



Re-sacralizing Urban Exclusion: A Narrative Inquiry into the Spiritual Survival Strategies of Surabaya's Marginalized

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The post-pandemic economic contraction in Surabaya has forced former formal-sector workers to enter the vulnerable informal street economy, giving rise to the phenomenon of "Neo-Spiderman". This study aims to investigate how these costumed street performers utilize Islamic spirituality as a survival mechanism in the face of stigma, debt, and existential uncertainty in street life.

Method: Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, this study focuses on purposefully selected subjects in the Sidosermo district, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation to map the intersection between global popular culture and local religious practices.

Results: The findings indicate that the use of costumes constitutes a strategic "identity of resistance" driven by time pressures stemming from debt. Crucially, the subjects restore the sacredness of the streets through the theology of *ikhtiyār* (active effort), distinguishing their work from begging, and maintaining dignity through strict temporal discipline in *ṣalāt* (prayer). Furthermore, rather than fostering competition among marginalized workers, the practice of *shukr* (gratitude) functions as a form of social capital that fosters solidarity.

Conclusions: This study concludes that "everyday religion" serves as vital infrastructure for survival, transforming economic vulnerability into spiritual resilience. This insight suggests that urban policies must acknowledge the moral and cultural dimensions of the informal workforce, rather than viewing it solely through the lens of public order. Theoretically, this study contributes to the sociology of religion in the Global South by demonstrating that "everyday religion" is not merely a passive escape, but an active adaptive strategy for navigating the precariousness of the neoliberal city.

ABSTRAK

Pendahuluan: Kontraksi ekonomi pasca-pandemi di Surabaya telah memaksa para mantan pekerja sektor formal untuk terjun ke dalam ekonomi jalanan informal yang rentan, sehingga memunculkan fenomena "Neo-Spiderman". Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki bagaimana para pengamen berkostum ini memanfaatkan spiritualitas Islam sebagai mekanisme bertahan hidup dalam menghadapi stigma, utang, dan ketidakpastian eksistensial dalam kehidupan jalanan.

Metode: Dengan menggunakan pendekatan penyelidikan naratif kualitatif, studi ini berfokus pada subjek yang dipilih secara purposif di distrik Sidosermo, memanfaatkan wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipatif untuk memetakan persimpangan antara budaya populer global dan praktik keagamaan lokal.

Hasil: Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan kostum merupakan "identitas perlawanan" strategis yang didorong oleh tekanan waktu akibat utang. Yang penting, subjek tersebut mengembalikan kesakralan jalanan melalui teologi *ikhtiyār* (upaya aktif),

membedakan pekerjaannya dari mengemis, dan mempertahankan martabat melalui disiplin waktu yang ketat dalam *ṣalāt* (shalat). Selain itu, alih-alih bersaing di antara para pekerja marjinal, praktik shukr (rasa syukur) berfungsi sebagai bentuk modal sosial yang menumbuhkan solidaritas.

Simpulan: Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa “*everyday religion*” berperan sebagai infrastruktur vital untuk bertahan hidup, mengubah kerentanan ekonomi menjadi ketahanan spiritual. Wawasan ini menyarankan bahwa kebijakan perkotaan harus mengakui dimensi moral dan budaya dari tenaga kerja informal, alih-alih memandangnya semata-mata melalui lensa ketertiban umum. Secara teoretis, studi ini berkontribusi pada sosiologi agama di Global Selatan dengan menunjukkan bahwa “agama sehari-hari” bukan sekadar pelarian pasif, melainkan strategi adaptif yang aktif dalam menavigasi prekariat kota neoliberal.

1. INTRODUCTION

The urban landscape of Surabaya, Indonesia’s second-largest city, has witnessed a peculiar visual transformation in its post-pandemic informal economy: the emergence of the “*Neo-Spiderman*” (Pitoyo et al., 2020). At various traffic intersections, individuals clad in the iconic red-and-blue spandex of the Western superhero perform distinctively local struggles for survival. This phenomenon is not merely an aesthetic anomaly but a symptom of a profound socioeconomic rupture. The Covid-19 pandemic precipitated an acute economic contraction in Surabaya, dismantling the livelihoods of formal sector workers and forcing a migration into the precarious informal economy (Zakia & Yasin, 2023). Within this context, the street busker (*pengamen*) operates at the intersection of economic desperation, urban exclusion, and creative adaptation (Rothenberg et al., 2016). While the visibility of these actors borrows from global popular culture, this study argues that their internal mechanism for survival is deeply rooted in a localized, functional interpretation of Islamic spirituality.

