



Media System Dependency and Psychological Effects of Indonesian Migrant Worker Conflict News in South Sulawesi

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Abstract

Online media has become a primary source of information on conflicts involving Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in South Sulawesi, particularly in migrant-sending communities. This study examined patterns of media system dependency and their cognitive, affective, and conative effects on online news readers. Using a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological orientation, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten purposively selected informants in Makassar City and migrant-sending districts. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, with credibility strengthened through source triangulation and member checking. Three dependency patterns were identified: emotional dependency among migrant families and former workers, verification-oriented dependency among media-literate groups, and incidental dependency among general readers. These patterns were associated with expanded knowledge, information ambiguity, reported anxiety, doomscrolling-like behavior, changes in family communication, and participation in social advocacy. The study's novelty lies in showing that dependency motive and personal proximity jointly shape psychological outcomes, thereby extending Media System Dependency Theory beyond prior research on crisis news, migration communication, and doomscrolling.

Keywords: Media Dependence, Psychological Impact, Conflict News, Indonesian Migrant Workers, Online Media, South Sulawesi.

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INTRODUCTION

The pattern of relations between the public and the media has shifted fundamentally along with the digitization of information flows. Online media has become a primary reference source for the public when accessing information. This includes news about conflicts involving Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in various destination countries. In complex and uncertain social situations, audiences tend to rely more heavily on the media for orientation and interpretation. This tendency reflects a central proposition of Media System Dependency Theory, as formulated by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) and further developed through the concepts of pervasive ambiguity and individual vulnerability to media dependence (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

A bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications identified a rise in research output on Media Dependency Theory beginning in 2023 (Nurlina, Huda, Brenda, Rohmah, & Putra, 2024). This trend reflects growing scholarly attention to public reliance on digital information during crises and to the media's role in shaping behavior, decision-making, and perceptions of global issues. Dependence on digital media permeates almost all aspects of social life, from the need for daily information to the formation of public opinion (Rahayu, Rizky, Putera, & Adriyani, 2024).

Recent theoretical developments indicate that information ambiguity, particularly when combined with low institutional trust, can intensify audiences' emotional dependence on media. Under these conditions, audiences may become increasingly vulnerable to emotionally charged content, including conflict reporting (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This argument is consistent with Loges (1994), who proposed that perceived threats strengthen individuals' dependency relationships with media systems.

The news value in conflict reporting tends to be high because it contains tension, shock, and broad social impacts, so that online media produces it massively, in line with the agenda-setting proposition that the media helps determine what issues are considered important by the public, not just convey information (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The selection and prominence of certain aspects of an event in building audience meaning is clearly seen in the framing study of conflict reporting in Indonesian online media (Taufiq & Arifin, 2024), a pattern that is also consistently found in other social issues in national online media (Siahaan & Vera, 2024). The impact of this kind of framing pattern becomes more personal for the people of migrant labor sending areas such as South Sulawesi when applied to the issue of migrant workers.

The significant population of migrant workers makes South Sulawesi a region where the issue of migrant worker conflict is not just long-distance news, but touches family and community networks directly. The media is the main means for migrant families to maintain cross-border emotional relationships as well as an anxiety channel when the information received is uncertain, as shown by long-term ethnographic studies of transnational families (Madianou & Miller, 2012). A significant prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms was also found in Indonesian migrant workers who were repatriated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with certain socio-demographic factors as predictors (Harjana, Januraga, Indrayathi, Gesesew, & Ward, 2021). Access to accurate and reliable information has also been shown to greatly affect the psychological condition of domestic migrant workers in the midst of a crisis according to a study of health information seeking behavior (Oktavianus, Sun, & Lu, 2022), a finding that is relevant to understand the relationship between news quality and the psychological well-being of migrant workers and their families.

