

THE STARLING PHENOMENON: CASE STUDY OF ITINERANT INSTANT DRINK VENDORS IN GADING SERPONG, SUBURBAN TANGERANG

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the operations of Starling vendors—informal mobile sellers of instant beverages in Gading Serpong, Tangerang Regency—who represent a unique form of ultra-micro enterprise within the suburban informal economy. As urban spaces expand and formal employment remains limited, these vendors have emerged as resilient actors navigating a dynamic environment through mobility, adaptability, and customer proximity. The study aims to examine how Starling vendors sustain their businesses through operational strategies, product diversification, and customer targeting. A qualitative case study method was used, involving semi-structured interviews with ten Starling vendors, direct field observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to extract patterns in vendor practices, customer interactions, and environmental challenges. The results show that Starling vendors demonstrate entrepreneurial agility by adjusting working hours, alternating between mobile and stationary operations, and diversifying their offerings beyond instant coffee to include snacks and cigarettes. Most customers are online motorcycle taxi drivers, office workers, and students, with cash still dominating payment methods. Key challenges include weather disruptions and spatial insecurity due to the absence of vendor-friendly policies. The study concludes that Starling vendors exemplify how ultra-micro businesses in suburban areas survive by leveraging informal infrastructures and local networks. While limited in scope, this research offers policy insights for enhancing vendor sustainability through support in digital payments, infrastructure access, and hygiene practices. Future studies should include consumer and policymaker perspectives to address public health and environmental concerns in informal mobile vending.

Keywords: Informal Economy, Instant Beverages, Micro Enterprise, Mobile Vendors, Starling

INTRODUCTION

The Starling phenomenon—locally known as "Starbucks *Keliling*" (Mobile Starbucks)—refers to a distinctive group of itinerant vendors who sell instant coffee and other packaged beverages using bicycles or motorcycles (Syaifullah, 2024). Despite the name's nod to the international coffee chain, these vendors operate independently and have no formal affiliation with Starbucks. They cater to urban and suburban customers in greater Jakarta such as office workers, residents, and commuters by offering affordable alternatives to conventional coffee shops (Johari & Atmodjo, 2025). In recent years, the term "Starling" has gained popularity among urban Indonesians, representing a new form of informal micro-entrepreneurship that combines mobility, affordability, and accessibility (Kurniawan & Madiistriyatno, 2023).

Beyond Starling vendors, the broader category of itinerant food and beverage sellers includes numerous small-scale traders offering snacks, meals, and drinks in public spaces (Alfiero et al., 2017; Tarulevicz, 2018). Typically operating without formal licenses, these vendors respond rapidly to changing consumer needs by relocating to high-traffic areas (Bandara et al., 2025; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022; Rachmawan et al., 2021). Their low capital requirements and operational flexibility significantly improve urban food accessibility and demonstrate the resilience of the informal economy (Giroux et al., 2021; Malasan, 2019). Together, Starling vendors and other mobile traders illustrate ongoing shifts in urban and suburban retail, where adaptability and mobility are central to economic survival (Thinh et al., 2025).

Informal micro-enterprises, including Starling vendors, play a crucial role in urban economies, especially in areas with limited formal employment (Brown & McGranahan, 2016; Jha & Bag, 2019; Magidi, 2022; Sharika & Hurdawaty, 2025). Small-scale vending offers an accessible means of livelihood for many individuals, with mobility as a key strategy to maximize customer reach (Anja & Zhang, 2025; Berhanu, 2021). However, little research has explored the role of itinerant vendors in suburban settings, where spatial organization, customer behavior, and infrastructure differ from urban cores (Thinh et al., 2025; Warakanyaka, 2024; Wongtada, 2014).

