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The Construction of Masculinity among Male Migrant Workers Through Digital Representations of Successful Migration

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Abstract
Social media has transformed migration from labor mobility into a digital space where migration success is represented and interpreted. This study examines how masculinity among male migrant workers is constructed and negotiated through social media representations of successful migration and how these representations shape migration aspirations in rural communities. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach in Indramayu Regency, Indonesia, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and analysis of TikTok videos, captions, audio, and visual elements. The study involved 21 informants, including current and returning male migrant workers, family members, community leaders, and local stakeholders. Data were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic analysis, with hegemonic masculinity as the analytical lens and impression management and symbolic interactionism as theoretical foundations. Findings reveal that masculinity is constructed through material achievements and family responsibilities, reinforcing the provider ideal. Impression management presents migration positively by emphasizing success while downplaying challenges. Consequently, digital representations frame migration as a realistic pathway to masculine achievement, shaping aspirations and reinforcing dominant masculine ideals in rural communities.

Keywords: *hegemonic masculinity, impression management, male migrant workers, migrant aspirations, social media representation*

Paper Type: *Research Paper*

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INTRODUCTION

Migration for international purposes has been part of economic strategies among Indonesian people, especially in rural areas with limited job opportunities and income disparities (Wulandari et al. 2021; Pujiati et al. 2025). However, migration can now be seen as more than just an economic choice. Success stories from migrant workers have influenced the imagination of social mobility and achieving a better life. It has become a social aspiration based on hopes of improving income, owning assets, increasing social status, and having successful families (Asis et al. 2019; Wo 2024).

The concept of successful international migration has significant implications for males. As the primary providers in their family, they are seen as the key people responsible for their family's well-being. Hegemonic masculinity holds that earning money, owning possessions, and providing for one's family are often seen as validation of masculinity (Connell 1995). International migration, therefore, can be seen as an opportunity for males to establish, negotiate, and uphold their masculinity through economic success. Data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) indicate that in 2025, 46,575 male migrant workers were sent to their destination countries, accounting for 34.5% of the 135,191 Indonesian migrant workers. Whilst there are fewer males than females, this still shows that international migration is an important opportunity for Indonesian males.

Social media has changed the way international migration is created, shared, and experienced. Immigrant workers share their experiences through photos, videos, and stories detailing their homes, cars, earnings, lifestyles, and other successes. These can indirectly affect how people perceive the success of migration (Chen et al. 2022). When examining male migrant workers, there can be hidden meanings in their digital representations. Economic success has become a symbol of successful masculinity.

However, some aspects of the migration experience are not always represented in digital spaces. Multiple studies have indicated that migration can involve family issues, changes in social roles, economic uncertainties, and challenges upon return (Wulandari et al. 2025; Nanda and Ghosh 2025). Remittances are also often used to purchase homes, assets, and goods that are considered to have symbolic value to society (Erisanna and Tjenreng 2025; Eviana and Gunawan 2018; Hakim et al. 2025; Sumardiani 2014).

The concept of impression management explains how individuals control how

information about them is presented to create a desired impression (Schlenker 1980). For male migrant workers, this may be linked to the creation of an image of a 'successful' man who can provide for his family (Näre 2010; Hakimi 2023). Symbolic interactionism is also relevant here, as it explains how symbols acquire meaning through social interaction (Blumer 1969). Owning a house and a car, having income, and a particular lifestyle are symbols of success. This is because society links these things to high status and economic success. Once these symbols are consistently shown online, they can serve as a reference for others to visualize what life is like as a migrant and therefore shape their aspirations to migrate (Dora et al. 2025).

Although studies on migration, masculinity, and social media have expanded, these three fields still tend to operate in isolation. Studies on migration in Indonesia have largely focused on the experiences and vulnerabilities of female migrant workers, while the experiences of male migrant workers have received relatively little attention (Wulandari et al. 2021; Elizabeth et al. 2020; Choithani 2020). In contrast, research on social media in migration contexts mostly frames digital platforms as tools for communication, maintaining social networks, and exchanging information (Sun et al. 2025; Guan et al. 2025). Thus, there remains a limited body of research that directly examines how digital representations of male migrant workers' success serve as a mechanism linking constructions of masculinity to the formation of migration aspirations.

This study looks at migration, masculinity, and social media. Migration is not seen as an economic strategy in this study; rather, it is examined in terms of how migrants represent themselves and create meaning around success. Social media was viewed as a way for male migrant workers to showcase their economic successes, whilst also managing their image and interacting with an audience who will give meaning to these displays. This study examines how certain successes are highlighted, granted social legitimacy, and become something to aspire to.

