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Reddy Anggara,
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Indonesia

*CORRESPONDENCE

Nani Nurani Muksin
✉ naninuranimuksin@umj.ac.id

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Mediated group communication for sustainable entrepreneurship: insights from former Indonesian migrant workers in Lombok

Nani Nurani Muksin^{1*}, Oktaviana Purnamasari² and Jumail³

¹Master of Communication Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia,

²Departemen of Communication Science, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia,

³Department of Informatics Engineering, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Return migration is often framed as a catalyst for rural development, yet the communicative processes through which reintegration and post-migration entrepreneurship are sustained remain underexplored. This article examines how mediated group communication shapes the reintegration experiences of returned Indonesian migrant workers in Lombok. Drawing on a qualitative case study combining in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and mediated communication observation of WhatsApp groups and community Facebook pages, the study analyses how returnees organize livelihoods, negotiate participation, and sustain collective action after migration. The findings identify three interrelated communicative mechanisms. First, mediated group communication enables an equalization of voice under cultural constraint, allowing women and less dominant actors to participate more actively while remaining embedded in local hierarchies. Second, group communication functions as institutional substitution, compensating for fragmented and episodic state support by coordinating production, circulating market information, and maintaining collective momentum. Third, affective operational coupling reveals how emotional exchanges such as humour and encouragement are inseparable from organisational routines, reinforcing discipline and entrepreneurial persistence. Together, these mechanisms show that mediated group communication operates not merely as a channel of interaction but as a communicative infrastructure that sustains reintegration as an ongoing social process. By reframing digital and face-to-face communication as constitutive of post-migration entrepreneurship, the study extends theories of computer-mediated communication and group interaction in culturally embedded and institutionally constrained contexts. The findings contribute to communication scholarship by demonstrating how communities in the Global South mobilize communication itself as a form of capital for resilience and collective economic action.

KEYWORDS

communicative infrastructure, digital platform, group communication, mediated communication, return migration, sustainable entrepreneurship

Introduction

Labour migration has long been a defining feature of Indonesia's socio-economic landscape, particularly in regions such as Lombok, one of the country's major sending areas for migrant workers (Anam et al., 2024). Each year, Indonesia witnesses the return of thousands of migrant workers, commonly referred to as *Pekerja Migran Indonesia Purna*, who reintegrate into their home communities after completing overseas employment. In the early

stages of the COVID-19 pandemic alone, approximately 180,000 workers returned through formal channels (UNDP Indonesia, 2021), while 10,195 returned between January and July 2024 from over 25 destination countries (IOM Indonesia, 2024). In policy discourse, they are frequently celebrated as *pahlawan devisa* or “remittance heroes” for their contribution to the national economy (Maksum, 2021). Yet return migration is rarely a simple homecoming. Reintegration often unfolds amid limited employment opportunities, fragile social networks, and ongoing uncertainty about how to rebuild livelihoods and social roles (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006).

Existing research has largely approached reintegration as an economic or policy problem, focusing on remittances, employment outcomes, or institutional programmes. While these dimensions are important, they offer only a partial view of what returnees encounter in everyday life. Reintegration is also a communicative process, one through which trust is rebuilt, knowledge is shared, and collective meanings are negotiated (Majidi et al., 2023). Without sustained communication, skills acquired abroad and aspirations for local development remain difficult to translate into viable practices.

In Lombok, returnees navigate these challenges by forming community-based entrepreneurial initiatives rooted in local resources such as agriculture, handicrafts, fisheries, and food production. These initiatives are not organized solely through formal institutions or individual decision-making. Rather, they emerge through continuous interaction among returnees, combining face-to-face meetings with mediated coordination via platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Through these hybrid communication practices, returnees exchange market information, coordinate production, provide emotional support, and maintain collective discipline. Communication thus becomes central to how entrepreneurial activities are sustained over time.

This hybridity is significant because it illustrates that communication is not merely an auxiliary tool for coordination. Instead, it functions as the connective tissue that binds individual efforts into collective projects (Tubbs and Moss, 2008; Walther, 2011). While in-person gatherings help preserve social cohesion and shared cultural values such as *gotong royong*, mediated group communication enables coordination across distance, time, and social difference. Together, these practices allow returnee communities to operate in contexts where formal institutional support is often limited or fragmented.

Beyond economic remittances, return migration also involves the circulation of ideas, norms, and practices acquired abroad (Levitt, 1998). These social remittances interact with locally embedded traditions of cooperation and solidarity, often associated with the solidarity economy, shaping how entrepreneurial initiatives are organized and legitimized within communities (Laville, 2010; Utting, 2015). Lombok's returnees illustrate that transnational experiences are not simply imported wholesale but are selectively translated and re-embedded through ongoing communicative practices that align with, and sometimes renegotiate, local values and expectations.

Despite growing scholarship on migration and entrepreneurship, the communicative dimensions of reintegration remain underexplored. Migration studies have tended to privilege policy frameworks and household-level outcomes, while entrepreneurship research has often foregrounded individual agency and Western models of innovation. Less attention has been paid to how collective

communication practices enable returnees to organize livelihoods, sustain motivation, and compensate for institutional gaps, particularly in non-Western and rural contexts (McKeever et al., 2014; Maksum, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how mediated group communication operates in the reintegration of Indonesian return-migrant workers in Lombok. It pursues three objectives. First, it documents the forms of mediated group communication through which returnees organize everyday economic and social activities. Second, it analyses how these communicative practices support locally grounded and sustainable forms of entrepreneurship. Third, it reflects on the theoretical implications of these findings for communication studies, particularly debates on group communication, computer-mediated interaction, and culturally embedded practices in contexts of weak institutional support.

By foregrounding communication as an ongoing social process rather than a discrete exchange, this study positions reintegration as a collective achievement shaped through communicative infrastructures. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to understand how communities in the Global South mobilize communication to navigate uncertainty, build resilience, and create alternative pathways for post-migration life.

Theoretical framework

Reintegration following labor migration cannot be adequately understood as a purely economic return. It is a communicative process through which identities, social legitimacy, and collective futures are renegotiated in everyday interaction. For returned Indonesian migrant workers (PMI Purna) in rural contexts such as Lombok, rebuilding livelihoods does not hinge solely on financial capital or policy intervention, but on communicative capacities that sustain trust, coordination, and collective meaning-making. This study therefore approaches reintegration through communication theory, foregrounding how group interaction, cultural embeddedness, mediated communication, and entrepreneurship intersect as mutually constitutive processes.

Group communication and collective coordination

Group communication scholarship emphasizes that collective outcomes emerge not simply from individual competence, but from the quality and structure of interaction among group members. Straube and Kauffeld (2021) demonstrate that effective collective performance depends on how diverse subgroup perspectives are integrated through communication. In return-migrant communities, such integration is particularly salient, as members bring heterogeneous migration trajectories, skills, and expectations shaped by different host-country experiences.

Rather than treating communication as a neutral conduit for information exchange, this perspective understands interaction as generative: communication produces solidarity, shared purpose, and collective agency. In the Lombok context, cooperative groups, women's collectives, and informal associations rely on ongoing interaction to negotiate roles, resolve uncertainties, and sustain participation. Group communication thus operates as a foundational process through

which reintegration becomes a shared project rather than an individual adjustment.

Cultural embeddedness and communicative legitimacy

Communication does not unfold in a cultural vacuum. Research in intercultural and culturally contextualized communication underscores that norms, values, and moral expectations shape how interaction is performed and interpreted (Liu et al., 2022). Reintegration, in this sense, is inseparable from the cultural logics that govern belonging and legitimacy within a community.