The correlation between repeated exposure to negatively charged news and increased anxiety and psychological distress is confirmed by a number of recent studies from the perspective



of media psychology. The phenomenon of doomscrolling, which is the habit of compulsively browsing negative news despite causing emotional discomfort, has been shown to be associated with psychological distress and a decline in subjective well-being (Sharma, Lee, & Johnson, 2022). The relationship between the intensity of social media consumption and the level of anxiety in the younger generation is also found in geographically and socioculturally adjacent contexts, namely research in West Sulawesi (Rahmawati, Rahayu, & Taufiq, 2024), reinforcing the urgency of studying similar phenomena in South Sulawesi, especially related to the issue of PMI. Psychosocial support, including healthy access to information, has proven to play an important role in maintaining the psychological well-being of Indonesian women migrant workers abroad through resilience-building programs (Rahmasari et al., 2024; Gusman, 2024).

South Sulawesi remains a relevant migrant-sending province in Indonesia. Official data from the South Sulawesi Provincial Manpower and Transmigration Office, based on BP2MI records, documented 1,386 PMI placements from the province in 2024, comprising 796 men and 590 women (Dinas Tenaga Kerja dan Transmigrasi Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan, 2025). These figures demonstrate the continuing relevance of international labor migration to communities in South Sulawesi. In migrant-sending communities, news about conflicts involving PMI may have greater personal relevance than reports about events that are socially distant from readers' everyday lives. Such reports may directly concern relatives, neighbors, or acquaintances who are working abroad. This relational proximity distinguishes the context of the present study from many media dependency studies focusing on disasters, politics, or public health issues that affect broader audiences regardless of their personal connection to the reported events.

Scholarship on media dependency has demonstrated that reliance on media tends to intensify under conditions of uncertainty, perceived threat, institutional distrust, and emotional salience (Nurlina, Huda, Brenda, Rohmah, & Putra, 2024; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Wangqu, Xue, & Chen, 2024). In the context of labor migration, however, such dependency remains insufficiently examined, particularly where uncertainty is relational and concerns the safety and well-being of individuals with whom readers have personal ties. Related studies have emphasized the role of media in sustaining transnational family communication, facilitating access to institutional information, and negotiating uncertainty across geographically dispersed social networks (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Oktavianus, Sun, & Lu, 2022; Valgas, Groot Kormelink, de Haan, & Kruikemeier, 2025). Meanwhile, research on repeated exposure to negative news has documented associations with anxiety, psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and doomscrolling (Sharma, Lee, & Johnson, 2022; Rahmawati, Rahayu, & Taufiq, 2024; Kresna, Lutfiana, Putri, & Valentiya, 2024). Nevertheless, these bodies of scholarship have rarely been integrated to explain how conflict-related news about Indonesian Migrant Workers affects readers in migrant-sending communities where reported events may carry direct personal consequences.

This study addresses this gap by examining patterns of media system dependency and their cognitive, affective, and conative effects among readers of PMI conflict news in South Sulawesi. It investigates the forms of dependency that emerge, the psychological effects experienced by readers, and the factors that account for variations in dependency levels and impact intensity across reader groups. The study contributes to Media System Dependency Theory by foregrounding dependency motives and personal proximity as explanatory factors that shape psychological outcomes, while also offering practical insights for online media organizations and PMI protection institutions in developing communication that is more responsive to readers' psychosocial conditions. A

qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological orientation was employed because the effects of conflict reporting are subjective, relational, and context-dependent, making in-depth interviews more appropriate for capturing how informants interpret news exposure and construct meaning within their personal and social circumstances.

The contemporary online media environment in Indonesia is increasingly fragmented, comprising news portals, social media platforms, messaging applications, and user-generated channels that circulate information at different speeds and through competing interpretive frames. Within this environment, audience dependency is no longer directed exclusively toward a single media outlet. Rather, it is distributed across multiple platforms and embedded within a broader information ecosystem in which users move between channels to obtain updates, compare accounts, and verify contested claims. For readers of PMI conflict news in South Sulawesi, this cross-platform dependency becomes especially salient when information is incomplete, rapidly changing, or emotionally consequential.