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the Starling phenomenon in Gading Serpong, a suburban area in Tangerang Regency characterized by housing clusters, commercial zones, and a growing middle-class population (Ischak, 2020). Gading Serpong is one of modern cities developed by private companies in greater Tangerang with Alam Sutera and BSD (Yulius et al., 2024). Unlike traditional street vending hotspots, Gading Serpong presents a unique environment in which mobile vendors navigate residential spaces and commercial centers while facing distinct spatial and regulatory dynamics (Kresna et al., 2023).

To understand how Starling vendors operate in this setting, the study uses semi-structured interviews and direct observation as primary data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jamshed, 2014; Knott et al., 2022; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Interviews are designed to explore vendors' motivations, strategies, and everyday challenges, while observations document customer interactions, sales patterns, and mobility practices. This combination allows for a rich understanding of how itinerant vendors sustain their operations in a suburban context (Jamshed, 2014).

The central problem addressed in this research is the lack of empirical data on the socio-economic contributions of mobile drink vendors in suburban environments (Njaya, 2014; Rakha et al., 2022). While much is known about informal vending in city centers,

less attention has been paid to how vendors adapt to the suburban market, where consumer behavior, regulation, and competition take different forms (Kresna et al., 2023; Warakanyaka, 2024). This study seeks to fill that gap by examining Starling vendors' survival strategies, income sources, and community interactions.

The primary objective of this research is to explore how Starling vendors adapt to the suburban market and what factors influence their sustainability (Bayraktar, 2024; Vignola & Oosterveer, 2022). The study analyzes their income patterns, customer demographics, and interactions with regulatory structures, alongside their perceptions of security and growth (Wibowo et al., 2023). These insights contribute to understanding the resilience of ultra-micro enterprises in rapidly urbanizing areas like Gading Serpong (Ischak, 2020).

This research is grounded in the frameworks of informal economies and urban micro-enterprise. While previous studies highlight how informal vending contributes to job creation and public access to affordable goods (Gabriel et al., 2024; Kasman et al., 2024), they often neglect the unique role of mobile food and beverage vendors in suburban contexts (Kresna et al., 2023). By addressing this gap, the study reveals how Starling vendors support the informal food and beverage economy in Gading Serpong. Their ultra-micro business models primarily serve low-income workers and expand access to low-cost instant beverages in everyday public spaces (T. Abdullah et al., 2023).

What makes this study distinctive is its focus on Starling vendors as a specific subset of the informal economy. Operating as ultra-micro enterprises, they rely on high mobility, adapting their routes in response to customer flow, access points, and shifting local conditions (Lucan et al., 2014). This flexible and responsive approach sets them apart from fixed-location vendors and illustrates an entrepreneurial model that thrives in dynamic suburban environments.

By unpacking their business practices, customer engagement strategies, and adaptability, this research adds to the growing discourse on informal vending in Indonesia. It highlights how mobile vendors contribute to suburban food accessibility and economic participation among underserved communities. In doing so, the study sheds light on a small but significant layer of Indonesia's informal economy—one that continues to evolve at the intersection of mobility, affordability, and micro-entrepreneurship (Abdullah et al., 2023; Vignola & Oosterveer, 2022).



Figure 1. Starling Vendor in Gading Serpong Area

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study approach (Çakar & Aykol, 2021; Cuka et al., 2015) to investigate the Starling phenomenon in Gading Serpong, Tangerang Regency. Gading Serpong was chosen as the research location because of its condition as an independent city and suburb that is full of economic interaction between people from various groups and backgrounds. The case study method enables an in-depth exploration of Starling vendors as informal micro-entrepreneurs in the food and beverage sector, focusing on their business practices, economic roles, and operational challenges. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, this research relies on primary data collected directly from Starling vendors, complemented by document analysis to contextualize their activities within broader economic and regulatory frameworks (Lester et al., 2020; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The primary data for this study is collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observation with 10 Starling vendors, who serve as the sole informants which considered sufficient for a case study based research (Ahmed, 2025). Their firsthand accounts offer valuable insights into business strategies, operational challenges, financial sustainability, and adaptation to customer demand in the informal food and beverage sector. Direct observation complements these interviews (Cuka et al., 2015; Jamshed, 2014) by capturing real-time practices such as mobility patterns, customer interactions, and sales strategies across various locations in Gading Serpong. To contextualize these findings, the study also incorporates secondary data (Bowen, 2009; Unachukwu et al., 2018) through document analysis, including local regulations, economic reports, and media coverage on informal vending and micro-businesses in urban and suburban settings. These sources help situate the Starling phenomenon within broader discussions on informal economies and ultra-micro enterprises.