In Lombok, values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), kinship obligations, and gendered expectations provide the moral grammar through which returnees' actions are evaluated. These norms function both as resources and constraints: they enable collective support while also disciplining individual behavior. Comparative work in rural China similarly shows that reintegration trajectories are shaped by family ties and traditional values, rather than following uniform economic pathways (Zhang et al., 2025). Such findings caution against universal models of reintegration and highlight the need to examine how communication mediates cultural legitimacy in context-specific ways.

From this perspective, communication becomes a site where cultural values are not merely reproduced but actively reinterpreted. Through everyday interaction, returnees negotiate how transnational experiences can be translated into locally acceptable practices, aligning innovation with communal expectations.

Mediated communication beyond interaction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) research has long explored how digital environments reshape interaction. Early studies suggested that reduced social cues could foster more equal participation while also enabling uninhibited behavior (Siegel et al., 1986). Subsequent models, including Social Information Processing and hyperpersonal perspectives, emphasized relational adaptation and identity dynamics in mediated settings (Walther, 2011). More recent work reframes mediated communication as a dynamic social process unfolding over time rather than isolated exchanges (Roos et al., 2024).

While these approaches provide valuable insights, they tend to focus on micro-level interactional effects, conceptualizing communication as episodic exchanges between individuals. The Lombok case suggests a broader analytical move is necessary. Here, WhatsApp groups, community Facebook pages, and face-to-face meetings form interconnected systems that sustain ongoing flows of information, emotion, and coordination. Communication does not simply facilitate action; it organizes collective life.

This observation aligns with research on migration governance, which shows how states often deploy communication to legitimize policy and regulate mobility (Pécoud, 2022). Yet in Lombok, returnees invert this logic. Rather than serving as instruments of control, mediated communication becomes a resource of autonomy, allowing communities to coordinate activities, share knowledge, and maintain morale in the absence of sustained institutional support.

Communicative infrastructure as analytical lens

To capture these dynamics, this study adopts and extends the concept of communicative infrastructure. Communicative Infrastructure Theory conceptualizes communication as a layered

system linking interpersonal interaction, community organizations, and institutional structures (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Complementarily, Klinenberg's (2018) notion of social infrastructure highlights how shared spaces and connective practices underpin community resilience.

Building on these perspectives, the Lombok case demonstrates that communicative infrastructures are not confined to urban or formally institutionalized settings. In post-migration rural contexts, mediated group communication functions as a lightweight yet durable infrastructure that integrates affective support, organizational coordination, and legitimacy-building. Humour, encouragement, and emotional reassurance circulate alongside reminders, schedules, and task allocation, forming patterned communicative flows that sustain collective action across digital and physical spaces.

Conceptualizing CMC as communicative infrastructure entails two analytical shifts. First, it moves the unit of analysis from discrete messages to patterned flows that link online interaction, face-to-face meetings, and entrepreneurial practice. Second, it foregrounds communication as generative, constituting organizational forms that persist despite fragmented governance. In this sense, communicative infrastructures not only connect individuals but partially substitute for weak institutional scaffolding, enabling collective resilience.

Sustainable entrepreneurship as communicative practice

Research on sustainable entrepreneurship emphasizes that economic activity in rural contexts is inseparable from social and ecological commitments. Wang (2022) argues that social entrepreneurship generates value when innovation is embedded in community welfare. Recent work on rural innovation ecosystems further shows that such entrepreneurship emerges through multi-actor configurations grounded in local social and cultural relations (Bravaglieri et al., 2025). Digital innovation mediates these processes by enabling rural enterprises to overcome resource constraints and coordinate collective action (Jan et al., 2025).

In Lombok, returnees' entrepreneurial initiatives exemplify this integration. Ventures in agriculture, crafts, and food production draw on transnational experiences of discipline and efficiency while remaining anchored in local resources and cultural values. These enterprises are sustained not solely through capital or policy but through communicative practices that align economic goals with collective identity and ecological awareness.

Toward an integrative framework

Taken together, this framework positions mediated group communication as the connective tissue of reintegration. Group interaction integrates diverse migration experiences; cultural embeddedness provides moral legitimacy; mediated communication enables continuity across space and time; and entrepreneurship offers a concrete arena where these processes materialize. Reintegration thus emerges not as a linear outcome but as an ongoing communicative negotiation through which communities reimagine belonging, coordination, and sustainability in post-migration life.

Research method

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine how group communication among Returned Indonesian

Migrant Workers (PMI Purna) shapes community-based entrepreneurial practices in rural Lombok. A qualitative approach was selected to foreground the situated, interactional processes that underpin reintegration, processes that unfold through shared narratives, informal coordination, and relational forms of problem-solving rather than individual economic indicators (Tracy, 2020). Anjani Village in East Lombok was chosen due to its long migration history and the prominence of returnee-led groups embedded in everyday community life.

Research site and context

The research centred on two local organisations that play central roles in returnee mobilization: KOMPI Perempuan (Komunitas Mantan Pekerja Migran Perempuan), a women-led returnee collective, and LSD Anjani (Lembaga Sosial Desa), a community organisation involved in social protection, training, and migrant support. Their ongoing activities, ranging from cooperative production to community meetings, provided a natural setting for observing how communication practices structure reintegration and economic collaboration.

Sampling and participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit returnees actively engaged in group communication and community entrepreneurship. Snowball sampling facilitated by KOMPI and LSD leaders helped identify additional participants, though this approach naturally produced a sample with strong internal ties.

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with returnees and community organizers: Zainudin (broom artisan), Iswandi (coffee artisan), Irmawati (coffee artisan), Quratul Aini (KOMPI leader), Nendi Wahyu (LSD Anjani), Firman Siddik (ADBMI representative), and two additional KOMPI members, Lia Indriana and Hartini. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 57 and represented diverse migration destinations, including Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min and explored migration histories, reintegration experiences, communicative routines, and entrepreneurial trajectories. All interviews and FGDs were conducted primarily in Bahasa Indonesia, with occasional use of the Sasak dialect when participants felt more comfortable expressing specific experiences. Transcription and translation into English were carried out by the researcher, ensuring that culturally embedded terms were preserved or clarified through memoing to maintain semantic accuracy.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) enriched the dataset. The first involved fifteen members of KOMPI Perempuan and lasted approximately 2.5 h, facilitated by a representative of the ADBMI Foundation. The second gathered seven members of LSD Anjani for a two-hour discussion facilitated by the organisation's leader. Both FGDs followed structured guiding protocols while allowing participants to deliberate, negotiate, and build upon one another's accounts, offering a window into collective perspectives and shared decision-making processes.

Triangulation interviews were conducted with institutional stakeholders to contextualize community-level accounts within broader policy and governance frameworks. These included Titan Listiani (Regional Development Planning Agency, Bappeda Lombok Timur), Muhammad Khairi (Head of the Manpower Office, Lombok Timur), and Muhammad Juaini Taofik (Regent of Lombok Timur).

Conducted in a semi-structured format, these interviews helped verify timelines, institutional forms of support, and the policy narratives referenced by community members.

Data collection procedures

Participant observation was undertaken during community meetings, cooperative production sessions, and informal gatherings. Fieldnotes captured naturally occurring communicative behaviors, including humour, encouragement, disagreement, and the everyday coordination of tasks and responsibilities.