The proliferation of costumed buskers must be understood against the backdrop of rising urban poverty and the hostile regulatory environment of Surabaya. Recent scholarship indicates that the informal sector in Surabaya is characterized by severe income volatility, with 78% of workers experiencing instability and a lack of essential capital assets (Wahyudi et al., 2025). This precarity is exacerbated by structural exclusion; informal workers are frequently denied access to social safety nets and legal recognition, rendering them vulnerable to chronic poverty and debt accumulation (Kittiprapas, 2022). Consequently, the street becomes not just a transit space, but a critical albeit contested site of economic production. However, this production occurs within a rigid legal framework designed to erase informality. The Public Order Regulation (Perda) Number 2 of 2020 explicitly prohibits commercial activity in public spaces not designated for such purposes, categorizing street performers alongside beggars as threats to ‘public order and tranquility’ (Septia et al., 2023).

This regulatory landscape institutionalizes a “second-class” status for street performers. The municipal government, enforced by the Public Order Agency (Satpol PP), prioritizes aesthetic order and the flow of traffic over the livelihood needs of the urban poor (Pratama, 2024). The exclusion is spatial and systemic; public space in Surabaya is increasingly commodified, pushing marginalized economic actors into legal grey zones where they face constant threats of displacement and confiscation (Nalle & Moeliono, 2023; Rahayu et al., 2025). In this war on occupancy, the street performer is rendered “matter out of place,” surviving only through constant negotiation and evasion (Peters, 2009). It is within this hostile ecosystem that the “*Neo-Spiderman*” guise functions not only as a tool for economic attraction but as a shield of anonymity.

The choice of the Spiderman persona warrants critical examination beyond mere fandom. Literature on cosplay suggests that the selection of such characters is often driven by pragmatism: high visual legibility, ease of costume reproduction, and the protection of identity provided by the full-face mask, rather than a deep narrative identification with the character's fictional struggle (Yuchen Guo, 2022). For the busker, the mask separates the frontstage performance from the backstage reality of poverty (Casanova et al., 2021). Furthermore, adopting the role of a costumed performer allows these actors to distinguish themselves, both structurally and psychologically, from beggars. Ho & Au (2021) argue that busking involves a reciprocal exchange of entertainment for donations, creating a positive affective atmosphere, whereas begging relies on pity-based solicitation. By positioning themselves as 'entertainers' rather than 'solicitors,' these actors attempt to reclaim a degree of agency and dignity denied to them by state regulations (Sunarto et al., 2024).

However, current sociological literature on the urban poor and popular culture leaves a critical gap. While studies have explored how Indonesian Muslim youth negotiate their identity through global pop culture, such as K-pop (Inayatussahara & Hasan, 2023). These analyses predominantly focus on consumption and fandom among the middle class. There is a scarcity of research addressing how the *urban poor* instrumentalize global pop culture symbols in synthesis with religious values to navigate existential crises. The "*Neo-Spiderman*" buskers of Sidosermo are not merely engaging in cultural consumption; they are engaged in a struggle for *ontological security*. The central puzzle remains: How do these marginalized individuals, stripped of formal status and labelled as public nuisances, sustain their psychological and moral resilience?

This article addresses this gap by analyzing the intersection of "resistance identity." (Castells, 2009; Castells, 2010) and "everyday religion" among costumed buskers in Surabaya. Nancy (2007) I argue that for these actors, Islamic spirituality functions as the primary mechanism of resistance against the dehumanizing effects of street life. The Spiderman costume provides the 'external shell' of resistance, facilitating anonymity and economic transaction, while Islamic theology provides the 'internal structure'. Through a narrative inquiry of buskers in the Sidosermo district, this study demonstrates that subjects reinterpret their precarious labor through the theological lens of *rizq* (divinely ordained sustenance) and *ikhtiyār* (endeavor), thereby transforming the profane act of busking into a sacred act of *'ibādah* (worship).