The collected data is systematically processed and analyzed thematically to identify key patterns related to vendor survival, financial sustainability, and market dynamics (Lester et al., 2020; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Interview transcripts are coded, and observational data is synthesized (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) to document trends in vendor movement and sales tactics. Triangulation is employed by cross-verifying findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis, ensuring that conclusions are well-supported (Donkoh, 2023). Finally, the findings are integrated into a narrative that positions the Starling phenomenon within the informal food and beverage economy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Based on the semi-structured interview conducted to 10 Starling vendors in Gading Serpong area, a summary of interview results is presented as follows:

Table 1. Summary of Interview Results

Theme	Summary of Findings
Operating Hours	Vendors begin selling between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m., and finish between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m.
Selling Location	6 vendors operate by moving around (itinerant), while 4 remain in one location (stationary/ <i>mangkal</i>)

Theme	Summary of Findings
Hot Water Refill	Most vendors refill water in Kampung Cicayur for Rp4,000–Rp5,000 per termos; others refill at home or <i>warteg</i> nearby
Business Ownership	All vendors operate independently and do not work under a boss or coordinator
Competitor Perception	Most vendors are not disturbed by modern "kopi gerobak"; they believe in sharing space and " <i>rezeki sudah diatur</i> "
Best-Selling Products	Kopi Kapal Api is the top-selling product; others include Good Day (Cappuccino, Freeze) and Nutrisari
Additional Items Sold	8 vendors also sell cigarettes, peanuts, and packaged snacks; 2 vendors sell beverages only
Customer Profile	Most customers are online ojek (<i>ojol</i>) drivers, followed by office workers, students, and security staff
Payment Methods	7 vendors accept only cash; 3 also accept QRIS or e-wallets such as Dana
Main Challenges	Common issues include rain disrupting business and being removed by security officers (<i>satpam</i>); one case of unpaid customer

The interviews revealed notable variation in operational patterns among Starling vendors in Gading Serpong. While some vendors begin selling in the early morning hours, others operate overnight, with business hours ranging from 6 a.m. to as late as 5 a.m. the following day. This wide time span indicates the flexibility and adaptability of vendors in targeting different segments of customers—from early commuters to night-shift workers. Most vendors emphasized the importance of adjusting their hours to align with customer traffic and weather conditions, demonstrating the dynamic nature of their daily operations.

In terms of selling location, vendors adopt two distinct mobility strategies: some remain stationary in high-traffic spots such as near campuses, residential clusters, or shop houses, while others prefer to move around specific zones such as markets or business districts. This distinction between fixed-location and roving vendors reflects differences in selling tactics and spatial access. However, regardless of mobility, all vendors emphasized the importance of choosing places with steady foot traffic and minimal interference from authorities or security guards (*satpam*). Most vendors refill hot water in informal facilities such as *wartegs* or from local sources at *Jalan Kampung Cicayur*, paying around Rp4,000 to Rp5,000 per container. This highlights how their business is supported by—and dependent on—infrastructure within the informal economy.

All of the interviewed Starling vendors operate independently, with no affiliations to a formal business owner or brand. This reinforces their classification as ultra-micro enterprises, run solely by individuals or families. Business decisions, supply procurement, and location choices are entirely self-managed. When asked about competition from "kopi gerobak" vendors—mobile coffee carts often seen as more modern and organized—most respondents expressed no hostility. Instead, they embraced a shared belief in "*rezeki sudah ada yang ngatur*" (everyone has their share of fortune), reflecting a culture of mutual tolerance and informal solidarity among small vendors.