Digital environments served as secondary contextual sources. Public posts from KOMPI Perempuan's Facebook page were reviewed to verify organisational timelines, document collective activities, and understand how the group narrated achievements to broader audiences. WhatsApp groups were observed in a non-intrusive manner to understand coordination rhythms without accessing or recording private content. Observations focused on patterns such as the frequency and timing of reminders, the typical hours when group activity intensified, how administrative or scheduling messages were framed, and the sequencing of coordination tasks (e.g., delegating roles, confirming attendance). No screenshots, verbatim messages, or identifiable content were collected; only interactional patterns were noted to contextualize offline group dynamics.

Document analysis included training reports, cooperative records, NGO publications, and publicly available governmental documents related to migrant support infrastructures. These sources supported the verification of timelines and informed the triangulation of institutional claims.

Data management and analytical procedure

All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts, fieldnotes, and documentary materials were organized and analysed using NVivo 12. The analytical process followed a reflexive thematic framework (Braun and Clarke, 2019), combining deductive prompts, such as group communication, reintegration practices, mediated interaction, and entrepreneurship, with inductive codes emerging directly from the data.

Initial coding yielded categories including "informal mentoring," "collective reassurance," "task redistribution," "decision hesitations," and "institutional navigation." These codes were iteratively reviewed, compared, and grouped into axial categories that captured broader communicative mechanisms. For example, repeated efforts to encourage quieter members to speak, alongside leaders' tendencies to downplay hierarchical positions, informed the theme *equalisation-of-voice*. Instances where community organisations assumed responsibilities typically associated with state institutions, such as documentation assistance, conflict mediation, or skills training, contributed to the theme *institutional substitution*. The interweaving of emotional reassurance with practical coordination in production settings shaped the theme *affective-operational coupling*. Reflexive memoing throughout the process documented analytic decisions, positionality considerations, and uncertainties.

Triangulation was achieved by systematically comparing thematic patterns with institutional interviews, observation notes, social media materials, and organisational documents. This process strengthened interpretive robustness and clarified convergences and divergences between community narratives and institutional accounts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta. All participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's aims and procedures. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifiable details have been removed to protect confidentiality. Public Facebook content was treated as contextual rather than personal data, and no private digital communication was analysed. Reflexivity remained integral to the research design, with the researcher acknowledging the influence of being an external observer and the potential for power asymmetries to shape participants' narratives.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Although male returnees were included among interview participants, their representation was limited, and the communicative environments observed were predominantly shaped by women's organisational networks. Snowball sampling through community organisations resulted in a cohesive participant group and may have excluded less-engaged or more critical returnees. While WhatsApp observations provided contextual insight, the absence of verbatim digital data restricted the depth of mediated communication analysis. Finally, as the study is grounded in a single village with strong organisational infrastructures, findings should not be generalised uncritically to more fragmented or less-organized returnee communities elsewhere in Indonesia.

Findings

Returning home as a collective, risk-laden process

For participants in Anjani Village, returning from overseas employment was rarely described as a moment of closure or success. Instead, return was narrated as a socially exposed phase marked by uncertainty, moral evaluation, and renewed obligations within the village. Several returnees explained that coming home without visible economic activity risked being interpreted as failure or dependency, regardless of years spent working abroad.

One interviewee reflected:

"When you return, you cannot just stay idle. If you only depend on your family, people will talk. That is why we try to start something, even if it is small, and usually not alone." (FGD, KOMPI Perempuan, 2024).

This concern was recurrent across interviews and focus group discussions. Reintegration was not framed primarily as an individual psychological adjustment but as a collective process of re-embedding oneself into local social relations, where visibility, contribution, and mutual dependence mattered. Economic activities, such as coffee processing, broom-making, or small-scale food production, were repeatedly described as strategies to restore social legitimacy as much as to generate income.

Rather than presenting themselves as beneficiaries of reintegration programs, participants emphasized their own responsibility to contribute to village life. This orientation complicates dominant policy narratives that frame former migrant workers mainly through their role as economic contributors during migration. In everyday village

contexts, returnees faced the task of re-establishing belonging through shared labour, cooperation, and participation in communal routines.

Reciprocity and the social risks of reintegration

Across narratives, returnees repeatedly stressed that reintegration was risky if pursued individually. Several participants explicitly contrasted collective economic initiatives with solitary efforts, describing the latter as fragile and socially vulnerable. Working together was not only economically pragmatic but also socially protective.

As one female participant explained:

"If we work together, people see that we are serious. If one person fails, others support. Alone, it is easy to give up." (Interview, 2024).

These accounts reveal that reciprocity functioned as a practical mechanism for managing uncertainty, not merely as a cultural ideal. Collective entrepreneurship helped distribute risks, stabilize motivation, and shield individuals from social judgment. This orientation resonates with local interpretations of *gotong royong*, not as ceremonial cooperation but as an everyday infrastructure of mutual accountability.

Importantly, reciprocity was not romanticized by participants. Several acknowledged tensions related to uneven contributions, delays in production, or differing expectations among members. Yet these frictions were generally narrated as manageable precisely because activities were embedded in ongoing relationships rather than short-term contracts. Reintegration, in this sense, unfolded through negotiated interdependence, not harmony.

Translating transnational experience into local practice

Returnees frequently referred to skills and dispositions acquired abroad, such as discipline, time management, and production routines, but emphasized that these were selectively adapted to local norms. Rather than replicating overseas work cultures, participants described combining external experiences with village-based expectations of togetherness.

One male returnee noted:

"Abroad we learned to work hard and on time. Here, we adjust it. We still help each other, we do not push people too hard." (Interview, 2024).

This selective translation challenges binary portrayals of returnees as either vulnerable dependents or successful entrepreneurs. Instead, participants occupied a fluid position shaped by pride in overseas experience and sensitivity to local moral economies. Their entrepreneurial practices were hybrid, grounded in both transnational exposure and local relational norms.

Informant profiles and empirical scope

To contextualize these dynamics, Table 1 summarizes the profiles of interviewees, focus group participants, and institutional informants. The table highlights variations in migration destinations, forms of post-return economic activity, and organizational roles. While participants differed in occupational pathways, ranging from agricultural processing to craft-based production, they shared a reliance on collective arrangements and community-based coordination.

Rather than demonstrating homogeneity, the table illustrates how diverse return trajectories converged around similar reintegration

TABLE 1 Profile of informants.

Category	Number of informants	Gender (general)	Current livelihood/enterprise	Method of data collection
Returnee migrants	8	Mostly female	Organic coffee farming, bamboo weaving, lobster farming, condiment production (e.g., terasi)	In-depth interviews
Returnee community members	22	Mixed, majority female	Group-based microenterprises, arisan, cooperative activities	Focus Group Discussions (2 sessions)
Institutional actors	2	Male	Policy and administrative roles (BP2MI, Local Government)	Key informant interviews / triangulation

challenges: managing visibility, sustaining motivation, and negotiating legitimacy within the village. These shared pressures form the empirical backdrop for understanding why communication, especially in group settings, became central to entrepreneurial persistence.

The findings above show that reintegration among PMI Purna in Anjani is inherently collective, socially risky, and relationally negotiated. The following section examines how these collective processes are sustained and coordinated through mediated group communication, and how digital interaction becomes intertwined with everyday organisational routines rather than functioning as a separate or purely technical layer.

Mediated group communication as communicative infrastructure

Collective reintegration among PMI Purna in Anjani did not rely solely on face-to-face interaction. Instead, participants described a patterned movement between digital communication, in-person deliberation, and everyday economic practice. WhatsApp groups functioned as an anchoring space where coordination, reassurance, and informal monitoring continuously circulated, sustaining engagement beyond episodic meetings.

