

# Beyond the Spectacle: The Pain and Grief Suffered by Indonesian Rooftoppers

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## ABSTRACT

One of today's popular urban explorations (urbex) is rooftopping, namely the craze of climbing skyscrapers, bridges, chimneys or towers wearing no harnesses for breathtaking stunt-like photos intended for social media fame. The data show that the number of victims due to rooftopping accidents cannot be underestimated. However, this cannot stop the ever-increasing number of new rooftoppers. Many people consider that rooftoppers do rooftopping for the pursuit of fame, attention, and revenues. Very little is known that certain groups of rooftoppers do rooftopping for other motivations. This paper investigates the motivations of Indonesian rooftoppers and the kinds of punishment they ever underwent. Fourteen Indonesian rooftoppers were recruited using a snowball sampling technique for this ethnographic study and Hermeneutics theory by Wilhelm Dilthey is used to analyse the data obtained from the in-depth interviews and observation. Surprisingly, this study reveals that most of the Indonesian rooftoppers are not obsessed with neither fame nor money, whereas some of them ever underwent severe punishments given by the security officers. The study concludes that the ultimate goal of most of the Indonesian rooftoppers is freedom and some of the punishments are inhumane.

**Keywords:** rooftopping, rooftoppers, social media fame, urban exploration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Scaling skyscrapers to get some shots on stunt-like actions on the rooftop for social media fame is a new craze during the last decade. Such a phenomenon is considered the new style of urban explorers known as rooftopping. Rooftopping itself dated back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in England when Geoffrey Winthrop Young's earliest publication titled "*The roof-climbers' guide to Trinity*" was first published in 1900 [1]. The book became the main reference of many roof-climbers all over Britain and Europe later on. In his book, Young delineated and explained the four routes to the rooftop of Trinity College (the constituent of Cambridge University, England) [2]. Due to the high demand, the book was reprinted three times in 1930, 1960, and 2011 by Oleander Press in Cambridge [1].

There was a secret nocturnal group of students scaling tall buildings in Cambridge at night. It was known as "The night climbers society" [3]. The society has existed for over a century and it consisted of several lecturers and students of Cambridge University, although it was forbidden. It became like a ritual for them to scale their university buildings during night time [4]. Young and his friends also wrote other books: *Wall and roof climbing by the author of The roof-climber's guide to Trinity* (1903),

*Climbing in Cambridge and in Oxford and Cambridge mountaineering* (1921), *The roof climber's guide to St. John* (1921), *Alpine Sports in Cambridge* (1924), *Correspondence about roof climbing* (1928, 1957, 1976 & 1982), *The night climbers of Cambridge* (1937) by Whipplesnaith. The book was reprinted in 1952, 1953, and 2007 by Oleander Press, Cambridge [5].

In Cambridge and Oxford the students maintained the tradition very well. Until today the tradition still existed. Below (Figure 1) is a picture of a student of the University of Cambridge of 2010-2014, Rebecca Wetten, who performed roof-climbing (rooftopping) as the part of the tradition maintained at the university [3].



**Figure 1** A student of the Cambridge University on the rooftop of Faculty of History

The widely-spread development of rooftopping in the twenty-first century was triggered by a photo of Tom Ryaboi sitting with one of his feet dangling on a skyscraper in Toronto Canada uploaded to Flickr and Reddit on May 11, 2011 [6]. Within twenty-four hours, his picture claimed remarkable *Like* from thousands of internet users and made him very famous in all over the world due to the empowerment of social media. Ryaboi's (unintentional) success made the term rooftopping proliferate on social networks and motivated teenagers and young people across the globe to do rooftopping [7].



**Figure 2**

Tom Ryaboi's viral photo of 2011  
(Source: Ryaboi, 2012)

Research reveals that the experiences of Indonesian rooftoppers differ from that of foreign rooftoppers, more particularly in terms of the punishments they underwent [7]. Many people might think that having stunning and breathtaking cityscape or rooftopping photos on the rooftop of skyscrapers or cranes is somehow an easy performance that costs no painstaking efforts. To some extent, rooftopping requires one's boldness being on top of high a building, taking selfies on the edge while sitting or walking on the building edge. For many, particularly to the amateurs this may cause vertigo. Moreover, a little slip of one's footstep or grip loss may result in death because of falling from the high height. This is a logical consequence that every rooftopper should realize and be ready to undertake. Nevertheless, many rooftoppers said that their enjoyment atop the skyscrapers or cranes is worthier than the risks they might undergo. A British rooftopper claimed that to get spotted by security officers was more worrying than to get fallen from the height [3].

