Digital Media and Emotional Communication for Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMIs): A Uses and Gratifications Analysis

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Abstract

Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMIs) face emotional challenges in maintaining family harmony due to geographical distance and dual roles. This study examines how PMIs use digital media to sustain emotional communication with their nuclear families, guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and digital communication documentation. Results show that digital platforms meet affective needs, maintain social bonds, and provide emotional relief. Gender influences the types of gratifications sought, while families emphasize reciprocal communication. Despite barriers such as time differences and limited access, video calls and messaging foster emotional closeness. Digital media play a vital role in supporting the emotional well-being of PMI and preserving long-distance family relationships.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized landscape, cross-border migration has become an inevitable phenomenon that significantly impacts the economic conditions of various countries. In Indonesia, Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMIs) play a vital role in supporting national economic growth, with remittances reaching IDR 253.3 trillion in 2024 and projected to increase to IDR 439 trillion in 2025. Nevertheless, this narrative of economic success through remittances often overshadows the heavy psychosocial burdens faced by Indonesian Migrant Workers, both men and women, including the emotional dilemma between professional demands in host countries and the longing for familial wholeness in Indonesia, further exacerbated by long-term physical separation from their children, partners, and support networks. While existing studies have extensively examined the impacts of migration from external aspects such as economic contributions and changes in family structure, the focus on PMIs' internal motivations and needs in using digital media remains limited. This gap indicates the need for a deeper understanding of why and how PMIs choose specific media for communication, particularly in relation to their emotional well-being and familial relationships. Therefore, this study adopts a user-centered approach by applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to examine the role of digital media as a means of emotional communication for PMIs.

In the context of global migration, over 297,000 PMIs were deployed abroad in 2024, primarily to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore (BP2MI, 2025). Their labor contributions resulted in a total remittance of IDR 253.3 trillion, making it one of the country's main sources of foreign exchange (Hidayat, 2024). This figure is expected to rise in 2025, following the government's target to deploy 425,000 PMIs and reach a projected remittance of IDR 439 trillion (Ramalan, S., & Arief, 2025). In addition to contributing to national revenue, PMIs help reduce domestic unemployment and support their families back home.

However, this narrative of economic success through remittances often overshadows the heavy psychosocial burdens faced by Indonesian Migrant Workers, both men and women. Many are caught in an emotional dilemma between the professional demands of their host countries and the longing for familial wholeness in Indonesia, further

exacerbated by long-term physical separation from their children, partners, and support networks. A study by PUSKAPA highlights that when parents migrate for work, their children are frequently left in the care of extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, or older siblings, who then assume full caregiving responsibilities alongside household obligations (PUSKAPA, 2025). Moreover, reports from IOM and UNICEF indicate that many left-behind children experience psychological impacts due to inadequate attention and affection from substitute caregivers, which may lead to deviant behavior and social stigmatization (Canton, 2021). UNICEF further emphasizes that millions of children across Asia are left behind by migrant parents, with direct consequences on their emotional well-being, psychological development, and educational attainment (Canton, 2021). Therefore, the economic achievements generated through remittances must be understood holistically by also acknowledging the psychosocial impacts experienced by PMIs and their families.

Data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) shows that between January and August 2024, 108,477 out of 207,090 PMIs placed abroad worked in the informal sector, such as domestic helpers and caregivers, with the majority being women (BP2MI, 2024). Workers in these sectors are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence, as they are often excluded from labor law protections in host countries. The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, 2023) reports that female PMIs frequently face economic, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, mostly within domestic work settings and non-procedural employment situations. The UN Women's Spotlight Initiative (2023, pp. 59–61) also highlights that undocumented female migrant workers living in employers' homes (live-in domestic workers) face gender-based violence, labor rights violations, and isolation from formal protection systems. These structural inequalities compel many female PMIs to remain in unsafe and inhumane working conditions, sacrificing their safety, rights, and well-being for what is often their sole source of income.

In navigating psychological pressures and dilemmas arising from separation, PMIs heavily rely on digital communication to maintain emotional connections with their families. A study by Nani Nurani Muksin (Muksin et al., 2019) on PMIs in Hong Kong found that WhatsApp is the preferred platform due to its affordability and variety of features. In addition, PMIs also use Facebook and Instagram not only for communication but also to run online businesses while working abroad. These findings emphasize that digital media has evolved beyond a simple

messaging tool into a vital space for maintaining emotional closeness, supporting personal interaction, and sustaining the financial role of PMIs despite the geographical divide.