This condition extends the application of Media System Dependency Theory beyond its original emphasis on relatively centralized mass-media institutions. In a fragmented digital environment, dependency is better understood as a relational attachment to an interconnected media system composed of institutional news organizations, social platforms, official government sources, and interpersonal networks. The intensity and form of dependency therefore arise not only from reliance on particular outlets, but also from the audience's need to navigate the wider information ecosystem in order to reduce uncertainty, establish credibility, and construct a coherent understanding of events.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological orientation to explore how online news readers in South Sulawesi interpreted their subjective experiences of PMI conflict reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in Makassar City and several migrant-sending districts, namely Jeneponto, Bone, and Bulukumba. Informants were recruited through purposive sampling and screened according to four inclusion criteria: residence in South Sulawesi, active consumption of online news, prior exposure to reports concerning PMI conflicts, and willingness to participate in recorded interviews. Recruitment was conducted iteratively to obtain variation in participants' personal proximity to migrant-worker issues, occupational backgrounds, age groups, and patterns of media use.

The final sample comprised ten informants, with data saturation assessed through the concurrent processes of data collection and preliminary thematic analysis. Saturation was considered to have been achieved when successive interviews no longer generated substantively new codes, categories, or interpretations related to media dependency and its psychological effects, while previously identified themes recurred consistently across participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Patton, 2015). The semi-structured interview guide contained open-ended questions addressing three analytical dimensions. Cognitive questions explored participants' understanding of PMI conflicts, perceptions of information clarity or inconsistency, and strategies for verifying news. Affective questions examined emotional responses, including anxiety, fear, sadness, empathy, and emotional exhaustion, as well as the tendency to continue following distressing news. Conative questions investigated behavioral responses after news exposure, including changes in family



communication, information-sharing practices, consultation of official sources, regulation of news consumption, and participation in educational or advocacy activities.

The sample was composed of participants from diverse social and professional backgrounds to capture variations in experience. The abbreviation “INF” refers to “informant,” followed by a two-digit identification number assigned to each participant to preserve anonymity and facilitate data presentation. The participants included a digital-native student (INF-01), a private-sector employee (INF-02), a housewife from a migrant-worker family (INF-03), a former migrant worker (INF-04), an educator (INF-05), a local online media journalist (INF-06), a civil servant working in the employment sector (INF-07), a self-employed general reader (INF-08), a migrant worker organization activist (INF-09), and an older online news reader (INF-10).

Table 1. Composition and Relevance of Research Informants

Code	Age	Background	Relevance
INF-01	20–23	Students, regular users of online media	Digital native, high access intensity
INF-02	25–34	Private employees in Makassar	Incidental news consumption
INF-03	35–50	Housewives, PMI families	Direct emotional engagement
INF-04	30–45	Post-PMI	Experiential perspective
INF-05	30–50	Teachers/educators	High media literacy
INF-06	25–40	Local online media journalists	News production perspective
INF-07	30–50	ASN in the field of employment/PMI	Institutional perspective
INF-08	25–40	Self-employed	General readers
INF-09	25–45	Migrant worker NGO activist	Advocacy perspective
INF-10	50–65	Elderly online news readers	Generational variations

Each informant brings a different relevance to the research focus: students represent digital native groups with high intensity of access to social media; private employees represent an incidental pattern of news consumption but remain connected to public issues; housewives with migrant families represent direct emotional involvement; Retired PMIs bring experiential perspectives from the experience of working abroad; teachers represent high-media literacy groups; local online media journalists bring a news production perspective; State Civil Apparatus in the field of Manpower brings an institutional perspective; self-employed represents the general readership; activists of migrant workers' organizations bring an advocacy perspective; and older readers represent generational variations in digital media consumption patterns. The age range of informants varies between 20 and 65 years old, reflecting the diversity of generations in accessing and interpreting PMI conflict reporting.