Kapal Api emerged as the most popular coffee brand sold by the vendors, followed by Good Day (Cappuccino and Freeze) and occasionally Nutrisari, fruit flavored instant

drink. Most vendors carry various brands, but customer preference appears to be based on both taste and price. In addition to drinks, nearly all vendors sell side items such as cigarettes, peanuts, and small snacks. Only two vendors stated that they sell beverages exclusively. This tendency toward diversification suggests a practical approach to increasing income per transaction and catering to the varied preferences of their core customer base.

The majority of vendors identified *ojol* (online motorcycle taxi drivers) as their main group of buyers (Kurniawan & Madiistriyatno, 2023; Wachyuni & Hardiningsih, 2022), with others mentioning office workers, university students, and local security personnel. These consumer groups reflect the vendors' integration within the urban working-class economy, especially in spaces where time, convenience, and affordability are highly valued. Interestingly, only three vendors reported accepting cashless payments through QRIS or e-wallets like Dana. The remaining seven vendors continue to rely solely on cash, indicating that use of technology (Widiati et al., 2024) and digital payment adoption among informal microvendors is still relatively limited.

When asked about the main challenges of operating a Starling business, most vendors mentioned two recurring issues: bad weather—especially rain—and being asked to move by security officers from their selling spots. These two factors disrupt sales routines and can lead to loss of income, particularly for mobile vendors without shelter or protection. Some also mentioned issues with non-paying customers or receiving verbal warnings from local residents. These challenges highlight the vulnerability of street vendors in suburban environments, where formal protections and vendor-friendly policies are largely absent.



Figure 2. Starling (Starbucks Keliling) Infographics

DISCUSSION

The result of this study revealed highly heterogeneous but interrelated patterns among the Starling coffee vendors. Each vendor operated as a sole proprietor with minimal capital, running their own pushcart or stall and working long, flexible hours.

Some hawkers remained stationed at one spot for several hours (especially near busy offices or residential areas), while others continuously roamed between locations (e.g., market alleys, street corners) to find customers (Kurniawan & Madiistriyatno, 2023). This flexibility in time and place appears strategic: by moving to where demand emerges and adjusting shifts for morning and night crowds, vendors maximize sales opportunities. All vendors sold basic coffee—often branded instant mixes like Kapal Api or Good Day—and typically supplemented it with simple add-ons such as cigarettes, peanuts, or packaged snacks. This product mix allowed them to appeal to low-income patrons, particularly ojek online (*ojol*) drivers and nearby workers (Aljasiri et al., 2023). The result is a diversified ultra-micro enterprise that relies on high volume of small transactions. In summary, the Starling operations are characterized by adaptive mobility, extended hours, product diversification, and targeting of modest-income clientele—features that resonate with known patterns of street-level food and beverage enterprises.

These patterns fit squarely within broader concepts of the informal economy and urban micro-enterprise. Street vending is a classic form of informal-sector work where individuals lacking formal jobs enter micro-entrepreneurship by selling goods in public spaces (Anja & Zhang, 2025; Wongtada, 2014). The Starling vendors are quintessential ultra-micro enterprises: they are one- or few-person operations with minimal infrastructure, unregistered with authorities, and largely cash-based. Such businesses typically arise from limited livelihood options and are sustained by necessity, social capital, and access to informal public infrastructure. The observed diversification of offerings—combining coffee with snacks or cigarettes—is a common survival strategy for micro-entrepreneurs facing slim profit margins (Syaifullah, 2024). Likewise, dependence on low-cost instant brands reflects the informal supply chains of these enterprises. These livelihoods contribute meaningfully to household income and food access for working-class communities, reinforcing their social and economic relevance.