The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the sociology of religion in the Global South by demonstrating that "everyday religion" is not a passive retreat but an active, adaptive strategy for navigating the neoliberal city. It challenges the binary view of the street economy as purely secular or criminal, revealing a hidden 'liturgy of the street' where prayer (*ṣalāt*) and gratitude (*shukr*) organize the temporal and moral lives of the marginalized. Empirically, it complicates the narrative of urban poverty in Surabaya, suggesting that behind the mask of global pop culture lies a profoundly local and spiritual resilience that defies the state's categorization of these individuals as mere objects of public disorder.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, positioned within the framework of Clandinin (2006) & Clandinin (2000) to explore the subjective construction of religious identity amidst urban economic precarity. The research focuses on a single-subject case study selected through purposive sampling in the Sidosermo district of Surabaya. The participant was selected

based on specific inclusion criteria: active engagement in the informal street economy through the “Neo-Spiderman” costume persona and the explicit articulation of Islamic spiritual practices in daily life. This single-case design functions as a “telling case,” offering deep, idiographic insight into the specific phenomenon of hybridized pop-religious identity.

Data collection was conducted over two weeks, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The analytical process employed rigorous narrative coding, synthesizing fragmented data into a coherent biographical structure. Analysis was guided by the three-dimensional space inquiry framework, examining the data through the lenses of *interaction* (personal and social), *continuity* (past, present, and future temporalities), and *situation* (the physical context of the street). Clandinin (2006), to ensure the credibility of the interpretation despite the limited sample size, the study employed method triangulation and member checking, verifying that the reconstructed narrative authentically reflected the subject’s lived experience as a form of resistance identity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Narratives of Disruption: The Formation of Resistance Identity

The emergence of the “Neo-Spiderman” phenomenon in Surabaya is not an isolated cultural curiosity but a direct manifestation of a severe macroeconomic rupture. The biographical trajectory of the subject, formerly a contract worker in the Information Technology (IT) sector, mirrors the systemic contraction of Indonesia’s formal labor market triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. This statement is based on his remarks during an in-depth interview about “Neo-Spiderman”:

“For me, this is actually new, sir. My previous job was just a regular one, but because of the pandemic, my debts piled up, so I ended up taking this job, which I’d say pays pretty well. I used to work at an IT company, but my contract was terminated for other reasons. I had a lot of debt. Then I tried various jobs, but monthly-pay jobs were difficult because I’d taken out loans from online lenders and banks. So, I needed a daily income. I had to find work that paid daily, like selling coffee on the street. But that’s weekly work, and the earnings are minimal, and I was struggling because the creditors were coming to my home. I felt bad for the kids. So, eventually, I looked for a way to earn a daily income. And this is what I’m doing now” (Spiderman, 2026)¹.

Data indicate that the pandemic induced a profound shock to the labor ecosystem, precipitating widespread contract terminations and a sharp decline in formal employment opportunities (Ridhwan et al., 2025). For the subject, the cessation of his IT contract was the initial destabilizing event that fractured his economic security. This transition from a high-skilled formal sector role to the precarious informality of the street illustrates the fragility of the ‘new middle class’ in urban Indonesia, where employment protections are often insufficient to withstand systemic shocks. The subject’s descent into the street economy was not immediate but followed a sequence of failed adaptive strategies, ranging from selling coffee on the roadside to attempting e-commerce via TikTok, demonstrating that the shift to costumed busking was a final resort rather than a voluntary vocational change.

¹ In-depth interview about “Neo-Spiderman”.

This narrative of downward mobility highlights the structural limitations of the informal economy's absorption capacity. While the informal sector is frequently theorized as a safety net during economic crises, the subject's experience reveals that not all informal activities provide viable subsistence. The failure of his initial entrepreneurial attempts, street coffee and social media sales, suggests that the market for petty commodities was saturated or insufficient to meet household needs (Pratomo, 2022). Consequently, the subject was forced to pivot toward a livelihood strategy that offered immediate liquidity. This aligns with Santoso's findings, who argues that income shocks in vulnerable households inevitably increase the intensity of informal labor participation as a survival mechanism (Santoso, 2020). The "Neo-Spiderman" persona, therefore, emerged not from a desire for performance art, but from the brutal calculus of survival in a labor market that had structurally excluded him.

The critical catalyst that accelerated this transition from the 'dignified' poor to the 'performative' street actor was the temporal pressure of debt. The research data reveals that the subject was ensnared in a cycle of daily debt obligations, stemming from both formal bank credit and high-interest online loans (*pinjol*). This financial architecture fundamentally altered the temporality of his economic life. Weekly or monthly income streams, typical of formal employment or stable trade, became insufficient to meet the aggressive, daily repayment schedule demands of creditors. Sibbald notes that high household indebtedness in urban settings significantly intensifies financial vulnerability, often dictating the nature of labor the debtor must undertake. For the subject, the street offered a daily cash flow that other forms of employment could not guarantee (Sibbald et al., 2025). The decision to don the costume was thus a strategic response to the immediate need for liquidity to service debt, illustrating how financialization penetrates the lives of the urban poor and reshapes their labor choices.