Table 2. Matrix Theme Analysis

Dimensions	Sub-Theme	Reference Questions
Media Dependence	Frequency of access, platform, reasons for dependency	News consumption patterns
Cognitive	Understanding of issues, ambiguity of information	Understanding & clarity of information

Affective	Anxiety, anxiety, doomscrolling, emotional exhaustion	Feelings & emotional responses
Konative	Changes in family communication, coping strategies	Post-news actions

The coding process was conducted iteratively through a combination of deductive and inductive procedures. The cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of Media System Dependency Theory provided the initial analytical categories, while additional codes were developed from recurrent meanings, expressions, and experiences identified in the interview transcripts. Each transcript was read repeatedly, segmented into relevant meaning units, and assigned preliminary codes. Codes with conceptual similarities were subsequently grouped into subthemes and broader themes through constant comparison across informants.

The emerging themes were validated by comparing them with the original transcripts, supporting observational and documentary data, and feedback obtained through member checking. The preliminary codebook and thematic structure were also examined through research-team discussions as a form of peer debriefing. Differences in interpretation were resolved by returning to the relevant transcript excerpts and reaching analytical consensus. Formal inter-coder reliability coefficients were not calculated because the analysis followed an interpretive phenomenological orientation; however, systematic documentation, source triangulation, and collaborative review were used to strengthen the credibility and consistency of the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews became the main data collection technique, referring to the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions in Media System Dependency Theory, complemented by non-participant observations and news article documentation studies as supporting data. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994) which includes data reduction, presentation of data in a theme matrix, as well as conclusion drawing and verification. Four thematic matrices were compiled to guide the analysis, namely media dependence (frequency of access, platform, reason for dependence), cognitive dimension (understanding of issues and ambiguity of information), affective dimension (anxiety, anxiety, doomscrolling, emotional exhaustion), and conative dimension (changes in family communication and coping strategies). The validity of the data was tested through triangulation of sources and techniques (Denzin, 1978) and member checking according to the criteria of trustworthiness of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The position of the researcher as a party that does not have a direct personal attachment to the PMI issue was also considered during the data collection process, in order to maintain a reflective distance from the emotional narrative conveyed by the informant without reducing the empathy needed in an in-depth interview. This approach is important considering that the research topic touches on emotionally sensitive experiences for some informants, especially PMI families and retired PMIs, so that researchers always ensure the psychological comfort of the informant during the interview process, including providing the option to stop the session if certain questions cause excessive discomfort.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The diverse characteristics of informants, including students, private employees, housewives with PMI family members, retired PMIs, educators, online media journalists, state civil servants, self-employed persons, activists of migrant workers' organizations, to elderly news readers, allow this study to capture a comprehensive picture of the variation in news consumption experiences and the level of dependence on online media. The following description is compiled following the flow of findings, starting from the profile and pattern of news consumption, followed by the pattern of media dependence, then the three dimensions of cognitive, affective, and conative psychological impacts, before closing with a discussion that links all of the findings into a broader theoretical framework.

Media Dependency Patterns

The ten informants involved in this study made online media the main source of information about the PMI conflict, with national news portals such as Kompas.com, Detik.com, Tribunnews.com, CNN Indonesia, and Tempo.co being the most cited platforms, accessed both directly and through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube. The intensity of news consumption varies according to personal closeness to the issue of migrant workers, even though all informants have access to relatively similar sources of information. Informants with family members as migrant workers or experience working abroad access news more often than general readers because the information is seen as having direct consequences for their personal and family lives.

The pattern of news consumption in the digital native group, represented by students (INF-01), took place very intensively through searches initiated by social media before continuing to official news portals to obtain complete information. "Usually I first see the news on Facebook or Instagram. If the title is interesting or concerns PMI, I immediately open the link. After that, I usually look for the same news again in Kompas or Detik to find out if the information is true," said INF-01. Social media functions as an entry point in the process of consuming news in the younger age group, while mainstream media is positioned as a source of verification, indicating consumption patterns that are no longer linear but move between platforms as an effort to obtain information certainty.

The time of reading the news for private employees (INF-02) was more situational, concentrated in the morning before work and at night after the activity was completed, although the issue of PMI conflict still received attention because it was considered to have high social value related to the protection of Indonesian citizens abroad. The frequency of news consumption increased significantly in informants who had a direct emotional relationship with PMI. Concerns about the safety of family members and relatives who are still working abroad prompted INF-03, a housewife whose husband used to work in Malaysia, to open three to four media at once every time news about PMI conflicts appears to ensure consistency of information. A similar emotional bond was felt by INF-04 as a retired PMI, who admitted to following one case for weeks because he felt close to the experiences of migrant workers that were reported.