In Indonesia, many security officers of skyscrapers considered rooftopping a crime, although the rooftoppers do not take or break anything but only trespassing. The research reveals that many Indonesian rooftoppers underwent various punishments and some even had severe

ones.

Thus, this study investigates the motivations of Indonesian rooftoppers efforts and the punishments they underwent. The informants narrated their heart-breaking stories about being caught and tortured due to doing rooftopping. Little is known about the sanctions and punishments from security officers if they are caught in action. What many of people see are their pictures flagging on social media.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on selfies has been widely conducted around the world, especially within the last decade, and no less than one hundred articles of scientific research on selfie were discovered through Google Scholar search engine. Sixty-seven were selected under the criteria of the research. Most of them discuss selfies correlated to narcissism, self-esteem and self-presentation/ representation. Only a few articles talk about rooftopping. Among the few, none discusses rooftopping in Indonesia. Moreover, most researches employ psychological approach.

There are several researchers namely Veena & Krishnamurti [8], Kaur & Vig [9], Lamba et al [10], Subrahmanyam et al. [11], Lamba et al. [12] and Kurniawan et al. [13] who researched dangerous selfies. What is meant by a dangerous selfie here is a selfie that is taken at dangerous places; which can potentially cause the doer to be injured or even die. Their research highlights the problems of the high death rate caused by dangerous selfies.

Moreover, among the articles, none of them uses Hermeneutics as the approach and theory. Therefore, this article is a novelty in urban exploration research in terms of the topic and research method.

The origin of Hermeneutics in modern usage comes from the 17th century, where Hermeneutics was important in the context of Bible studies [14]. Scholars turned to Hermeneutics to create guidelines for the interpretation of scripture. Since the 17th century, Hermeneutics has penetrated many scientific fields and is applied to texts other than scripture, including unwritten sources [15].

Hermeneutics theory by Wilhelm Dilthey is employed to reveal the informants' motivation in doing rooftopping and the punishments they underwent and why they won't quit.

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. In Humanities interpretation is very important. Understanding one's book, painting, action or thought is the primary task of Humanities [16].

The German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey was interested in the method and the aim of the Humanities, which he believed to be very different from those of the Natural Sciences. Now, to understand that aim and method, we first have to determine what the Humanities study; what their subject matter is.

According to Dilthey what they study is in German *erlebnis*, which we can translate as something like experience or maybe conscious experience. In effect, what Humanities study is what human beings think and feel and

want and so on. They study what it is like to be a certain person, to live in a certain time or society, to write a certain book, make a certain painting and so on. But if that is true, it may seem that we have a big methodological problem, for other people's experiences are not available to us. Dilthey says they study expressions of experiences because people experience the world in a certain way. They write certain books, build certain buildings, observe certain customs and so on. We cannot directly study anyone's experience, but we can and do study everything which expresses their experience [16].

For Dilthey then, there is a distinction between the things we study and the things we want to know about. We study expressions because only expressions are available for study. But our aim is not so much to learn about these expressions themselves. We aim to go a step back and understand the experience that led to these expressions. For understanding, Dilthey uses the German word *verstehen*, which has become common even in the English literature. *Verstehen* is a special kind of understanding [16].

It means that we can put ourselves in the place of the person who made the expression and experience what that person experienced while making that expression. If we read a poem and get it in the same state of mind that the original poet had, that is *verstehen*. The same is true about any expression that we study.

### 3. METHODS

It is a qualitative study with a hermeneutic approach conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2019. Fourteen Indonesian rooftoppers were recruited as the informants with a snowball sampling technique. The technique was used since it was difficult to approach and contact Indonesian rooftoppers since they were terrified of being detained by security officers or policemen. It is one of the issues in Indonesia that rooftoppers are considered a crime, so that they must be very careful in doing rooftoping, including in responding external parties who want to know about them and their community (illegal rooftoppers of Jakarta). Thus, the process of convincing them that it was the part of research took time and therefore a key person was employed. The key person also belonged to the community of Jakarta illegal rooftoppers. Then he informed his friends (other rooftoppers) that they would be interviewed for research and in return, they got some money.

Before the interviews the informants' Instagram accounts were examined whether they fulfilled the criteria of the research. They should have rooftoping pictures or videos posted within the last year on their accounts. The data were collected through both offline and online in-depth interviews, observation and triangulated with interviewing other informants and crosschecking the contents (pictures/videos) posted on informants' Instagram accounts. The online interviews were carried out by using WhatsApp text messages and voice calls. The face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out in Jakarta.

### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

One day in the sunny midday, a group of three male teenagers met up at a food-stand located near the main street in Central Jakarta. They arrived by themselves from different directions. Soon, they were seated on the wooden bench at the food stand and ordered some food and drink. Once the food was served, then they three quickly ate their lunch. These three teenagers were Jakarta rooftoppers who were meeting for planning a climb of a target. The food-stand was designated as the venue where many rooftoppers of Jakarta gathered and discussed their rooftoping plans. The three rooftoppers were aged between 15 and 20. Fitrah, the youngest rooftopper in the group was quite well-known among Jakarta rooftoppers for his bravery and skills in rooftoping. Though he just practiced rooftoping for about three years, he had defeated all the skyscrapers in Jakarta successfully. This was confirmed by the other rooftoppers whom I interviewed that they called him 'Master' for his excellent achievement and skill. The other two were older than him and they frequently became a team in rooftoping.

Although they belonged to different schools and years they knew and trusted each other. They could unite as a team since they had the same mission and goal namely scaling the skyscrapers and seizing the freedom on the rooftop. These teenagers belonged to the community called "Jakarta illegal rooftoppers". They operated in small groups and some of them did individually.

Fitrah and his two friends targeted a sixty-two-storey building in Jakarta. It is one of the tallest buildings in Jakarta and it became the pursuit of many rooftoppers. At that time, Fitrah took the lead of his two friends for he had ever scaled the building.

Once the briefing was done, they headed to the targeted building. Firstly, they observed the building situation and mapped the location of the security posts and public facilities (toilets and praying room). Security posts locations were necessary to know since they should always stay away from the security officers. Toilets and praying rooms were two common reasons frequently used by Indonesian rooftoppers in case they met a security officer asking them where they were heading. The next point they searched was the basement and the emergency stairs since they were their major gateway to the rooftop.

Having found them, the three teenage rooftoppers began their adventurous trip to the rooftop. Along the way throughout the emergency stairs, they mostly kept silent and stayed alert for the emerging security officers and installed CCTVs. They moved fast because they knew every minute counted. About fifteen minutes later, they halted for having a break. Fitrah took out a bottle of mineral water from his faded backpack and had a drink while wiping the sweat from his forehead with his hand. After that, he gave the bottle to his two friends. They took a rest for about five minutes and then they resumed. Frequently, they entered a building in the late afternoon at the same time when the employees were going home. It was reasonable since most of the security officers would devote their attention to the indoor security.

About half an hour later they almost reached the rooftop. Fitrah and his two friends were feeling rushed. That was the feeling that many rooftopers felt when they were about to reach the rooftop. Such feeling is also commonly felt by mountain climbers when they approach the rooftop. This can trigger the adrenaline that causes excitement. Fatigue, thirst, and hunger may suddenly vanish due to the feeling.

Usually, they wore uniforms of construction workers, namely vests with a cross at the back and construction helmets. Many rooftopers were undercover in such a way while doing rooftoping since they felt more secured with the apparels. They collected the vests and helmets from the construction site they found in the building or they purchased them from the used-clothes sellers.

Eventually, they came onto the rooftop after unlocking the door to the rooftop. Unfortunately, that was an unlucky day. A security officer spotted them through a CCTV on the top floor. Then he called out his colleagues informing them that several intruders were spotted on the top floor. When Fitrah and his two friends reached the rooftop many security officers had been there. They charged these rooftopers with trespassing the building. As a consequence, these angered security officers hit and kicked them repeatedly all over their bodies without asking them more. Fitrah and his friends begged them to stop hitting and kicking them but they wouldn't listen. The three rooftopers suffered from nose bleeding and black and blue all over their bodies after being treated so badly. At the end, one of them was run to the hospital for the unstopped nose-bleeding.

The depiction is merely one of the sad stories shared by the informants about being caught while having rooftoping. To Fitrah it was not the first time to be caught by security officers. He and his two friends were even detained at a local police station for three days. The others (among the fourteen informants) stated that they had ever been asked to have push-ups and one of them had ever been forced to roll over the rough cement-floor wearing no clothes. As a result, he suffered from pain and hurts all over his body. The other informants told about more severe punishments perpetrated by security officers, namely being electrocuted with a portable electrifier. Among these punishments being reported to the police was the most terrifying one to the rooftopers since their names would be noted and recorded by the policemen as having carried out a crime. So, the rooftopers usually chose to be punished physically when they were caught than to be reported to the police.