Furthermore, the psychological dimension of this debt crisis was profound. The subject recounted the intense emotional distress caused by debt collectors visiting his home, a violation of the domestic sphere that was particularly traumatic because his children witnessed it. This intrusion shattered the home as a space of ontological security, replacing it with shame and anxiety. Sibbald emphasizes that economic vulnerability is inextricably linked to psychosocial strain and social exclusion. In this context, the street, paradoxically, became a space of refuge (Sibbald et al., 2025). By wearing the Spiderman mask, the subject could secure the necessary funds to protect his family from the humiliation of debt collectors while simultaneously shielding his own identity from the public gaze. The costume functions as a 'technology of anonymity,' allowing the subject to navigate the stigma of street busking without compromising his social standing as a former IT professional in the eyes of his community.

The subject's trajectory also exposes the inadequacy of social protection systems in Indonesia. Despite the severe economic dislocation caused by the pandemic, the subject's narrative suggests a lack of access to effective safety nets that could have prevented his slide into extreme precarity. that in high-informality contexts, unemployment benefits often have limited stabilizing effects because many workers fall outside the scope of full formal coverage, or the benefits are insufficient to cover household debt burdens (Liepmann, 2024). The subject's reliance on high-risk borrowing strategies to survive the initial shock of job loss indicates a gap in public welfare provision. Pritadrajati observes that workers who lose formal jobs often shift directly into informal work rather than exiting the labor market or relying on state support (Pritadrajati, 2023). This systemic failure forces individuals to privatize their survival, assuming all the risks of economic

recovery by commodifying their own bodies and identities in public space (Brunckhorst et al., 2024).

The broader structural context reinforces this interpretation. The labor market reforms and the overall macroeconomic environment in Indonesia have created a dynamic where formal employment growth has not proportionally matched structural and educational changes (Pratomo, 2022). The flexibility introduced by regulations such as the Omnibus Law, while intended to stimulate investment, has in some sectors increased job instability (Mahy, 2022). For workers like the subject, this flexibility manifests as disposability. When the macro-structural environment limits institutional absorption capacity (Kudrna et al., 2022), Alternative livelihood strategies, no matter how unconventional, become rational economic choices (Sunam et al., 2021). The “Neo-Spiderman” is thus a rational actor navigating an irrational market, utilizing the cultural symbol of a superhero to mitigate the very real absence of structural support.

The formation of this ‘resistance identity’ is a dialectical process. It is forged in the tension between the exclusionary forces of the formal economy and the predatory inclusion of the debt economy. The subject does not choose the street because it offers freedom, but because it offers the only remaining mechanism to preserve the sanctity of his household against the intrusion of creditors. The mask allows him to perform resilience while concealing vulnerability. Informality functions as a survival mechanism for marginalized urban communities with limited formal access. In the case of the “Neo-Spiderman”, this survival is performative, extracting value from the urban landscape to service the debts accumulated during the collapse of his formal existence. The transition from IT worker to costumed busker is not a drift into deviance, but a rigorous, calculated adaptation to a systemic failure of the urban economic order (Miranda et al., 2025).

3.2 Re-sacralizing the Street: Rizq and the Theology of *Ikhtiyār*

Operating within the street economy entails not only physical resilience but also the continuous effort to construct and maintain moral legitimacy in the face of societal judgment. The informant demonstrates a keen awareness of the ambiguous social positioning of his work, characterizing it as a “grey area” (abu-abu) in which the boundary between acceptable labor and perceived begging remains indistinct from the perspective of the public: *“To me, this job is a gray area; it could be called begging, but it could also be seen as something else. It could be considered begging, but I’m still making an effort to entertain people; I’m not just asking for handouts. I’m also doing this out of necessity. I have no other choice. The important thing is that whatever I do is halal. I’ve also tried a few other ventures, like selling coffee, selling items on TikTok, and so on”* (Spiderman, 2026).

To resolve this tension, the subject constructs a sophisticated theology of legitimate work that redefines his presence in public space. Central to this framework is the Islamic concept of *ikhtiyār* (active striving), which he interprets not merely as the expenditure of energy, but as a dual performance of creative entertainment and ethical self-restraint. By framing his labor through this theological lens, the subject transforms the potentially stigmatized act of busking into a dignified pursuit of *rizq* (divine sustenance), thereby insulating his self-worth from the degradation often associated with the informal street economy (Kasriadi, 2023).