Teachers as high-media literacy informants (INF-05) always compare several sources before believing the content of a news, while online media journalists (INF-06) emphasize the importance of cross-source verification as part of their profession, even admitting to having the habit of checking official government releases and tracing the track record of sources before rewriting



information for their own work purposes. The state civil apparatus (INF-07) uses the media to update rapidly changing knowledge to support public service tasks, especially because the development of migrant workers cases often involves cross-agency coordination that demands the speed of obtaining accurate information. Migrant worker activist (INF-09) used online media as the basis for advocacy activities, explaining that news was often the initial trigger for his organization to intervene to accompany the victim's family before the official report was received from the institution. General readers (INF-08) and elderly readers (INF-10) showed much more incidental consumption patterns, relying heavily on social media or WhatsApp groups without further information after the news subsided; INF-10 in particular admitted to relying on information shared through family groups on WhatsApp, then asking for clarification from children or grandchildren who are considered to know more about how to verify digital information before fully trusting it. Three consumption patterns were successfully identified from the overall findings: routine patterns in journalists, activists, and migrant workers' families; situational patterns in employees, teachers, civil servants, and self-employed; and incidental patterns in general readers and older age groups.

The level of media dependence shown by all informants is not homogeneous, influenced by personal proximity to the issue, information needs, previous experiences, and the level of uncertainty felt when conflicts occur. These findings support the main proposition of Media System Dependency Theory that the relationship of dependency between individuals and media increases when the social environment is in an ambiguous state and the individual needs orientation to understand the situation at hand. Groups with direct ties to the world of migration, especially migrant workers and retired migrant workers, showed the highest level of dependence because every news of conflict was perceived to have the potential to affect family conditions, relative security, and household economic plans. This condition describes the relationship of orientation dependency in the perspective of Media System Dependency Theory, which is when individuals are highly dependent on the media to understand the social environment that has direct consequences on their lives, as expressed by INF-03: "If there is news about PMI experiencing problems, I can't just read one media... I feel like if I don't know the latest developments, I won't be calm because there are still many family and friends working in Malaysia."

Journalists (INF-06) and state civil servants (INF-07) show a form of dependency that is more function-oriented than emotional, because the need to access information in these two groups is directly related to professional demands. INF-06 explained that failure to obtain the latest information could have a direct impact on the credibility of his writings as a journalist, while INF-07 highlighted the risk of giving false explanations to the public if they did not follow the development of the case carefully. This kind of function-oriented dependency is different in character from the emotional dependence experienced by the PMI family, because the underlying need is work accuracy, not certainty about the safety of those closest to them, even though both encourage high intensity of news consumption.

The media's dependence on this study is also strengthened by the perception of high risks to the issue of migrant workers, considering that migrant worker conflicts involve many countries, different legal systems, and information that develops very quickly. The need to follow daily news developments is revealed from the statement of INF-07: "Sometimes in the morning information like this appears, in the afternoon it has changed again after there is a clarification from the government or embassy. If we don't follow the development every day, we can misinform the public." The form of media dependence in this study is also seen through the behavior of

information verification across media, social media, YouTube channels, and official government websites such as BP2MI and the Indonesian Ministry of Migrant Worker Protection, reflecting the shift in dependence from one media institution to the digital media ecosystem as a whole.

Three analytically distinct but overlapping patterns of media system dependency were identified among readers of PMI conflict news in South Sulawesi. Orientational dependency refers to reliance on media for understanding rapidly changing situations and determining appropriate responses, particularly among migrant families and government officials. Verification-oriented dependency involves the systematic comparison of multiple news sources, official statements, and digital platforms to assess information credibility, and was most evident among educators, journalists, and media-literate readers. Emotional dependency denotes sustained news monitoring driven by personal attachment to migrant workers and concern for their safety, particularly among PMI families and former migrant workers. Although these patterns differ in their dominant motivations, they may coexist within the same individual. Together, they demonstrate that media dependency in the context of migrant-worker conflict reporting encompasses informational orientation, credibility assessment, and emotional reassurance, each of which produces distinct psychological consequences.