The underpinning issues in this article are the motivations of the Indonesian rooftopers and the kinds of punishments they underwent. Seven of the fourteen informants asserted that they do rooftoping for a hobby. Four of them claimed if they do it for the sake of photography. Two stated that they seek entertainment and one claimed to do rooftoping due to escaping from life problems.

Nearly all of the informants stated that they had ever been caught by the security officers. To get imprisoned is the punishment that all rooftopers tried to avoid. Not to

mention the sanctions namely asking their parents to arrive at the venue to pick them up, deleting the rooftoping pictures or videos they might have taken, and deleting their social media accounts. The security officers strongly warned them to report them to the police if they still find them doing rooftoping.

However, the intimidating warning and severe punishments given by the security officers did not seem to be able to shut the rooftopers' motivation down. Most of them did rooftoping again a few weeks after being punished. This was incredible since to get fully recovered from trauma usually takes a long time and sometimes even the person quit. There is a big question why couldn't those punishments make them stop having rooftoping?

As stated before that the majority of the informants do rooftoping since they consider it as a hobby while others argue that they do rooftoping for the sake of photography. At first, I couldn't believe it when they said that they do rooftoping for merely a hobby. Somehow the risk is too big and it's not worth with what they obtain in my perspective.

In Hermeneutics, there is a term hermeneutic circle, namely efforts made to investigate the meaning of something in a continuous manner (in a circle) to obtain the closest or the most accurate one. To understand how these rooftopers dared to risk their lives for a hobby is not easy. Nonetheless, they have ever undergone severe punishments and intimidating sanctions. I realized that the rooftopers were still too young to articulate what they meant more understandably. So, I kept investigating them through an in- depth interview.

I asked them about how they felt when they were on the rooftop. They stated that they were happy and relieved from their fatigue due to ascending the stairs onto the rooftop. Then I asked them about being relieved to be correlated with sensation. Eventually, in one of the interviews I found the term "freedom". The informant acknowledged that he felt very free when he was on the rooftop facing down the cityscape from above. So, there it is the keyword. They sought freedom. Then everything makes sense.

This freedom was the energy that drove them to keep doing rooftoping although the security officers had asked them to delete their rooftoping pictures/videos and even their social media accounts. Moreover, this is what made them endure the intimidating sanctions and severe punishments from the security officers. All the motivations: hobby, photography, entertainment and escape from life problems lead to this freedom. All those motivations were deeply rooted in the life background of the rooftopers. Why were they difficult to articulate freedom? It is because most of the Indonesian children usually stay with their parents until they turn 20 or 25. So, many of their decision-makings are still interfered or intervened by their parents, for example in determining their schools or colleges and programs or departments, parents still frequently "guide" their children authoritatively to which school or college they should attend. Consequently, children have few opportunities to have a negotiation. If they reject that, their parents occasionally threaten them

for not wanting to pay for their tuition fees or not wanting to be responsible for any failure of their children's future career.

According to some of the informants their parents sometimes got angry with them for various reasons and one of them is rooftopping. Most of their parents did not permit them to do rooftopping. When they were caught in action, their parents were asked to pick them up and this made their parents outraged. But nearly all of them did not want to stop rooftopping. Their parents' anger even made them more determined to perform rooftopping.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Scaling the skyscrapers and performing stunt-like actions atop of them has been brought to reality. The rooftoppers have turned the horrific view of the sheer skyscrapers into an exciting spectacle. Not merely it exists in the action or adventure movies but also the scenes have been adopted by urban explorers with conscious intention for the sake of breath-taking pictures/videos which are then posted on social media for fame or public attention.

Based on the research, Indonesian rooftoppers perform rooftopping for several reasons: hobby, photography, entertainment, and escape from life problems. Although they have various motivations, all of them share the same objective, seeking the (ultimate) freedom. Posting their rooftopping pictures on social media for having virtual representation is secondary in fact. This is proven when several of them were caught and forced to delete their Instagram accounts and rooftopping pictures/videos they did not stop doing rooftopping. Several kinds of the punishments undergone by the Indonesian rooftoppers were too excessive and inhumane. Some of the security officers acted too extraordinarily and that made some of the rooftoppers suffer from memorable injuries. Among the kinds of punishments, being reported to the police is the most terrifying one since it can disrupt their good reputation.

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