This research applies the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which positions individuals as active, goal-oriented media users who consciously select media to satisfy their specific needs (Katz et al., 1973) and (Blumler & Katz, 1974). In this context, PMIs are not passive recipients of information, but discerning users of digital platforms who employ media to meet communication demands emerging from their migrant experiences. (Madianou & Miller, 2013), in their study on transnational families, reveal that digital media such as WhatsApp and Facebook are used by PMIs to maintain emotional connectivity, alleviate loneliness, and uphold social roles within their families. This communication is not merely informative but plays a crucial role in sustaining psychological closeness across distances. Furthermore, gender-based differences in media usage are also significant. Research shows that female PMIs tend to use media for emotional expression and social bonding, while male PMIs are more likely to use it for practical and functional purposes (Wilding, 2006). On the other hand, families left behind also rely heavily on digital communication to monitor the condition of their loved ones abroad and stay involved in their daily lives (Wilding, 2006).

Based on this framework, this study aims to examine how PMIs meet emotional needs through digital communication, what strategies they employ, the forms of gratification they experience, the gender-based differences in media usage patterns, and how families in Indonesia perceive this media usage. It is hoped that this research will enrich the literature on long-distance family communication in the digital era and provide practical insights for more responsive policies and programs to support the communicative needs of PMIs.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMIs) who face the dilemma between career and family, and how they empower digital media for emotional communication (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The case study design was chosen as it allows for the exploration of phenomena within real-life and complex contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are difficult to distinguish (Yin et al., 2018).

Purposive sampling was used to select relevant informants including four female PMIs in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan, one male PMI in South Korea, and two family members in Indonesia based on criteria such as duration of employment abroad, family status, and digital media usage (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted online, and non-participant observation of informants' interactions and narratives.

Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three cyclical stages:

1. Data reduction (selection, simplification, and coding),
2. Data display in matrix and narrative forms, and
3. Conclusion drawing and verification to ensure the validity of findings (Muawanah, 2021)

This approach enabled the researcher to explore in depth the dynamics of digital media usage in fulfilling emotional, social integrative, and tension-release needs among PMIs, as well as to map communication strategies used to maintain long-distance family closeness.
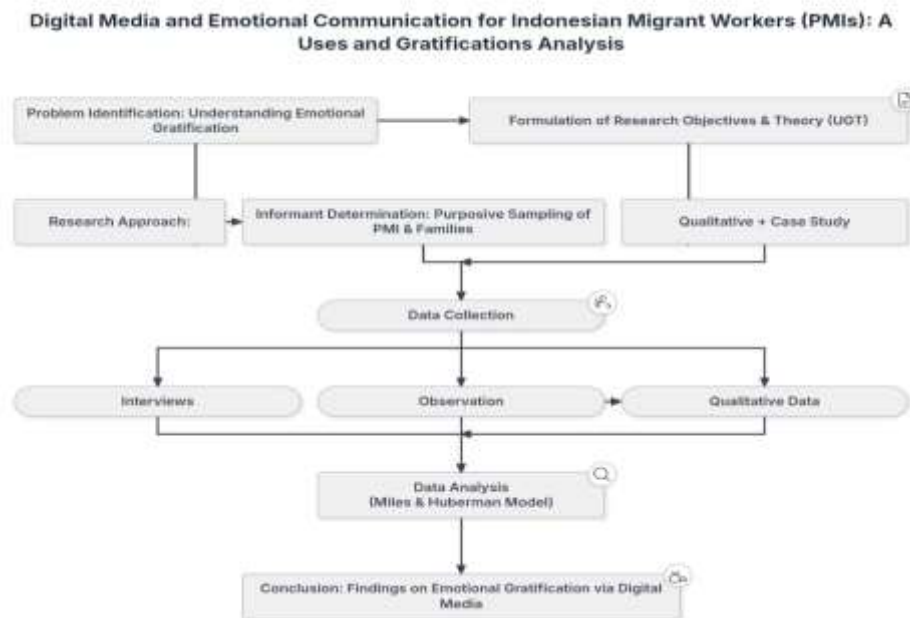
Figure 1. Diagram of Research Design