Participants consistently emphasized that WhatsApp groups were not used only for task-related announcements. Messages included reminders, short encouragements, jokes, and expressions of concern when members were absent from activities. These exchanges created a sense of continuity between meetings and production work, allowing members to remain socially present even when physically dispersed.

As one participant explained:

“In the group chat, we do not only talk about selling products. Sometimes it’s just reminders, or jokes. But from there, we feel connected and ready to meet again.” (FGD, LSD Anjani, 2024).

Importantly, these digital interactions did not replace face-to-face communication. Instead, they prepared and structured it. Online exchanges often preceded community meetings by circulating agendas, clarifying expectations, or signalling issues that required collective discussion. Meetings then became spaces for deliberation, negotiation, and consensus-building rather than basic information exchange.

Negotiating participation and voice

Several female participants noted that mediated communication altered participation dynamics in subtle but significant ways. In formal village meetings, speaking up could be constrained by age, gender, or perceived authority. In contrast, WhatsApp’s asynchronous and text-based format lowered the social threshold for participation.

One interviewee reflected:

“In meetings, sometimes we stay quiet. In the chat, it feels safer to write ideas first.” (Interview, 2024).

This did not mean that hierarchies disappeared. Rather, digital interaction created conditional spaces of participation where ideas could be tested before being voiced publicly. The equalisation of voice observed in this study emerged not as a universal effect of technology but as a negotiated outcome shaped by local norms of politeness, face-saving, and collective harmony.

In this sense, mediated communication functioned less as a neutral channel and more as a social buffer, allowing members, especially women, to engage without immediately confronting established power relations. Participation was expanded, but always within culturally intelligible boundaries.

Affective-operational coupling in collective coordination

Across interviews and observations, affective exchanges and operational coordination were tightly interwoven. Encouragement, humour, and expressions of care often accompanied reminders about meetings, production schedules, or market deadlines. These affective cues were not incidental; they helped maintain motivation and accountability in contexts where economic returns were uncertain and workloads uneven.

Participants described how light-hearted messages or supportive comments reduced reluctance to attend meetings or complete tasks. Emotional reassurance prepared members for practical engagement, while operational reminders anchored affective bonds in concrete activity. This coupling sustained collective momentum over time.

Rather than separating emotional support from organisational discipline, the data suggest that affect functioned as an enabling condition for coordination. Collective efficacy emerged through this interplay, particularly during periods of fatigue or stalled production.

From communication flow to infrastructure

Empirically, communication followed a recurring cycle. Digital exchanges initiated coordination and sustained solidarity. Face-to-face meetings transformed circulating ideas into shared decisions. Entrepreneurial activities materialized these decisions through production, distribution, or training. Outcomes and challenges were then fed back into digital groups, where they were collectively interpreted and addressed.

Institutional actors occasionally entered this cycle through announcements, invitations, or programmatic support relayed via community leaders. Rather than directing action, institutional

communication was absorbed into existing group routines, reinforcing the centrality of community-based coordination.

At this point, communication cannot be understood merely as a medium facilitating action. It constitutes the infrastructure through which reintegration and entrepreneurship are organized, legitimized, and sustained. Through axial coding of interview transcripts, FGDs, and observational notes, recurring interaction patterns across communication settings were identified. These patterns are analytically reconstructed in Figure 1.

Figure 1 visualises this empirically grounded cycle. WhatsApp groups anchor coordination and solidarity, feeding into community meetings where deliberation and consensus occur. These meetings guide entrepreneurial activities that generate both economic practice and shared value. Institutional linkages intersect with this cycle by providing legitimacy and support, which are then translated back into community routines. The arrows indicate not a linear progression but a recursive flow, showing how affective maintenance and operational coordination remain interdependent across communicative settings. While this cycle recurred across cases, participants also described moments when coordination weakened, meetings stalled, or institutional support failed to materialize, indicating that the infrastructure remained contingent and fragile.

Analytical implications

By tracing communication across digital, face-to-face, and institutional contexts, this study situates mediated group

communication within broader discussions of communicative infrastructure, highlighting how it operates beyond the use of specific technological platforms. In the studied communities, equalisation of voice, institutional substitution, and affective-operational coupling emerge as outcomes of sustained interaction embedded in local social relations, rather than as inherent features of digital media themselves.

This perspective challenges linear reintegration models that privilege economic adjustment alone. Instead, it shows how communication itself operates as a form of relational capital, enabling returnees to persist, adapt, and collectively reshape their post-migration trajectories.

Cultivating entrepreneurship through local resources and collective organisation

Entrepreneurial practices among PMI Purna in Anjani emerged less as individual initiatives and more as collectively negotiated projects rooted in local resources and shared labour. As illustrated in Figure 2, collective planning typically followed sustained interaction in group communication platforms, where decisions about business types and resource pooling were negotiated. Participants repeatedly emphasized that economic activities were pursued not only to secure income but to maintain social legitimacy and mutual dependence within the village. Ventures such as coffee processing, broom making, bamboo weaving, small-scale fisheries, and food production were framed as ways to remain productive without detaching oneself from communal obligations.

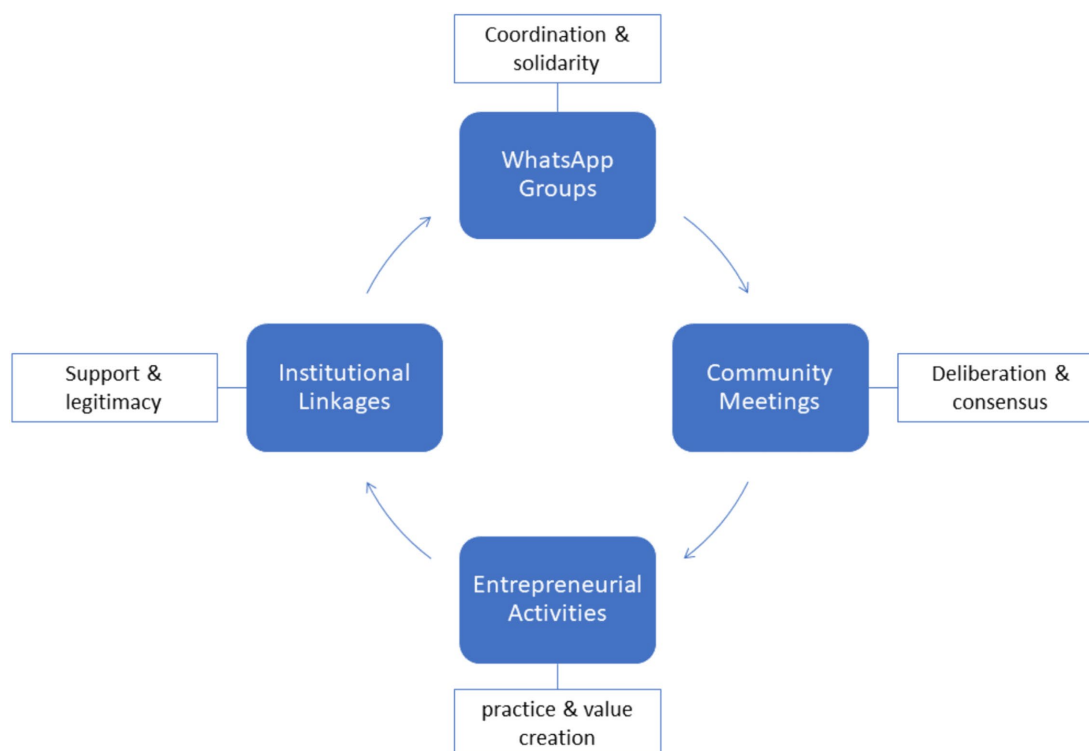


FIGURE 1

From channel to communicative infrastructure: the affective–operational cycle. This figure presents an analytical reconstruction based on axial coding of interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. The categories and relations depicted emerged from recurring interaction patterns identified across digital communication, face-to-face meetings, entrepreneurial practices, and institutional engagements. The cyclical form represents a dominant empirical pattern rather than a prescriptive or uninterrupted process.