The foundation of this resistance identity lies in the subject’s theological differentiation between fixed destiny (*maut*) and mutable destiny (*rizq*). While acknowledging that death is an inevitable, predetermined event, he argues that economic fortune is contingent upon human agency: *“I believe that people must make themselves worthy, so that whatever blessings they receive, they have truly earned them. In my opinion, while death is inevitable, one’s destiny in love and one’s*

fortune can still be changed” (Spiderman, 2026). This perspective rejects a passive fatalism often attributed to the urban poor. Instead, the subject advances a meritocratic view of divine provision, stating that “humans must make themselves worthy (*memantaskan diri*)” to receive God’s blessings. This concept of ‘worthiness’ serves as a crucial psychological mechanism. It implies that *rizq* is not a random handout but a divine response to human effort (Dinillah et al., 2022). Consequently, his daily activity on the street is reframed from a passive wait for charity into an active, spiritual proving ground where he demonstrates his eligibility for God’s provision through the quality of his striving.

This theological stance manifests concretely in the subject’s insistence on effort as the boundary marker between his work and begging. He explicitly distinguishes the “*Neo-Spiderman*” persona from conventional panhandling by highlighting the creative labor involved. “*I’m still trying my best to entertain people, I’m not just asking for handouts*” (Spiderman, 2026). This effort includes the physical demands of wearing the full-body costume in Surabaya’s heat, dancing, and interacting playfully with children. By injecting entertainment value into the transaction, the subject seeks to shift the nature of the exchange from one of pity (associated with begging) to one of service (associated with legitimate work). The costume, therefore, is not just a tool for financial attraction but a moral shield; it signifies that he is *working* for his sustenance. This is congruent with contemporary research conducted by Utomo & Mateo-Babiano, which reveals that informal laborers in Indonesia frequently amalgamate notions of fatalism with manifestations of agency, thereby constructing narratives that depict adversity as manageable through pragmatic adaptation. For the individual in question, the performative aspect of the costume serves as tangible evidence of this agency, thereby substantiating his assertion to *rizq* (Utomo & Mateo-Babiano, 2024).

Ethical self-restraint constitutes the second pillar of this theological framework. In a precarious environment where aggressive solicitation is common, the subject adheres to a strict code of ‘waiting for voluntary giving’ rather than directly requesting money. He describes this as ‘guarding the ethics of interaction’ (*menjaga etika interaksi*). This passivity is strategic and religiously informed; by refusing to coerce or pressure passersby, he aligns his behavior with Islamic norms of civility and dignity (Poljarevic, 2024). This restraint serves a dual purpose: it minimizes conflict with public order officers who target aggressive beggars, and it reinforces his internal narrative of moral superiority. He is not a nuisance; he is a silent presence offering visual entertainment, accepting only what is freely given. This adherence to an implicit “moral economy” of the street suggests that for the Muslim informal worker, legitimacy is derived not from state recognition, but from the alignment of one’s conduct with religious ethical standards (Anriani et al., 2022; Dahlan, 2025).

Beneath the public performance of the Spiderman persona lies a private, internal layer of spiritual practice that provides the existential grounding for this labor. The subject reveals that his work day begins not with the costume, but with the recitation of *kalimat t̤ayyibah*, specifically *Bismillāh* (In the name of God) and *Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh* (There is no power nor strength except through God); “*I start my work with a simple prayer like Bismillāh, Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh*” (Spiderman, 2026). Crucially, these utterances are not part of the public spectacle; they are not vocalized to attract Muslim donors or to signal piety to the audience. Instead, they function as an internal coping mechanism, an ‘existential foundation’ enabling him to face the uncertainty and potential humiliation of the street. This distinction between the external, commodified performance and the internal, sacred monologue is vital. Religious coping provides essential ‘ontological security’ for marginalized populations, allowing them to interpret crises as

meaningful tests rather than chaotic failures. For the subject, the *kalimat tayyibah* acts as a spiritual armor, reinforcing his reliance on God (*tawakkul*) before he assumes the vulnerability of the public gaze (Amin, 2025).