3. Results

3.1 Digital Media as an Emotional Bridge (Fulfilling Affective Needs)

The findings of this study strongly affirm the relevance of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in understanding the digital communication behavior of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI). As articulated by Katz et al. (1973), audiences possess agency in interacting with media, and PMIs demonstrate themselves as active and selective media users. They consciously choose digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube to fulfill various needs arising from the complexities of migration and the career-family dilemma. The fulfillment of affective needs through video calls clearly demonstrates how digital technology can bridge physical distance to maintain emotional closeness between PMIs and their families. PMIs do not merely use media for practical communication; they actively seek gratifications such as feeling loved, valued, and emotionally connected to their loved ones – needs that are particularly vital amidst the psychological strain of separation and geographical distance. From thematic analysis, it is clear that video calls are highly prioritized by most informants for this purpose.

This is clearly reflected in one informant's statement:

"Almost every night, I video call my child before he sleeps. I don't want him to forget my voice and face. I'm also really happy to see his smile directly, even if it's just through a phone screen. It feels... like we're really close, even though we're far apart." (D, 34 years old, female PMI in Hong Kong).

As explained by Madianou and Miller (2012), video calls serve as a form of 'virtual presence' that helps reduce psychological distance, particularly for migrant mothers with their children.

3.2 Maintaining Social Relationships and Roles (Fulfilling Social Integrative Needs)

In addition to using video calls to maintain emotional closeness, many Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) also actively utilize instant messaging applications like WhatsApp to continue fulfilling their family roles. Through text messages, they can remain part of daily household life, whether as mothers, wives, or heads of household. This communication is often practical and functional, encompassing advice to children, discussions with spouses about finances, and responses to emergencies such as a family member's illness.

One informant, a 37-year-old female PMI working in Malaysia, recounted:

"If my child is lazy to go to school, I immediately text them; I reprimand them even though I'm far away. Sometimes I also talk to my husband about bills, or if a child is sick. This way, I can stay updated and still offer advice, even from afar." (M, 37 years old, female PMI in Malaysia)

This statement indicates how instant messages are not just tools for exchanging information but also important means for PMIs to remain involved in family life. Through this long-distance communication, they can continue to exercise control, convey concern, and participate in important decision-making. In such situations, digital media play a significant role in preventing their social roles from disappearing simply due to separation by distance and time. For PMIs, being able to continue fulfilling their roles as parents or spouses provides a sense of calm, relevance, and recognition all crucial for maintaining their self-esteem and social identity as part of the family.

3.3 Media as an Emotional Escape (Fulfilling Tension Release)

Working abroad is not only physically demanding but also emotionally draining. Many PMIs face intense work pressure and prolonged longing for their families back home. In such situations, some rely on digital media as a temporary escape from the burdens they carry. Social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube become avenues for light entertainment, while WhatsApp groups for fellow PMIs are often used to share stories, joke, or simply feel less alone. For them, these activities can be a simple yet effective way to calm their minds and divert focus from daily pressures.

An informant working in Taiwan clearly expressed this:

"When I'm tired and miss home, I usually watch funny videos on my phone or read chats in PMI friends' groups. It helps a bit, reduces the stress for a while, so I don't constantly dwell on the work burden here." (Y, 40 years old, female PMI in Taiwan).

From this testimony, it is clear that media usage is not always directly related to family communication but rather to the personal need to feel emotionally lighter. Simple activities like watching videos or reading group chats can be a form of tension release that helps them cope. In this context, digital media function as a catharsis a small space where they can momentarily "breathe" before returning to their work routines and other responsibilities. Thus, media use is not just about maintaining relationships but also about maintaining one's own strength and sanity while living as a migrant worker.

3.4 Challenges of Long-Distance Digital Communication

Although digital media have opened avenues for PMIs to remain emotionally connected with their families, the reality is not always smooth. In practice, numerous obstacles hinder communication or make it feel less satisfying. Signal interference, demanding work schedules, and time differences between the country of employment and the hometown are common issues they face. The intention to share stories or find solace through conversations with family sometimes fails due to uncontrollable circumstances.

One female PMI informant working in Hong Kong recounted:

"Sometimes, during a video call, the signal starts acting up, constantly breaking, which is frustrating. Or my body is just so tired after a full day of work, so I can only reply to chats briefly. It feels unsatisfying, like... something is missing. I really want to talk for a long time." (D, 34 years old, female PMI in Hong Kong).