One participant explained:

“We want to stand on our own feet, but not alone. If we move together, everyone feels included.” (Interview, 2024).

This orientation shaped how entrepreneurial ideas were generated and evaluated. Rather than being planned in isolation, initiatives often developed through informal conversations in digital groups, village meetings, or shared workspaces. These communicative settings functioned as arenas where experiences from abroad were discussed, assessed, and selectively adapted to local conditions.

As one interviewee recalled:

“The idea did not come suddenly. We talked in the group, shared stories from abroad, and then someone said we should use what we already have here.” (Interview, 2024).

These accounts suggest that communication did not merely transmit pre-formed ideas but enabled collective sense-making, allowing participants to connect transnational experience with locally available resources.

Recontextualising migrant knowledge into local practice

Returnees frequently referred to skills learned overseas, including discipline, time management, and quality control. However, these dispositions were not applied wholesale. Instead, they were recalibrated to align with local expectations of cooperation and social pacing. Participants stressed that efficiency had to coexist with *gotong royong*, particularly in labour-intensive activities such as weaving or food production.

A female returnee involved in bamboo weaving noted:

“Abroad, everything was fast and strict. Here, we work together. If someone is late or tired, we adjust. That is how production continues.” (Interview, 2024).

This hybridisation illustrates how entrepreneurial practice was shaped by ongoing negotiation between external experience and local moral economies, rather than by linear transfer of skills. Productivity was understood relationally, measured not only by output but by the sustainability of cooperation.

Managing market pressures through collective deliberation

Despite strong local embedding, returnee-led enterprises faced persistent challenges, particularly related to marketing, pricing, and competition with mass-produced goods. Several participants described difficulties in convincing consumers to value handmade or organic products.

One participant reflected:

“People compare our products with factory goods. We explain why ours are different, but it takes time.” (Interview, 2024).

Rather than framing these obstacles as individual failure, participants described them as collective problems to be discussed and addressed together. Pricing strategies, packaging decisions, and



distribution channels were frequently deliberated in group settings, both online and offline. In this sense, communication served as a mechanism for absorbing market uncertainty, allowing members to recalibrate expectations and strategies without fragmenting the group.

Communication as an organisational hinge

Across these practices, group communication platforms functioned as lightweight organisational forms that connected experience, planning, and action. Digital groups facilitated the circulation of ideas and feedback, while face-to-face meetings enabled negotiation and commitment. Entrepreneurial activities then materialized these discussions, generating outcomes that fed back into subsequent communication.

At this juncture, communication can be understood as an organisational hinge: a flexible mechanism that facilitated the translation migration experience into local economic practice without formal bureaucratic structures. Rather than replacing institutions, these communicative arrangements allowed communities to coordinate production, manage risk, and sustain participation in contexts where formal support was intermittent. Figure 2 summarizes a dominant empirical pathway observed across cases, rather than a uniform or inevitable sequence of entrepreneurial development.

Figure 2 illustrates how migration experiences inform group communication platforms, which in turn enable collective planning and knowledge sharing. These communicative processes support entrepreneurial practices and extend into market coordination and distribution. The figure visualises communication not as a linear input but as a hinge that connects transnational experience with locally embedded economic action.

However, participants also described cases where entrepreneurial activities stalled or market coordination remained limited, indicating that the sequence depicted in Figure 2 was contingent and uneven rather than guaranteed.

The findings demonstrate that sustainable entrepreneurship in Anjani is not reducible to access to capital or individual motivation. Instead, it is sustained through communicative infrastructures that align economic activity with social relations and cultural expectations. Group communication helped returnees manage uncertainty through shared responsibility, allowing enterprises to persist despite market constraints.

Rather than treating reintegration as a completed state, participants navigated entrepreneurship as an ongoing communicative process. This perspective allows returnees to be understood not simply as economic actors, but as organizers of collective practice, whose entrepreneurial activities are inseparable from the communicative environments that sustain them.

Negotiating cultural embeddedness and collective values

Reintegration among PMI Purna in Anjani unfolded through ongoing negotiation with locally embedded cultural norms rather than straightforward adaptation. Participants repeatedly described reintegration as a process of re-establishing moral and social legitimacy within the village, where values such as *gotong royong*, kinship obligations, and gendered expectations shaped how returnees were evaluated.

Several participants emphasized that returning without visible contribution risked social distancing. As one interviewee noted:

“If we only think about ourselves, people will say we are arrogant. If we do things together, even small things, the community accepts us.” (Interview, 2024).

Here, cultural embeddedness functioned simultaneously as a resource and a form of social regulation. Collective action enabled acceptance, but it also set expectations that returnees were required to meet. Reintegration thus involved navigating a moral economy in which belonging had to be continuously demonstrated through participation and contribution.

Gendered participation and conditional voice

Gender emerged as a critical axis in this negotiation. Female returnees described limited opportunities to speak in formal village meetings, where age and male authority structured deliberation. However, mediated group communication created alternative spaces for participation that operated alongside, rather than in opposition to, these norms.

One participant explained:

“In meetings I am shy to speak. In the WhatsApp group, I can write my ideas first.” (Interview, 2024).

This shift did not eliminate hierarchy but reconfigured it. Digital platforms allowed women to test ideas, build confidence, and gain recognition before engaging in face-to-face discussions. Participation remained culturally bounded, but communicative mediation enabled incremental expansion of voice.

Women’s entrepreneurial activities were also framed in moral terms. Activities such as weaving or food production were described not only as income-generating but as contributions to family welfare and cultural continuity. As one participant stated:

“We weave not only for money, but so our daughters know this work.” (Interview, 2024).

These narratives indicate that women’s entrepreneurship gained legitimacy by aligning with culturally valued forms of care and transmission, rather than challenging gender norms directly.

Stigma, discipline, and re-establishing legitimacy

Cultural embeddedness also entailed friction. Several participants recounted experiences of stigma upon returning, particularly assumptions that return signified failure abroad. One male returnee recalled:

“At first people thought I failed overseas. They looked at me with pity. That pushed me to show I could still contribute.” (Interview, 2024).

Such accounts reveal how collective values could discipline returnees, motivating them to reassert worth through visible economic and social engagement. Entrepreneurship became not only a livelihood strategy but a communicative act through which returnees negotiated dignity and belonging.

Triangulation interviews echoed this interpretation. Local institutional actors described women returnees as central organizers of community-based initiatives, while also noting that their effectiveness depended on their ability to mobilize neighbors and uphold shared norms. These perspectives reinforced the view that cultural embeddedness was not static but actively reproduced and reshaped through everyday communicative practices.

Cultural mediation as a recursive process

Empirically, cultural values, communication practices, and social legitimacy were linked in a recurring cycle. Local norms informed how communication was conducted; mediated group interaction enabled participation and coordination; collective action generated visible contribution; and successful contribution reinforced the very values that structured interaction in the first place (Figure 3).