Hegemonic masculinity is the primary theory in this study, with impression management and symbolic interactionism supporting it. Combining these three theories will provide a deeper understanding of how migrants' aspirations for migration are influenced by other factors, such as digital representation. This study aims to answer two research questions: 1) How do men migrant workers construct and negotiate masculine identities through displaying migration success on social media? 2) How do these displays

impact the creation of migrant aspirations in rural communities? This study will contribute to the migration literature by examining the experiences of male migrant workers. It will also add to masculinity studies by showing how digital representations can be used to legitimate masculinity. Finally, this study will contribute to communication studies by demonstrating that social media can serve as a site of production and distribution for aspirational masculinities.

METHODS

A qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach will be used. This was chosen because the study focuses on understanding the experiences and interpretations of male migrant workers who display their success in migration on social media. The phenomenological approach can therefore help to understand how the informants have experienced and interpreted success in migration and masculinity within their social lives (Creswell 2017).

This study was conducted in Indramayu Regency, comprising Sindang, Juntinyuat, and Sukra Sub-districts, over a one-year period from February 2025 to February 2026. This location was chosen because, according to 2025 data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), Indramayu Regency is among the areas with a high number of migrant workers. Therefore, this area can be seen as having high rates of migration, making it an interesting location to look into the masculinities experienced by male migrant workers.

There were 21 research participants in total, comprising ex-male migrant workers, current male migrant workers, family members, community leaders, and local stakeholders. A purposive sample was used to select informants believed to have the experience and knowledge required for the research topic. Below is a table illustrating the breakdown of participants involved in the research.

Table 1.

No.	Informant Category	Number of informants	Location
1.	Former male migrant workers	10	Sindang and Juntinyuat
2.	Current male migrant workers	5	Sindang and Sukra
3.	Family members of migrant workers	3	Sindang, Juntinyuat and Sukra
4.	Community leaders	2	Sindang and Sukra
5.	Local stakeholders	1	Juntinyuat
	Total number of informants		21 number

Profile of Research Informants (February 2025)

This study used a mixed-method design to gather information. In-depth interviews were used to understand migrants' lived experiences, their views on success, and their masculine identities. Interviews were conducted with migrant males currently working online while overseas. However, former migrant workers, families, community leaders, and stakeholders participated in face-to-face interviews. This was done in Indonesian, with certain situations using local dialects to create a sense of intimacy and deepen the context. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder (with informed consent), and field notes were also used.

Non-participatory observations were carried out of the routines, activities, and environment in which informants lived. An analysis of TikTok was also undertaken to understand how the success of male migrant workers was portrayed through video, text, sound, and visual cues. TikTok was selected because the platform's visual and auditory elements allow narratives about migration to be created and portrayed through symbols that show economic success, property ownership, lifestyle, and family success. Further details on data collection can be found below in Table 2.

Table 2.

Method	Objective	Data Source
In-depth interview	To explore migration experiences, perceptions of success, and constructions of masculinity	Former male migrant workers, current male migrant workers, family members of migrant workers, community leaders, and local stakeholders.
Participatory observation	To understand daily practices, social interactions, and the community context	Former migrant workers, migrant families, and rural communities
Social media content analysis	To identify forms and symbols of representation of male migrant workers' success	Videos, text, audio, and visual elements in relevant TikTok content

Data Collection Methods (March 2025)

This used a qualitative approach, starting with qualitative content analysis. This helped provide insight into how different things were represented, what was perceived as a symbol of success, and the narratives within the TikTok content. Thematic analysis was then applied to the data to group the codes collected from the interviews, observations and TikTok into themes and categories. To do this, I analyzed the data multiple times, coding it, categorizing it, and creating themes. This was then interpreted through the lens of hegemonic masculinity as my main theoretical perspective. I used impression management and symbolic interactionism to supplement this.