Meanwhile, another informant, residing in Singapore, experienced something similar:

"There was a time when I had specifically set aside time to video call my child, but then the electricity suddenly went out in the village, or their data ran out. It felt so sad, like the hope of talking directly just vanished." (S, 30 years old, female PMI in Singapore).

From these accounts, it is evident that while the desire to maintain communication remains strong, various technical and situational barriers prevent the expected gratification from being fully met. Moments that should be quality time with family instead turn into disappointment due to poor signals or unfavorable conditions. Consequently, feelings of frustration arise, sometimes even leading to guilt for not being able to be fully present, even through a screen. This demonstrates that the success of emotional communication does not solely depend on intention and the media used but is also heavily determined by external conditions that remain a challenge for many PMIs.

As a qualitative study focusing on the in-depth experiences of informants, thematic analysis in this study identified various barriers that predominantly emerged in their narratives. Constraints such as internet signal interference, time limitations due to demanding work schedules, and time differences were the most frequently expressed challenges by informants, reflecting the complexity of adapting digital communication amidst migration conditions. Findings regarding these communication barriers are consistent with the broader literature on challenges faced by migrant workers in maintaining digital connections.

A study by Madianou and Miller (2013) also highlights how unstable internet connectivity and asynchronous schedules frequently

disrupt the emotional closeness expected from media interactions. Furthermore, time constraints due to long working hours and time differences are generally reported as significant obstacles limiting the duration and quality of communication, as highlighted in qualitative studies on migrant workers' lives showing pressure from tight work schedules, for instance in Japan (Syawwal, 2024). This also aligns with the findings of Sinaga et al. (2024) who discuss the impact of infrequent communication on children's feelings of loneliness due to time and distance constraints.

Issues of accessibility and internet data costs in the origin areas also hinder smooth communication, as frequently found in research on the digital divide in rural areas or vulnerable groups, as indicated by reports on digital access for female migrant workers to services and information (Smeru Research Institute, 2017). This phenomenon indicates that the experiences of informants in this study are not anomalies, but rather a reflection of broader structural challenges in transnational communication.

3.5 Comparison of Communication Needs and Media Usage Patterns Between Female and Male PMIs

This study found significant differences in communication needs and digital media usage patterns between female and male PMIs. Female PMIs generally prioritize emotional needs (affective needs) and social needs (social integrative needs), especially those related to childcare and maintaining family harmony. They use digital media such as video calls to ensure emotional connections with their families are preserved. This is evident from one informant's testimony:

"For me, video calls have become a necessity. Every day, as much as possible, I make time to see my children. It doesn't matter if it's long or short; what matters is being able to see their faces, hear their voices. But if I can't video call, whether because I'm tired or the timing isn't right, it feels... empty. Like something is missing, like I'm not a complete mother. Even though it's just through a phone, it's very important for my heart." (D, 34 years old, female PMI in Hong Kong).

Through digital communication, female PMIs strive to seek emotional closeness, alleviate homesickness, and maintain their roles as mothers and wives, despite physical distance separating them from their families.

On the other hand, while male PMIs also use media for family communication, their patterns differ slightly. They emphasize social needs related to their roles as heads of household and information providers, such as ensuring family finances remain secure. Furthermore,

they utilize media for stress release (tension release), such as entertainment or general information consumption. One male informant revealed:

"I usually use WhatsApp to send money and ask about my family's well-being, to put my mind at ease, knowing they are healthy at home. Sometimes I call too, but not as often as my wife, who video calls almost every day. When I miss them, I prefer to watch the news or play games on my phone. It helps keep my mind from wandering. Honestly, sometimes talking makes my heart heavier. So, I find my own way to calm myself down, the important thing is I can still do my job." (Mr. R, 45 years old, male PMI in South Korea).

These differences reflect gender norms and social role expectations in Indonesia that influence how female and male PMIs utilize digital media. Women focus more on emotional and nurturing aspects, while men tend to emphasize instrumental roles as providers while also using media for personal relaxation. In other words, although their goal is the same to maintain family relationships the way they prioritize communication needs shows different patterns according to their respective social roles.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study strongly affirm the relevance of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in understanding the digital communication behavior of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI). PMIs are active and selective media users. They consciously choose specific digital platforms to fulfill various needs arising from the complexities of migration and the career-family dilemma. This aligns with UGT's core premise that audiences possess agency in interacting with media (Katz et al., 1973). In a more recent context, Akter, Tan, and Muslim (2024, p. 8) highlight that migrants, including PMI, actively evaluate and select digital media to meet their emotional, social, and tension-relief needs. Thus, digital media serve not only as tools for exchanging information but also as coping mechanisms and as a means to sustain social roles within transnational family life.