The figure illustrates a recursive process in which local cultural values shape mediated group communication, enabling participation and solidarity. These communicative practices support the negotiation of stigma and everyday challenges, contributing to the reinforcement of local values through visible contribution and collective legitimacy. In this empirical context, culture emerges not merely as a background condition but as an active site of mediation sustained through ongoing communication.

Taken together, these findings show that cultural embeddedness operates as an ongoing communicative negotiation rather than a fixed

framework. Returnees did not simply adapt to pre-existing norms; through mediated and face-to-face interaction, they selectively reaffirmed, reworked, and stabilized cultural values in ways that enabled reintegration. Communication thus functioned as a cultural infrastructure, sustaining collective belonging while allowing limited transformation from within.

Institutional interfaces and the limits of support

Participants consistently described a gap between institutional narratives surrounding migrant return and the practical realities of reintegration. While national discourse frames returned migrant workers as *pahlawan devisa*, returnees in Anjani experienced institutional support as limited, episodic, and weakly coordinated. Reintegration, in their accounts, was rarely accompanied by sustained institutional engagement.

This disconnect was articulated succinctly in interview accounts, as illustrated by the following statement:

“When we were abroad, we were called heroes. After returning, we were on our own.” (Interview, 2024).

Such statements were not framed as outright rejection of state involvement, but as expressions of unmet expectations. Participants acknowledged the existence of training sessions, information dissemination, and occasional assistance, yet emphasized that these

interventions were often one-off and insufficiently aligned with their actual livelihoods.

Triangulation interviews with institutional actors reinforced this perception. Officials involved in labor migration governance acknowledged that programs existed but were constrained by limited resources and uneven reach. Support was described as project-based rather than continuous, with responsibility for long-term follow-up implicitly shifting back to communities. A local government representative noted that while small grants or equipment were sometimes provided, coordination across agencies remained weak, and sustained accompaniment was rare.

Perceived versus actual support

Returnees’ assessments of institutional support clustered around several recurring domains, particularly training relevance, access to capital, market facilitation, recognition, and mentoring continuity. These perceptions were contrasted with institutional accounts acknowledging both the presence and the limits of existing programs (Table 2).

Across these domains, the pattern was consistent. Training was available but generic; access to capital was theoretically possible but procedurally opaque; market facilitation occurred sporadically through exhibitions; symbolic recognition outweighed material accompaniment; and post-training mentoring was largely absent. This constellation of experiences shaped how returnees oriented themselves

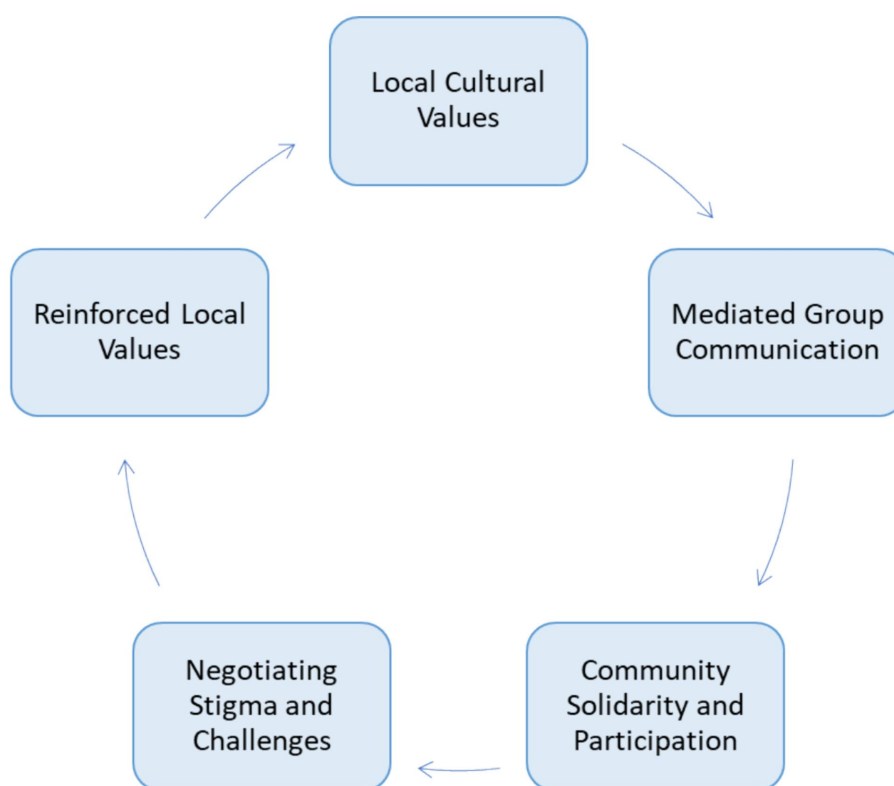


FIGURE 3

Cultural mediation as an interpretive synthesis of empirical findings. This figure presents an interpretive synthesis of how mediated group communication interacted with local cultural values in the studied communities. Rather than representing a formal analytical model, the diagram summarizes recurring interpretive themes identified across the findings and should be read as a heuristic summary of the cultural dynamics observed in Anjani, not as a universal or exhaustive model of cultural mediation.

toward institutions: not as primary anchors of reintegration, but as peripheral and unreliable interlocutors.

Informal coordination as institutional substitution

In response to these limits, returnees did not simply disengage from institutional frameworks. Instead, they reorganized their own communicative practices to perform functions typically associated with formal support structures. Group chats, village cooperatives, and informal meetings became sites where production schedules were coordinated, market information circulated, and practical advice exchanged.

One participant explained:

“If we wait for officials, nothing moves. In our group, we decide who produces, who sells, and who teaches.” (Interview, 2024).

Empirically, these practices amounted to what can be described as institutional substitution. Rather than filling a temporary gap, mediated group communication assumed ongoing roles in coordination, mentoring, and morale-building. These arrangements did not replace institutions in a formal sense, but they reduced dependency on them, allowing collective economic activity to persist despite fragmented governance.

Trust, legitimacy, and institutional distance

The divergence between formal and informal channels also shaped patterns of trust. Several participants expressed skepticism toward government-led initiatives, which were perceived as irregular or politically motivated. Encounters with officials were described as brief and symbolic, often lacking continuity. In contrast, peer-based communication networks were viewed as dependable precisely because they were grounded in shared experience and daily interaction.

Triangulation interviews echoed this contrast. Academic observers noted that credibility within returnee networks derived less from official authority than from lived migration experience and demonstrated commitment to collective work. Trust, in this sense, was communicatively produced through repeated interaction rather than institutionally granted.

Empirical implications within the findings

Taken together, these findings indicate that institutional interfaces played a secondary role in the everyday processes of reintegration observed in Anjani. While state agencies and local governments provided symbolic recognition and fragmented assistance, the operational burden of reintegration was carried by returnees themselves through informal and mediated coordination. Institutional absence did not halt reintegration, but it reshaped its communicative architecture, elevating peer-based networks as primary sites of organization and support.

Discussion

These findings show that Lombok’s returnees mobilize communication as both infrastructure and resource for reintegration. Beyond being “remittance heroes,” they emerge as community builders who transform migration experiences into collective, sustainable initiatives. Their entrepreneurial practices, rooted in local resources but enriched by transnational lessons, demonstrate that reintegration is a communicative process rather than an economic adjustment. The re-negotiation of cultural values such as *gotong royong*, shifting gender dynamics in digital spaces, and the limited role of formal institutions underscore that informal communicative networks constitute the true scaffolding of community resilience.