The synthesis of these elements, the doctrine of *ikhtiyār*, the performative effort of entertainment, ethical restraint, and internal prayer, culminates in the framing of street labor as a valid form of *‘ibādah* (worship). The subject asserts that hard work, regardless of its form, is part of a valid form of worship in Islam as long as it is done to fulfill familial obligations. This sacralization of labor is a powerful act of resistance against social exclusion. By viewing his sweat and fatigue as an offering to God rather than just a struggle for coins, the subject redeems the ‘profane’ space of the street. The exhaustion becomes meaningful, and the small earnings are sanctified as *rizq*, purified by the worthiness of his effort. This mirrors Fakhriati and Erman’s observation that local wisdom and religious teachings allow Indonesian artisans to reinterpret economic disruption, maintaining dignity amidst uncertainty (Fakhriati & Erman, 2022).

It’s the intersection of popular culture and Islamic theology that allows him to navigate the ‘grey area’ of his existence with a coherent sense of self. The Spiderman costume provides the necessary anonymity and entertainment value to operate in the informal economy, while the theology of *ikhtiyār* provides the internal conviction that he is not a beggar, but a servant of God actively seeking his ordained provision. This duality: the visible pop-culture hero and the invisible pious subject, enables him to extract economic value from the urban landscape while preserving the sanctity of his identity as a provider and a believer. In this way, Islamic spirituality functions not as a retreat from the world, but as the very mechanism that makes engagement with the harsh realities of the neoliberal city psychologically and morally sustainable.

3.3 The Liturgy of the Street (*Ṣalāt*) as a Moral Anchor

Within Surabaya’s street economy, time is largely equated with income generation. For informal workers, every moment away from the traffic flow reduces the daily earnings needed to repay debt. However, the subject challenges this logic through disciplined adherence to Islamic temporal practices. Rather than fully submitting to economic pressures, “Neo-Spiderman” creates deliberate interruptions by prioritizing the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) over profit (Pattenden & Wastuti, 2023). This practice functions not only as a religious obligation but also as a temporal and spatial anchor that disrupts the rhythm of busking, allowing him to reaffirm his place within the moral community (*ummah*) and resist the stigma of his work. During the interview, “Neo-Spiderman” himself spoke candidly about his sense of vertical symbiosis as a servant: “As for prayer, of course I perform it, sir. I never miss the five daily prayers. If I can’t make it on time, I try my best to still find time to pray at the mosque,” he stated firmly (Spiderman, 2026).

The spatial dimension of this practice is essential. The individual intentionally chooses the mosque for prayer, avoiding makeshift spaces. In street sociology, buskers are often marginalized. By entering the mosque, the individual transitions from a precarious existence to one of theological equality. Importantly, the narrative does not distinguish between the performative and spiritual identity. The lack of costume removal suggests a deep integration of identity; the religious self remains active alongside the Spiderman persona. Rather, the prayer schedule enforces a ‘moral clock’ that overrides the economic demands of the street. While the market influences labor during busy times, the call to prayer prompts a retreat. This adherence to divine time affirms agency, indicating that despite financial struggles, the individual maintains sovereignty over their circumstances. *Ṣalāt* thus serves as a transformative moment, providing a rhythmic renewal of self (Pattenden & Wastuti, 2023).

This ritual practice is grounded in an existential orientation established before the performance begins. The subject's daily invocation, "*Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh*," is less a performance for an audience than an internal stabilizing mechanism. As Ammerman argues regarding 'everyday religion,' such practices provide structure (*nizam*) to the chaotic experience of modernity (Nancy, 2007). For a former IT professional whose life has been upended by structural violence, the rigidity of *ṣalāt* offers the only predictable stability in a day defined by uncertainty. It functions as a moral compass, ensuring that the precarious nature of the work does not destabilize his fundamental life orientation.

Moreover, the insistence on congregational prayer counters the atomizing effects of the street economy. Transitioning from the formal sector to the street often entails a loss of professional community, yet the mosque facilitates reintegration into a shared social fabric. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder (*saf*) with congregants, who may include the very drivers who donate at the traffic light, reasserts the subject's belonging to the social body of Surabaya. This aligns with Mahmuda, who positions religion not as a mere coping mechanism for the marginalized but as a foundational moral structure that sustains social values. In the mosque, the "*Neo-Spiderman*" is re-humanized, effectively countering his objectification as a roadside spectacle (Mahmuda, 2020).