Table 3. Synthesis of Media System Dependency Patterns among Readers of PMI Conflict News

Dependency pattern	Defining characteristics	Dominant informant groups	Primary psychological effects	Supporting quotation
Orientational dependency	Reliance on media to understand rapidly evolving cases, reduce situational uncertainty, and determine appropriate personal or institutional responses.	PMI families, government officials, and readers with direct responsibility for migrant-worker issues.	Expanded issue knowledge, heightened vigilance, and concern arising from rapidly changing or incomplete information.	“Sometimes in the morning information like this appears, in the afternoon it has changed again after there is a clarification from the government or embassy. If we don’t follow the development every day, we can misinform the public” (INF-07).
Verification-oriented dependency	Systematic comparison of news reports, social media content, official releases, and other sources to establish accuracy and credibility.	Educators, journalists, students, and other media-literate readers.	Improved verification practices and media literacy, accompanied by cognitive burden when different sources provide inconsistent accounts.	“After that, I usually look for the same news again in Kompas or Detik to find out if the information is true” (INF-01).
Emotional dependency	Repeated and sustained news	PMI families and former	Persistent anxiety, fear, emotional	“If there is news about PMI

monitoring motivated by personal attachment to migrant workers and concern about their safety and well-being.	migrant workers.	exhaustion, doomscrolling tendencies, and intensified family communication.	experiencing problems, I can't just read one media... I feel like if I don't know the latest developments, I won't be calm" (INF-03).
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The synthesis indicates that dependency patterns are differentiated primarily by the motivation underlying media use rather than by access frequency alone. Orientational dependency prioritizes situational understanding, verification-oriented dependency emphasizes information credibility, and emotional dependency seeks reassurance regarding personally significant individuals. This distinction strengthens Media System Dependency Theory by demonstrating that different dependency motives generate different combinations of cognitive, affective, and conative effects.

The three patterns of dependency also do not stand separately in practice, but can be present simultaneously in one individual with different portions. Guru (INF-05), for example, shows a combination of verifiable dependence in his professional capacity as an educator and an orientational dependence when associating news with concern about his former students who are now working as migrant workers abroad. This kind of combination suggests that the classification of three patterns of dependency should be understood as dominant tendencies that help map out the variation of experiences, rather than completely separate and mutually exclusive categories between individuals.

Cognitive Effects of PMI Conflict Reporting

The cognitive impact of reporting on PMI conflicts is reflected in the expansion of informants' understanding of the complexity of migrant worker problems, which was originally limited to the assumption that working abroad always provides economic benefits. Repeated exposure to the news shows that the problems of migrant workers include labor exploitation, human trafficking, violence, contract violations, and weak legal protection in the destination country. INF-01 revealed that he only understood the complexity after reading various news stories, a process that shows media serves as a means of cognitive orientation that helps individuals understand social environments that were not previously recognized in depth.

Information ambiguity appears along with the increase in this knowledge. INF-03 said that the experience of reading conflicting versions of news about the causes of death of migrant workers, encouraged him to no longer believe in just one media. The difference in news content between media often causes confusion so that informants feel the need to search for additional information before drawing conclusions, while INF-04 as a retired PMI actually compares news content with his personal empirical experience while working abroad, showing that the media serves to enrich individual interpretations based on their experiences. The teacher (INF-05) assessed that the news highlighted more events than the root causes, while the journalist (INF-06) emphasized that the main challenge today is no longer the limitation of information but the abundance of information that is not necessarily credible, so that the ability to verify is an important part in building the correct understanding.