To make explicit how the Lombok case extends existing theoretical frameworks, Table 3 synthesizes the relationships between legacy communication theories, empirical observations from this study, and the theoretical extensions proposed, thereby clarifying the study’s conceptual contribution to communication scholarship.

This study demonstrates that reintegration among Returned Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI Purna) in Lombok is fundamentally a communicative process. Returnees do not simply re-enter local economies as individual economic actors; rather, they actively assemble communicative infrastructures that enable collective action, cultural negotiation, and sustainable entrepreneurship. In this sense, communication operates not only as a medium through which reintegration unfolds, but as a form of capital that sustains post-migration life under conditions of limited institutional support.

TABLE 2 Perceived support vs. actual support.

Domain	Perceptions of returnees	Actual support (BP2MI/Local Government)
Training and Capacity Building	“We expected training that fits our business, but most are too general and just once” (I8, Interview, 2024).	Triangulation data confirms training exists, but is mostly one-off sessions, often not tailored to specific livelihoods (Triangulation, Local Government, 2024).
Access to capital	“We thought the government would help with capital, but when we tried to apply, the process was complicated and unclear” (I10, Interview, 2024).	Officials point to micro-credit and cooperative schemes, but acknowledge that only a small fraction of returnees access them due to bureaucracy (Triangulation, Academic, 2024).
Market access and information	“Our products are handmade, but people still prefer cheap factory goods. We hoped the government could help us find markets” (I9, Interview, 2024).	Market promotion occurs through occasional exhibitions or fairs, but lacks continuity and reach beyond local events (Triangulation, Local Government, 2024).
Recognition and legitimacy	“When abroad we were called heroes, but after returning, it feels like no one cares about what we are building here” (I3, Interview, 2024).	Academic triangulation highlights that policy frames returnees mainly as economic contributors, with limited attention to their community-building role (Triangulation, Academic, 2024).
Ongoing mentorship and monitoring	“After training, nobody follows up. We are left to continue on our own” (I7, Interview, 2024).	Programs are project-based, with little long-term mentoring; officials admit the support system is reactive rather than continuous (Triangulation, Local Government, 2024).

Across the findings, mediated group communication emerges as both infrastructure and resource. WhatsApp groups, community meetings, and informal gatherings do more than facilitate coordination; they constitute the social architecture through which returnees translate migration experiences into locally grounded practices. This challenges policy-oriented framings that treat reintegration primarily as an economic adjustment or skills-transfer problem. Instead, the Lombok case shows that reintegration is embedded in everyday communicative labor, where affective ties, cultural values, and organisational tasks are continuously negotiated.

A central contribution of this study lies in extending classical theories of computer-mediated communication. Early CMC perspectives emphasized reduced social cues and the potential for equal participation in digital environments (Siegel et al., 1986; Walther, 2011). The Lombok findings complicate this assumption. Equalization of voice did not emerge as a universal outcome of digital mediation, but as a culturally contingent process. Asynchronous and text-based communication afforded women greater opportunities to contribute, not by dismantling hierarchical norms, but by enabling participation that aligned with local expectations of deference and face-saving. This suggests that equal participation in CMC must be understood as situated, shaped by cultural logics rather than technological affordances alone.

The study also advances scholarship on group communication by identifying affective–operational coupling as a key mechanism sustaining collective action. While prior work has highlighted how subgroup interaction quality shapes collective outcomes (Straube and Kauffeld, 2021), the Lombok case shows that humour, encouragement, and relational warmth are not peripheral to organisational functioning. Instead, affective exchanges directly reinforce task readiness, accountability, and entrepreneurial persistence. Emotional communication thus operates as an organisational resource, binding members together while simultaneously enabling coordination across production, marketing, and decision-making activities.

These dynamics resonate with Communicative Infrastructure Theory, which conceptualizes communication resources as links between individuals, communities, and institutions (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). However, the Lombok findings extend this framework by demonstrating institutional substitution. In contexts where formal reintegration support is fragmented or episodic, mediated group communication does not merely connect actors to institutions; it partially replaces them. WhatsApp groups and community cooperatives assume functions typically associated with governance structures, including information dissemination, mentoring, coordination, and legitimacy-building. This inversion aligns with critiques of migration governance that emphasize how states often rely on symbolic recognition while outsourcing the practical labor of reintegration to communities themselves (Pécoud, 2022).

Cultural embeddedness further shapes these communicative infrastructures. Reintegration in Lombok is negotiated through values such as gotong royong, kinship obligations, and gendered expectations. Rather than treating culture as a static backdrop, the findings show how cultural values are re-embedded through communication. Returnees translate transnational experiences into local idioms, combining discipline and efficiency learned abroad with collective practices rooted in village life. This dynamic aligns with Peredo and Chrisman's (2006) conception of community-based enterprise and Liu et al.'s (2022) call for culturally contextualized communication research, while extending both by foregrounding communication as the mechanism through which tradition is continually remade.

Entrepreneurship, in this context, cannot be reduced to individual initiative or market rationality. Consistent with scholarship on rural and sustainable entrepreneurship (Wang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2025), Lombok's returnees embed economic activity within social and ecological commitments. What distinguishes this case is the role of communication in transforming migration experience into collective enterprise. Digital and face-to-face interactions function as incubators of entrepreneurial

TABLE 3 Legacy theories and extensions from the Lombok case.

Legacy theories/concepts	Classical propositions	Observed in Lombok	Theoretical extensions
CMC Theories (SIP, Hyperpersonal, SIDE) (Walther, 2011; Siegel et al., 1986)	Digital media reduce social cues, enabling equal participation but sometimes uninhibited behavior.	WhatsApp groups foster equalisation of voice, especially for women, but shaped by cultural norms of deference and face-saving.	<i>Equalization-of-voice under cultural constraint</i> : equal participation is contingent upon cultural logics, not universal.
Group communication (Straube and Kauffeld, 2021)	Quality of subgroup interaction determines collective outcomes.	Digital and face-to-face exchanges integrate diverse migration experiences, sustaining solidarity and collective plans.	<i>Affective–operational coupling</i> : emotional exchanges (jokes, encouragement) directly reinforce organisational discipline and task coordination.
Communicative infrastructure theory (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Soluk et al., 2021)	Communication resources link micro (individuals) to macro (institutions).	WhatsApp groups and cooperatives link individuals but also substitute for absent institutions.	<i>Institutional substitution</i> : group communication operates as lightweight organisational infrastructure compensating for weak governance.
Cultural embeddedness in communication (Hall, 1976; Couldry, 2012)	Cultural values shape communicative practices of reintegration.	Returnees sustain community legitimacy by translating gotong royong, kinship duties, and gendered expectations into both online and offline interactions.	Cultural re-embedding through communication: traditions are not fixed but dynamically reshaped within ongoing communicative practices.
Entrepreneurship in rural development (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006; Bravaglieri et al., 2025)	Entrepreneurship succeeds when innovation meets social and ecological commitments.	Returnees link transnational discipline with local traditions, building enterprises embedded in solidarity and ecological values.	<i>Communication as capital</i> : communicative infrastructures transform migration experience into entrepreneurial ecosystems.

imagination, aligning transnational knowledge with local resources such as coffee, bamboo, fisheries, and food production. Communication thus becomes a form of capital that enables entrepreneurial ecosystems to emerge despite weak institutional scaffolding.