The accuracy of the analysis is ensured through triangulation, comparing data collected from different informant categories. In addition, the researchers compare data obtained from interviews, observations, and TikTok content analysis. Furthermore, this study adheres to ethical guidelines by obtaining consent from the informants, anonymizing the data, and using an informant approach for social media data. This study has been approved by the ethics committee (Number 378/UN40.K/PT.01.01/2026). The research is conducted to understand how digital representations can be seen as social practices inseparable from male migrant workers' experience. Therefore, by using different data, the author managed to separate the lived experiences of male migrant workers, the meanings assigned by informants, and the image of success created for digital audiences. Findings of this research will be presented by theme, drawing on data and interpretations to understand how representations of success, constructions of masculinities, and the creation of migration aspirations are related.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transnational Masculinity and Its Relevance to the Cultural Provider Mindset

Transnational masculinity is created through relationships and practices that cross national boundaries. Migration changes the economic role of migrant men but also creates new spaces where masculine identities can be developed, performed, and recognized (Rother 2017). This idea is closely related to the idea of 'cultural provider mindset' in rural Indonesian society. The cultural provider mindset means that men are seen as the ones who should provide economically for their family. Therefore, when men migrate, their success is seen in the destination country.

The research findings show that the migrant experience becomes gendered through social conceptions of successful male migrants. Remittances, having a home, getting a car, setting up a business, and providing money for the family are important, as they indicate successful fulfillment of their role as providers (Ellis 2000; Spiliopoulos and Cuban 2025). The idea of 'provider culture' therefore not only influences men to provide economically for their family but is also acknowledged by the community. This can be seen in the findings below:

Table 3.

Theme of Findings	Observed Social Practices	The Meaning of Masculinity
Remittances as a symbol of success	Regular remittances to family members	The ability to provide for one's family financially is an indicator of a man's success
Symbolic consumption of the fruits of migration	Building a house, purchasing a vehicle, and hosting celebrations	Material achievement serves as markers of masculine status and success
Social pressure from the community	Encouragement to demonstrate the benefits of migration to family and the surrounding community	Masculinity is judged based on the ability to meet social expectations
Vulnerabilities of masculine identity	Feelings of shame and a sense of failure when unable to provide tangible economic benefits	Economic failure can be perceived as a failure to meet masculine standards

Manifestations of the "Cultural Provider" Mindset in Transnational Masculinity (June 2025)

The table above shows that economic achievement has a relational meaning. Its

masculine value is not inherently tied to a home, a vehicle, income, or other material possessions. Rather, it is formed through a social process in which the surrounding community associates such achievements with a man's ability to fulfill his gender role (Jung 2025). This is evident in the way people recognize the success of migrant workers through observable economic outcomes. A former migrant worker explained that:

> "If we go back and build a big house, people here will think we've made it or something; they'll say we're amazing." (OA, Former Migrant, Indramayu, 2025)

This demonstrates that the house has become a symbolic object, as it can communicate messages that people in that community understand. It has become a symbol that will give him recognition of being a 'successful man'. This shows that masculinity can be determined by the actions men take, but is also influenced by how the local community interprets these actions (Kukreja 2021). The idea of a 'cultural provider' can be seen as a cultural lens that links economic ability to masculine value. This aligns with the hegemonic masculinity perspective, in which masculinity is shaped by dominant societal norms that provide measures for determining a man's status and success (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

However, asset acquisition is not the only factor in these success criteria. Being able to economically support family members also allows migrant workers to gain recognition. They can portray themselves as good providers for their families, thereby gaining recognition as successful men. However, there can be tension associated with meeting these criteria. With expectations of tangible results from migration, migrant men have to balance social expectations with long-term economic interests. As one migrant worker said:

> "It's all so confusing. Even though we have a lot of money and my family wants me to use the money I earn to buy a motorcycle or a house, I'm afraid that if the money runs out, I won't have my own business." (NL, Migrant Worker, Indramayu, 2025).

This statement therefore can cause issues for male migrant workers when they have to fit into the 'provider' role. They will be able to satisfy their family's expectations by providing a home and/or car, giving them a sense of social acceptance. However, this can leave them without sufficient resources to create an economically sustainable future, as they spend their income on achieving symbolic gains. The 'cultural provider' mindset creates a sense of legitimacy; however, it creates criteria which can put men in a vulnerable

position. If economic success is considered to be one of the key measures of success, then those who do not achieve something tangible may feel negatively about themselves and be seen negatively by society. In terms of hegemonic masculinity, this shows how the norm of being a provider serves as an evaluative criterion, dictating which forms of masculinity are legitimized, whilst placing those who do not meet the criteria in a more vulnerable position (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

To conclude, the notion of "cultural provider mindset" can be seen as a cultural framework in which male migrant workers associate economic success with masculine values. Having a home, a car, remittances, etc., can all be considered signs of success, as they show they are fulfilling their role as providers. As part of transnational masculinities, the cultural meaning can also be seen in the digital realm. This shows that social media can be used as a platform to construct and gain an image of being a successful male migrant. Successes are highlighted, and only certain successes are shown, which can be seen as valued within society. Therefore, the 'cultural provider mentality' helps to determine what type of success will be displayed and provides a basis on which aspiration can be built around the success of male migrant workers.