Specifically, the fulfillment of affective needs through video calls demonstrates how digital technology can bridge physical distance to maintain emotional closeness between PMIs and their families. PMIs do not simply use media for practical communication; they actively seek gratifications such as feeling loved, valued, and emotionally connected to their loved ones—needs that are particularly significant amidst the psychological strain of separation and geographical distance. Video calls

enable deeper interactions by reinstating non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and and gestures, which are crucial in strengthening emotional bonds. As Madianou and Miller (2012) explain, video calls serve as a form of "virtual presence" for migrant mothers, helping reduce the psychological distance with their children. Similarly, Akter, Tan, and Muslim (Akter et al., 2024) found that digital media provide migrant workers with a space to maintain emotional and social ties with their families, ensuring that affective and integrative needs are fulfilled even while abroad. This understanding aligns with Bowlby's (2008) attachment theory, which emphasizes the importance of secure and enduring emotional bonds as a fundamental aspect of psychological well-being for both children and parents.

The aspect of tension release through social media reflects an important coping dimension in media use among PMIs. Amid work-related pressures and homesickness, digital media function as a form of catharsis or positive distraction. PMIs consciously seek light entertainment or social interaction to alleviate emotional fatigue and stress an example of emotion-focused coping, which focuses on managing emotional responses rather than changing the situation itself (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Recent studies also suggest that migrant workers use short video platforms and entertainment applications not merely for leisure but as strategies to relieve stress and loneliness during their time abroad (Akter et al., 2024). These gratifications help them maintain psychological balance, thereby enhancing their capacity to sustain healthy communication with their families.

Nevertheless, this study also reveals that the gratification process does not always proceed smoothly. Technical challenges such as unstable internet connections, time constraints due to heavy workloads, and time differences can significantly hinder the fulfillment of expected gratifications. When anticipated gratifications are not met, this may lead to frustration and emotional burdens for PMIs. As noted by Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985), a gap between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained can result in dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal. (Madianou & Miller, 2013) also observed that connectivity issues, asynchronous schedules, and fatigue frequently disrupt the emotional closeness expected from media interactions. This underscores that while PMIs are active users, the effectiveness of media in meeting their needs is heavily influenced by external factors. Therefore, access to and quality of digital infrastructure are crucial in supporting emotional communication and the psychosocial well-being of PMIs.

The gender comparison analysis and the perspectives of families left behind in Indonesia further enrich the understanding of the complexities of migrant family communication through the UGT lens. Differences in the prioritization of communication needs between male and female PMIs indicate that gender plays a significant role in shaping media use patterns and the types of gratifications sought. Recent studies show that women tend to use social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram more intensively and interactively, primarily to nurture social and emotional relationships. In contrast, men are more active on platforms such as Twitter and focus more on informational and entertainment-related media use (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022). Additionally, findings from (Shepherd, H., Scott, A., & Robinson, C., 2023) suggest that women are more engaged in communal and emotional digital activities, whereas men tend to prefer instrumental and individual-oriented digital engagement. These patterns are consistent with the behaviors observed among PMIs: women emphasize caregiving roles and household harmony through emotional communication, while men prioritize communication for fulfilling economic responsibilities and personal stress relief.

Moreover, incorporating the perspectives of families left behind further deepens the analysis of migrant family communication. A recent study by Sinaga, Watloly, and Litaay (Sinaga et al., 2024) found that in migrant families, children who regularly communicate with their parents via digital technology tend to feel more emotionally connected, while infrequent communication is often associated with increased feelings of loneliness. These findings emphasize that digital communication is an interactive process: families in Indonesia also seek affective, social, and reassurance gratifications from media, not just the PMIs abroad. Furthermore, research by Akter, Tan, and Muslim (Akter et al., 2024) shows that communication breakdowns such as the absence of video calls or delayed message responses can trigger emotional frustration among left-behind family members, directly affecting the strength of emotional bonds.