Comparative insights reinforce the broader relevance of these findings. Studies from sub-Saharan Africa show how farmer cooperatives and smallholder entrepreneurs mobilize digital communication to compensate for institutional voids, combining technological appropriation with locally embedded practices (Coggins et al., 2022; Manyise et al., 2025). Similar dynamics have been observed in other developing contexts, where digitally mediated entrepreneurial networks mitigate weak institutional support structures through ongoing coordination and information exchange (Soluk et al., 2021). In rural China, social networks and digital platforms function as informal infrastructures that mediate kinship ties and economic adaptation among returnees (Wang et al., 2025; Tang and Hao, 2025). Similarly, research from Latin America highlights how solidarity economies rely on hybrid communicative forms that integrate global enterprise models with local community practices (Martínez et al., 2019; Gaiger et al., 2019). The Lombok case contributes to this comparative literature by showing how communicative infrastructures enable resilience across diverse cultural and institutional landscapes.

Taken together, this study advances four contributions to communication scholarship. First, it reconceptualizes mediated group communication as communicative infrastructure, demonstrating how digital and face-to-face exchanges jointly scaffold reintegration and sustainable entrepreneurship in the Global South. Second, it identifies affective–operational coupling as a mechanism through which emotional communication directly sustains organisational discipline and collective persistence. Third, it introduces institutional substitution as a communicative process, highlighting how community-based networks partially replace fragmented state support. Fourth, it extends classical CMC theory by articulating equalization of voice under cultural constraint, showing how participation is negotiated rather than universally enabled by technology.

By foregrounding communication as constitutive rather than auxiliary, the Lombok case challenges linear models of reintegration centered on policy, capital, or individual adjustment. Reintegration emerges instead as an ongoing communicative negotiation, one in which returnees assemble infrastructures of solidarity, rework cultural values, and generate sustainable livelihoods. In this sense, communication itself becomes the foundation of resilience and entrepreneurship in post-migration contexts.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and theoretical contributions.

First, the communicative environments analysed in this study were predominantly shaped by women's organisational networks. Although male returnees were included among interview participants, mediated group communication practices were largely observed within women-led collectives. This gendered configuration may have influenced interactional dynamics, particularly the observed equalisation of voice and affective–operational coupling. Consequently,

these communicative mechanisms should be understood as emerging within specific gendered organisational contexts rather than as universal features of mediated group communication among return migrants.

Second, the study relies on purposive and snowball sampling through established community organisations. This approach enabled in-depth engagement with active returnee groups but likely excluded less-engaged, marginalized, or more critical returnees who operate outside organized communicative infrastructures. As a result, the findings foreground communicative practices associated with collective participation and organisational embeddedness, while underrepresenting experiences of fragmented or individualized reintegration.

Third, the empirical analysis is grounded in a single rural site, Anjani Village in Lombok, where returnee communities benefit from relatively strong organisational ties and sustained collective activity. This context shapes how mediated group communication functions as communicative infrastructure and as partial institutional substitution. The findings therefore have limited transferability to settings where returnee communities are more dispersed, less organized, or embedded in different cultural and institutional arrangements.

Fourth, observations of mediated communication were limited to interactional patterns rather than verbatim digital content. While this approach respected ethical considerations and participant privacy, it constrained the depth of discourse-level analysis of mediated interaction. As a result, interpretations of affective–operational coupling and coordination practices are based on observed communicative rhythms and reported experiences rather than detailed textual or conversational analysis.

Finally, as with all qualitative and interpretive research, analytical readings remain partly subjective despite reflexive procedures. Alternative interpretations of communicative practices are possible. Moreover, the study captures reintegration dynamics at a particular moment in time, limiting insights into how communicative infrastructures evolve over longer trajectories.

Future research could address these limitations by examining mediated group communication across diverse gender configurations, organisational forms, and community contexts. Comparative and multi-site studies would help clarify how communicative infrastructures vary under different institutional and cultural conditions. Longitudinal designs could illuminate how communicative infrastructures adapt across different stages of entrepreneurial development. In addition, ethically grounded digital ethnographic approaches and mixed-method designs could deepen understanding of how specific linguistic and affective practices sustain collective entrepreneurship over time.

Conclusion

This study examined how mediated group communication shapes the reintegration of Indonesian return-migrant workers in Lombok. Moving beyond economic or policy-centred views, the findings demonstrate that reintegration is a communicative process through which livelihoods, identities, and collective legitimacy are continuously negotiated. Returnees do not simply re-enter existing social structures; they actively mobilize communication to translate transnational experiences into locally grounded entrepreneurial practices under conditions of limited institutional support.

Across the findings, mediated group communication functions as a communicative infrastructure. WhatsApp groups, face-to-face meetings,

and informal cooperatives jointly organize information exchange, emotional support, and collective coordination. These infrastructures sustain everyday problem-solving, entrepreneurial persistence, and morale, compensating for fragmented or episodic formal assistance. Reintegration thus appears not as a discrete post-migration phase, but as a recursive process maintained through ongoing interaction.

The analysis also underscores the role of cultural embeddedness. Values such as gotong royong, kinship obligations, and gendered expectations actively shape participation, voice, and legitimacy. Digital platforms do not erase these hierarchies but mediate them, enabling negotiated forms of inclusion, particularly for women, while remaining embedded in local moral economies. Communication, therefore, cannot be understood apart from the cultural logics through which it operates.

At the institutional level, the Lombok case reveals a persistent gap between symbolic recognition and material support. Rather than disengaging, returnees respond by strengthening community-based communicative networks that partially substitute for weak governance. Communication becomes a resource of autonomy and resilience rather than merely a channel for policy implementation.

Theoretically, the study advances communication scholarship by reconceptualizing mediated group communication as communicative infrastructure, introducing affective–operational coupling as a mechanism linking emotion and coordination, demonstrating culturally contingent equalization of voice, and foregrounding institutional substitution as a response to governance gaps. While limited by its qualitative and context-specific design, the study highlights the need to understand reintegration in the Global South not as a policy endpoint, but as a communicative process through which post-migration life is continually made and remade.

Recommendations

This study suggests that reintegration policies should pay closer attention to communicative infrastructures that already sustain returnees' livelihoods. Rather than prioritizing one-off training or financial assistance, institutional actors could support affordable digital access, basic digital literacy, and hybrid forms of coordination that combine mediated and face-to-face interaction. Importantly, informal communication networks should be recognized as existing capacities rather than deficits to be formalized or replaced.

For scholarship, the findings invite comparative and longitudinal research across Global South contexts to examine how communicative infrastructures evolve under different cultural and institutional conditions. Methodologically, combining interviews with netnographic observation can further illuminate how mediated group communication operates as an organizing force in post-migration settings. Greater dialogue between migration studies and communication theory may help reposition reintegration as a communicative process rather than a purely economic or policy outcome.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it involved non-interventional, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with adult participants. The study posed minimal risk, participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements because written informed consent was not required because the study involved non-invasive qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with adult participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, verbal consent was obtained after explaining the study's purpose and procedures, and anonymity was assured. In this cultural context, verbal consent was considered more appropriate and sufficient for ensuring ethical participation while maintaining participants' comfort and trust.

Author contributions

NM: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft. OP: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Jumail: Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. The authors declare that Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI, version GPT-5) was used to assist in specific aspects of this research. The tool was employed for (1) supporting thematic data analysis by generating alternative categorizations and clarifying patterns identified by the authors, (2) proofreading and improving the clarity of the English language, and (3) suggesting potential references

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