Representations of Male Migrant Workers' Success on Social Media

This construction of masculine identities as a provider is not only performed in social situations but also in online environments. Male migrant workers use social media as a platform to display their migrant successes. This is constructed by selecting migrant workers' successes, organizing them into a narrative, and using symbols that are easily understood by the audience (Liu et al. 2025; Nurhikmah et al. 2024).

The findings from the social media content analysis and interviews show that the success of male migrant workers was mostly reflected in material gains and in their responsibilities to their families. The attainment of owning property was one of the most obvious examples. Phrases such as "the result of hard work in Japan at age 22" and "seeing the true nature of work in Taiwan" show how migration can be seen as a way of achieving material gains. Success was also shown through achievements that could be linked to responsibility for the family. Many posts showed how they were renovating their parents houses, taking parents on religious trips, buying gold and saving for the future. This shows that the economic success they have isn't viewed purely as something they own but something they can do for their

family.

These patterns indicate that the representation of male migrant workers' success has a strong gender dimension. Homes, vehicles, savings, and other material achievements are imbued with meaning as symbols of success because they are associated with men's ability to fulfill their responsibilities as providers. Thus, economic achievements serve not only as evidence of successful migration but also as a source of legitimacy for masculinity.

However, these portrayals are not completely representative of the migrant experience. The content analysis shows a bias towards positive stories, with negative or contradictory stories largely absent. This demonstrates migrant workers are trying to create an impression (Manoe et al. 2025). From a Schlenker (1980) impression management perspective, this can be seen as individuals attempting to influence the information provided about themselves to create a particular impression (Santika et al. 2025). In this instance, migrants focused on their achievements and their families' successes. Conversely, the stress and exhaustion of working life, difficulties of living in the host country, and potential financial failure do not form a large part of the public story. As one informant said:

> "Working abroad isn't as easy as people think; it's exhausting, and there's a lot of pressure, but of course, you can't tell people all that." (MA, Migrant Worker, Indramayu, 2025).

This sentence highlights the gap between the actual migration experience and its portrayal across different social media platforms. The informants were very clear that they could not present the full migration experience in public. They also noted that this was also an interpersonal issue. As they explained:

> "I rarely post about the hard parts; I don't want my family back home to worry, so I just show them the good stuff." (HI, Former Migrant, 2025)

That quote suggests that concealing difficult experiences is also done to protect family members from worry. Thus, content curation serves two purposes at once: maintaining relationships with family and preserving one's social standing as a man capable of meeting expectations as a provider. Awareness of the selectivity of representation also emerges from the audience's perspective.

This is significant as it shows not all audiences view digital representations as an

accurate reflection. Some audiences understand that there has been some selectivity during the creation of the content (Dora et al. 2025). However, they do not lose the symbolic nature of these successes. Homes, cars, consumption, and family accomplishments can serve as symbols linking migration to economic success. From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969), the meaning of symbols is not inherent in the object itself but is developed through social interactions. This means that homes or cars become symbols of success because society assigns them particular meanings.

Male migrant workers' success is demonstrated through their material accomplishments, and meeting their familial obligations. They will present these accomplishments through impression management to demonstrate their success and responsibility as men. According to symbolic interactionism, the homes, cars, spending and familial accomplishments they have will become meaningful to them as they represent symbols of success. Social media, therefore, shows how successful they are in their migration and reinforces this idea of success through social interaction.

Representations of Success and the Formation of Migration Aspirations in Rural Communities

The portrayal of the success of male migrant workers on social media platforms is not only significant in representing their own success but also an important source for the public's imagination of migration. Whilst the previous subsection discussed how success was portrayed through impression management and symbolic meaning, this section explores how success is associated with the development of migration aspirations within rural communities. Migration aspirations represent an individual's desire to migrate and their orientation towards migration in relation to their future (Meliala et al. 2025). Social media provides insight into migrants' experiences and successes and can therefore influence individuals' aspirations about what life might be like if they were to migrate (Amatillah et al. 2025).