This disciplined religiosity silently challenges the state's narrative of disorder. While regulations like Perda No. 2 of 2020 categorize street performers alongside beggars as threats to public order (*ketertiban umum*) (JDIH Pemerintah Kota Surabaya, 2020). The subject's punctuality and observance contradict this framing. By embodying the 'Islamic civility' described by Poljarevic, he contests his criminalization, demonstrating a capacity for self-regulation that rivals the orderly citizen. The liturgy of the street thus becomes a quiet form of resistance identity. It prevents the subject from becoming merely the character or the beggar by recurrently anchoring him to an ontological reality where his provision (*rizq*) comes from God, not the drivers (Poljarevic, 2024). This integration of the Spiderman persona with the pious subject creates a hybrid identity, resilient precisely because it is moored to a transcendent moral order that the vicissitudes of the market cannot touch.

3.4 Gratitude (*Shukr*) as Social Capital

In Surabaya's informal street economy, scarcity ignites fierce competition. Traffic intersections create a zero-sum environment where limited resources are intensely contested. Each coin in one busker's container diminishes another's earnings. Traditional sociological views suggest that the urban poor act as rational hoarders in volatile conditions. However, the "*Neo-Spiderman*" narrative challenges this view. By embracing *shukr* (gratitude), individuals develop a different moral economy. Gratitude transforms from mere emotion into an active social ethic that reshapes the street's political economy. It serves as spiritual currency, turning economic scarcity into social capital and fostering solidarity amidst urban marginalization (Dayanti, 2023).

The ethical foundation of the "*Neo-Spiderman*" is rooted in a deliberate and systematic psychological recalibration. As a mechanism for enduring the profound psychological strain of poverty without succumbing to despair or social envy, the subject employs a specific cognitive strategy: the active practice of 'looking downward' to cultivate gratitude (*shukr*) (Firas & Izzaty, 2020). In the context of an urban consumer culture that incessantly compels individuals to pursue unattainable status and wealth, this reorientation of the gaze serves as a form of active resistance. This practice is not an expression of arrogance, but rather a disciplined comparison of lived existence. By internalizing the reality that many others face even more precarious conditions, the

subject performs a radical reframing of their own vulnerability. This involves a meticulous audit of 'somatic assets', physical capital such as health, the stamina required to labor under the equatorial sun, and the functional mobility needed to inhabit a restrictive costume for hours on end (Muthia & Isbah, 2022).

Within this theological and philosophical calculation, physical capacity is not viewed as a mere biological trait, but as a form of entrusted wealth, a resource unavailable to the elderly or the disabled who occupy the same streetscape. This internal monologue functions as a vital bulwark against the "politics of envy" that often triggers social fragmentation among the urban marginalized. As evidenced in narratives of everyday resilience, such spiritual reframing is a crucial survival strategy; by validating their own agency and bodily capacity, the subject prevents the psychological degradation associated with chronic poverty and sustains a sense of sufficiency amidst profound material scarcity.

The theological architecture supporting this solidarity is the subject's conviction regarding the nature of *rizq*. Because he believes that destiny regarding sustenance is open to modification through *ikhtiar* (effort) and ethical conduct, he is immune to the scarcity mindset that drives turf wars: "*What matters is that it is halal*" asserts (Spiderman, 2026). This statement implies that lawful sustenance carries a specific metaphysical weight or blessing (*barakah*) that renders it sufficient, whereas ill-gotten gains (from theft or aggressive coercion) would be devoid of value. This perspective neutralizes the hostility often directed at newcomers in the informal economy. Instead of defending his intersection against other buskers, a common source of horizontal violence, he integrates them into a community of care. The street, narrated by municipal regulations (Perda) as a chaotic space of disorder and potential criminality, is re-scripted by its occupants as a space of mutual aid, regulated by the invisible laws of *shukr*. This aligns with Utomo and Mateo-Babiano's analysis of Indonesian informal workers who blend fatalism with agency; the subject accepts the structural constraints of the economy but actively shapes the *moral quality* of his relationships within it. To fight for crumbs, in his view, is to doubt the Provider (Utomo & Mateo-Babiano, 2024).