The Starling vendors' experiences also echo global and regional trends in street vending. In many countries, mobile food hawkers depend on flexibility and adaptability to survive in uncertain or unregulated spaces (Malasan, 2019; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). Similar to vendors in Southeast Asian cities, Starling sellers in Gading Serpong demonstrate resilience by shifting locations, adjusting hours, and tailoring products based on demand. Like vendors in larger cities, they strategically cluster near transit stops, shop houses, campuses, and other locations with consistent pedestrian flow. This spatial logic supports their ability to reach consumers in need of quick, affordable food and beverages.

Despite these similarities, several differences stand out. The suburban area in Tangerang regency context lacks designated vending zones or support systems often found in more formally governed city centers. Without formal licensing or protected spaces, Starling vendors rely on tolerance and negotiation. Many reported being moved by security personnel or receiving informal warnings from property managers. This results in a high level of precarity and disruption, especially for those without a consistent spot to return to (Anafo et al., 2024; Pulliat et al., 2024). Additionally, digital payment adoption remains limited. Although some vendors accept e-wallets such as Dana or QRIS, the majority still rely on cash transactions. This indicates that digital inclusion, often promoted at the national level, has not fully reached informal vendors operating at the street level (Mir & Wani, 2023; Nurqamarani et al., 2023). Furthermore, vendors depend on highly informal logistics networks, such as refilling thermoses at nearby kampungs or warungs, rather than through regulated suppliers. These local infrastructure links are key to their ability to operate daily.

Future research should examine the hygiene and environmental dimensions of Starling vending practices (Furqan & Kasmita, 2023). Field observations suggest that some vendors use disposable plastic cups, or possibly reused mineral water cups, without clear sanitation practices (Abdullah et al., 2022; Akbulut et al., 2024; Najahi et al., 2025). This raises questions about food safety and consumer health in mobile beverage service (Ermawati et al., 2024). Waste disposal is another concern: vendors frequently sell drinks and snacks in packaging that likely ends up in nearby public bins or open spaces (Alfiero et al., 2019; Grangxabe et al., 2024). With increasing attention to plastic waste and sustainable packaging, research is needed to assess how such small-scale vendors manage (or contribute to) environmental impacts (Vignola & Oosterveer, 2022). Further inquiry could explore whether hygiene guidelines, basic waste protocols, or low-cost sustainable packaging initiatives can be introduced and accepted by informal vendors. Future studies might also examine how vendors respond to environmental campaigns or regulations, and whether they would adopt cleaner or more sustainable practices if resources or incentives were made available.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how Starling vendors—mobile instant drink sellers operating informally in the Gading Serpong area—sustain their businesses as ultra-micro enterprises in a suburban context. The findings indicate that Starling vendors demonstrate adaptability through flexible working hours, self-management, product diversification, and responsiveness to the needs of low-income customers such as ojek online drivers. These vendors operate entirely within the informal sector, relying on social and local infrastructure to maintain their livelihoods. The study concludes that Starling represents a resilient form of informal food and beverage entrepreneurship shaped by mobility, low capital, and environmental challenges. However, any generalization beyond the specific context of Gading Serpong must be made with caution, as this study reflects a localized set of practices among a small group of vendors.

This research is limited by its narrow geographical scope, small sample size (10 vendors), and its exclusive reliance on qualitative interviews without triangulated consumer perspectives or regulatory input. Additionally, themes such as hygiene, waste management, and digital integration emerged during field observation but were not directly explored in the interview guide. Future studies should expand to multiple urban and peri-urban areas, involve other stakeholders such as customers and local authorities, and investigate critical issues related to public health, sanitation, and environmental sustainability in informal mobile vending. A closer look at the intersection between informal entrepreneurship, urban space, and digital inclusion may also enrich understanding of the evolving role of mobile vendors in Indonesia's food and beverage sector.

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