Research findings indicate that exposure to digital representations of migrants' success can contribute to individuals' aspirations to work abroad. One informant explained:

> "These days, a lot of people want to go abroad because they often see on their phones that people working there are successful; they can build houses, buy cars, and all that sort of thing." (RS, migrant worker, Indramayu, 2025)

This statement shows how social media can provide a visual and narrative framework for migrants to consider what their future could be like. Images and narratives about buying homes and cars, and achieving material success, can lead people to see working abroad as a way to improve their financial situation. This can be seen in the audience's responses to social media content. Responses often include people who want to do the same, showing that successful narratives can affect migrants' ambitions.

Social media thus serves as a space in which individuals encounter and imagine possible futures through migration (Ahmad 2020). However, these aspirations are shaped not only by exposure to digital content but also by the social meanings attached to symbols of migrant success (Nurmiarani et al. 2024). Among these symbols, asset ownership is particularly prominent because it makes economic achievement visible and socially recognizable. This association is also evident in the accounts of community leaders, who observed:

> "When people here see someone coming home with a car or building a house, they immediately assume that working abroad must mean they've succeeded." (IL, Community Leader, Indramayu, 2025)

This highlights how migrants' success has been used as an indicator of the benefits of migration. Constant exposure to these material successes creates an expectation that migrants achieve them by working in other countries. This can be linked to concepts of 'migration aspirations' (Aslany et al. 2021). These aspirations hold different meanings for men because they are linked to the expectation that they fulfill the role of breadwinner. The concept of the "cultural provider mindset," discussed in the previous section, reinforces the view that economic success is integral to success as a man. This is reflected in the informant's statement:

> "If men here can't yet provide for their families, especially when they see others succeeding abroad, they start thinking they have to go abroad too." (AF, Migrant Worker, Indramayu, 2025)

This suggests that migration aspirations were driven by a desire to make money as well as meet their role as the provider. Migrants have been portrayed on social media as having 'made it' by achieving material success. This can therefore be seen as an achievable goal for males to attain masculine success by migrating abroad, building a house, buying a car, and providing for their families. This can encourage males within rural communities to believe they can meet their material needs whilst fulfilling their socially

constructed expectations of masculinities through migrating.

However, there is a contrast between the positive images created and the reality of migration. While many social media users recognize the challenging work environment and high cost of living, these issues are often not the focus of content. AF mentioned that migration did not look so appealing when looked at on a phone screen, but 'it was very tiring'. This highlights the difference between the perceived positives of migration and the physical and mental exhaustion. Therefore, this not only shows that online images are not entirely accurate, but also how unrealistic expectations are formed due to the selective focus on the positives.

This tension is particularly relevant in understanding how masculine identities are created. Success stories circulating on social media can help link the concept of 'provider' to working abroad, given their emphasis on men providing for their families through material success. As the migration findings demonstrate, achieving this ideal is not easy. This highlights the importance of understanding the motivations behind migration and how migrants may perceive opportunities even when there are limitations (De Haas, 2021; Carling and Collins, 2018). Social media serves as a way to gain knowledge about working abroad; however, it also shapes how masculine success is idealized. Social media influences how people perceive migration, and creates a culture that emphasizes the importance of being a 'provider'.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that social media acts as an arena in which the success of male migrant workers can be portrayed. This contributes to the meaning of masculinity and migration aspirations within rural communities. Success is shown through owning assets and fulfilling family duties. These achievements have been curated through impression management to portray the ideal 'successful' and responsible male. Symbolic interactionism allows these symbols to have meaning by representing successful migration. This will therefore serve as a guide for individuals considering migration. Males are further encouraged by a cultural provider mentality that ties economic success to the breadwinner role.

Theoretically, this study contributes to communication studies by demonstrating that digital representations not only convey migration experiences but also help shape the way

people interpret success and envision the future through migration. These findings expand the application of impression management and symbolic interactionism by situating them within the context of migration communication, while also demonstrating that migration aspirations are shaped by the interplay among digital representations, social meaning-making, and gender norms.

In addition, this study also has practical implications by highlighting the importance of strengthening digital literacy in migration communication, particularly the public's ability to understand the selective nature of representations on social media. Information about migration must be conveyed by taking into account not only economic gains but also working conditions, the cost of living, and the risks and challenges of migration. This approach is essential to prevent the public from forming migration aspirations based on incomplete representations of success.

There are a number of limitations to this study. By focusing on the portrayal of male migrant workers and the community reaction in one rural area, this study does not yet provide insight into how such portrayals affect communities in other areas. Further research can examine how male and female migrants are portrayed, how portrayals differ across social media platforms, and the relationship between digital representation, aspiration creation, and the decision to migrate.

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