The practice of gratitude also fundamentally transforms the vertical power dynamic between the busker and the donor. The interaction at the car window is fleeting, lasting perhaps ten seconds, and is typically codified as a unidirectional act of charity: the wealthy driver inside the air-conditioned vehicle gives, and the poor busker outside in the heat takes. This asymmetry threatens to erode the recipient's dignity, reducing him to a passive object of pity. The subject, however, re-injects reciprocity into this encounter through spiritual intercession. When asked about the people who give him money, he responds unequivocally: "*Pasti saya doakan*" (I definitely pray for them) (Spiderman, 2026). This is not a trivial platitude. In the Islamic worldview, the prayer of the oppressed (*du'a al-mazlum*) or the struggling poor is considered particularly potent and unobstructed (Mudasiru, 2025). By offering a prayer in return for a coin, the subject transforms the transaction from a handout into a spiritual exchange. He is not a beggar; he is a spiritual agent providing a service intercessions that the wealthy driver cannot purchase in the marketplace. This restores a sense of equilibrium to an otherwise unequal relationship. As Arreza notes, faith provides the meaning-making framework that allows informal workers to retain agency. Here, the subject utilizes his spiritual status to 'repay' the donor, thereby maintaining his self-respect. The coin serves the body, but the prayer serves the soul; in the subject's estimation, the exchange is balanced, if not tilted in his favor (Arreza, 2024).

Furthermore, this ethic of gratitude serves as a means of resistance against the grey area (*abu-abu*) of his social status. The subject is acutely aware of the ambiguity of his work: “*It could be called begging, it could be called not begging*” (Spiderman, 2026). This legal and social liminality is a source of constant vulnerability. *Shukr* provides the moral clarity that the state’s legal system denies him. By focusing on his output, entertainment for children, prayers for donors, and financial support for peers rather than his intake, he stabilizes his identity as a productive member of society. He frames himself not as a parasite on the urban landscape, but as a node in the circulation of material and spiritual goods. His refusal to complain, his insistence on ‘looking down’ to find reasons for thankfulness, serves as a psychological shield against the stigma labeled by the state. This inward-looking gratitude creates an emotional buffer, preventing the harsh rejections of passing drivers, rolled-up windows, and averted gazes from internalizing as personal failure. When a driver ignores him, it is interpreted not as a rejection of his humanity but merely as a temporary constriction of *rizq* that God will release through a different channel.

The subject’s narrative demonstrates that in the informal economy, spiritual values are not distinct from economic strategies; they are the infrastructure of survival. *Shukr* is the mechanism that prevents the competition for scarcity from devolving into a war of all against all. It allows the “*Neo-Spiderman*” to see the other busker not as a rival to be pushed out, but as a mirror of his own struggle. In a city that has structurally excluded them both from formal protection, this solidarity is the only reliable safety net available. By anchoring his survival in the collective rather than the individual, the subject demonstrates that even in the depths of economic fragility, the capacity for generosity remains a potent form of resistance. The mask of Spiderman may hide his face to preserve his anonymity, but the ethic of *shukr* reveals his humanity, proving that while the market may strip him of his formal status, it cannot strip him of his capacity to act as a moral agent.

4. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of the “*Neo-Spiderman*” in Surabaya transcends the visual novelty of street performance; it represents a profound assertion of moral agency amidst structural exclusion. This study argues that Islamic spirituality functions not merely as a passive refuge, but as an active “resistance identity” that enables the subject to navigate the “grey area” of the informal economy. The findings demonstrate that the subject’s trajectory—from formal IT employment to the street—was precipitated by the temporal violence of debt, yet a theological reconstruction of labor sustains his survival. By reframing busking through the doctrine of *ikhtiyār* (effort) and the ethics of waiting, the subject distinguishes himself from the beggar, transforming the profane space of the intersection into a site of *‘ibādah* (worship).

Furthermore, the study reveals that religious practice acts as a counter-infrastructure to neoliberal precarity. The rigid adherence to *ṣalāt* serves as a temporal anchor that disrupts the relentless logic of capital accumulation, allowing the subject to periodically reclaim his status within the moral community. Simultaneously, the ethic of *shukr* (gratitude) dismantles the zero-sum competition of the street, converting economic scarcity into social solidarity. Theoretically, these insights challenge state narratives that categorize street performers solely as agents of disorder, revealing instead a disciplined, religiously literate subject who generates social order from below. However, as a single-subject narrative inquiry, these findings are exploratory. Future research should examine whether such spiritual resistance persists across broader, less

religiously homogenous networks of informal workers. Ultimately, the mask of Spiderman conceals a face, but the narrative reveals a spirit that refuses to be fully commodified by the market. Theoretically, these findings enrich the discourse on the sociology of urban religion in the Global South by demonstrating that everyday religious practices are not merely mechanisms of escape, but rather a moral infrastructure that actively shapes the resilience of marginalized individuals in the face of structural pressures in metropolitan cities (Surabaya).

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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