This narrative reinforces that the effectiveness of digital communication in migration contexts is not only about what PMIs achieve but also about whether the expectations of families at home are met. Therefore, UGT-based studies should adopt a holistic ecosystemic approach to family communication, encompassing both migrant senders and family receivers to better understand interactivity and the balance of gratification in long-distance communication.

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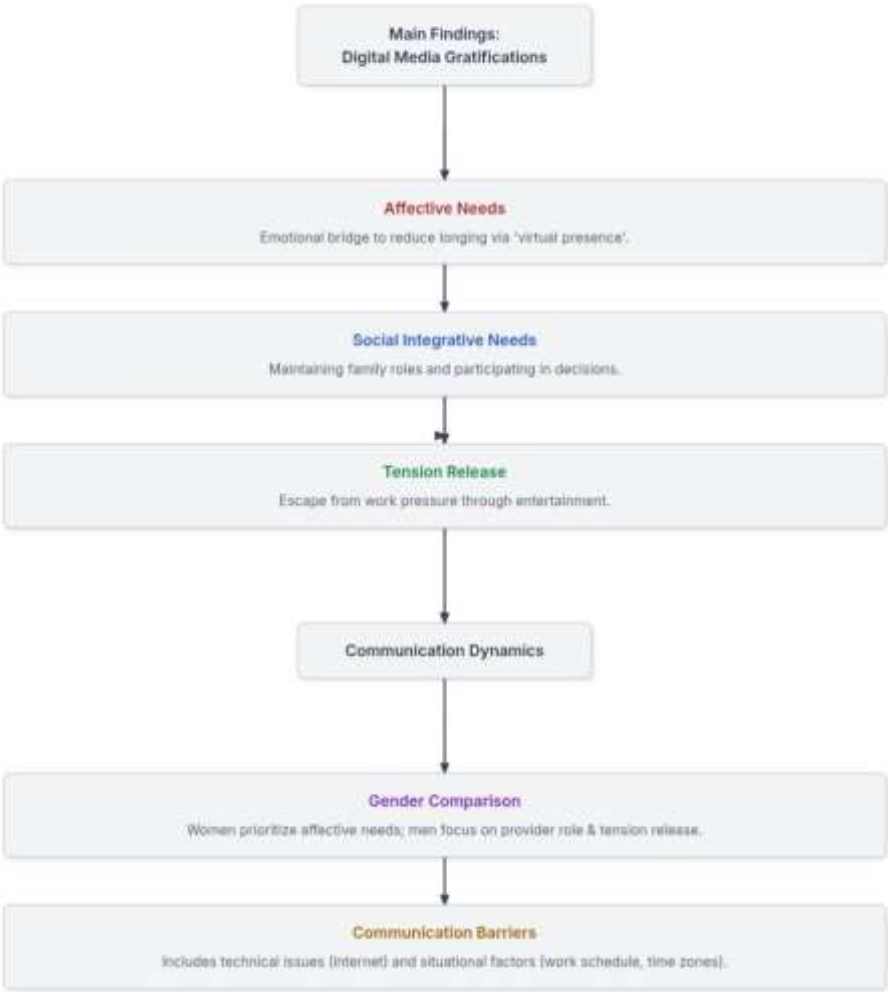
Figure 2. Diagram of Research Findings

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that digital media have become a crucial tool for Indonesian migrant Workers (PMI) in sustaining emotional connections with their families across distances. Through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), PMIs are shown to actively use media particularly video calls and instant messaging to meet affective, social integrative, and tension-release needs. Despite challenges such as

limited infrastructure and demanding work conditions, digital platforms effectively support emotional well-being and family cohesion. The study also highlights gender-based differences and family perspectives, emphasizing the complexity of transnational communication dynamics and the essential role of digital access in enhancing migrants' psychosocial resilience. To support PMIs further, policy recommendations include improving digital infrastructure in PMIs' origin areas, such as subsidized internet services, and developing digital-based emotional communication training programs. It is also important to establish community support networks that leverage digital media to reduce isolation and enhance PMIs' adaptability. Increased digital access directly contributes to psychosocial resilience through facilitating consistent communication, information access, and virtual social support. Limitations of this study include its relatively small sample size and specific regional focus, thus limiting statistical generalizability. Furthermore, as a qualitative study, findings are not intended for statistical generalization but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of specific experiences. Future research could explore longitudinal studies to track communication dynamics over time or conduct comparative analyses across host countries and employment sectors for a more comprehensive understanding.

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