The gap in verification capabilities between generations is also evident in these findings. Students and journalists, who grew up with digital technology from an early age, are relatively more skilled at tracing additional sources, comparing news angles, and recognizing clickbait patterns in news headlines. Older readers such as INF-10 rely more on interpersonal relationships, i.e. asking younger family members, as a verification mechanism to replace technical abilities that have not yet been fully mastered. This condition shows that the cognitive impact of reporting on PMI conflicts cannot be separated from the digital literacy gap which is still a structural challenge in many regions of Indonesia, including South Sulawesi, so that the ability to evaluate the truth of information ultimately depends on the social capital and family network owned by each individual, not solely on personal media literacy skills.

Migrant worker activists (INF-09) show a distinctive form of cognitive processing, because their knowledge about the issue of migrant workers does not only come from online media, but also from field experience accompanying the victim's family, so that this informant tends to position himself as a comparison between the media narrative and the real conditions he encounters directly. The combination of experiential knowledge and media-based knowledge in activist groups shows that the cognitive impact of PMI conflict reporting does not always run in one direction from the media to the audience, but can also run both ways when the audience has direct access to the reality being reported, a nuance that is rarely captured in media dependence research with general reader subjects who do not have similar field involvement.

Two patterns of cognitive impact can be deduced from the overall findings, namely knowledge enrichment regarding the complexity of migrant worker problems, the actors involved, and the protection mechanisms available, and the emergence of information ambiguity due to differences in news content between media. The proposition that media becomes the primary source of orientation when individuals face a complex and uncertain social environment is reinforced by these findings, as well as showing an important development that media dependence does not automatically produce a complete understanding, but can give rise to ambiguity due to the diversity of framing, speed of publication, and differences in the completeness of information between media.

Affective Effects of PMI Conflict Reporting

Various affective responses also accompany the consumption of PMI conflict news, including anxiety, sadness, fear, anger, empathy, and emotional exhaustion. The intensity of these self-reported affective responses appeared highest among informants with direct ties to PMI. INF-01 stated that the photographs and videos of victims accompanying the news made him “feel sad” and caused him to continue thinking about the reports late into the night, suggesting that visual elements may intensify readers’ emotional involvement. INF-03 reported feeling increasingly worried whenever she encountered news about PMI, prompting her to contact relatives who were still working in Malaysia to ensure their safety. INF-04 likewise reported that such news evoked memories of his previous experiences as a former migrant worker.

Media literacy seems to play a role as an emotional control mechanism for teachers (INF-05), who admit to still feeling empathy but trying to maintain emotional distance so that they can assess information objectively. Greater frustration and concern was felt by migrant worker activists (INF-09) as similar cases continued to recur without adequate resolution, reflecting that emotional involvement is not only born from news content but also from the social experiences that accompany the work of informants. Symptoms that resemble doomscrolling were also found in this study:

almost all informants admitted that they continued to follow news developments until the end even though they realized that it made them more anxious, as INF-03 said, "Sometimes I know that reading the news continues to make me more worried. But if I stop reading, I'm even more anxious because I'm afraid of new developments that I don't know about." This paradox shows that the relationship of dependence on the media can produce an emotional cycle that is difficult to break when the issues consumed have high personal relevance, in contrast to general readers (INF-08) and elderly readers (INF-10) whose emotional involvement is relatively low and does not last long.

The variation in affective responses between generations and between social roles can also be seen from the way informants interpret the anxiety that arises. Female informants with domestic responsibilities, such as INF-03, tended to direct their anxiety into immediate action in the form of direct communication with relatives, while male informants in this study, such as INF-04 and INF-07, harbored the anxiety more as a personal reflection before translating it into more delayed actions, such as sharing advice or compiling socialization materials. These differences in expression patterns show that the affective impact of PMI conflict reporting is not only shaped by personal closeness to the issue, but also by social roles and gender norms that shape the way each individual manages and expresses their anxiety.

This pattern of accumulation of concern arising from repeated exposure to negative news is in line with the cultivation theory pioneered by Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986), namely that intensive and repetitive consumption of media content tends to shape the public's perception of the real world as a more dangerous place than its objective condition, an effect that in the classical literature is referred to as mean world syndrome. In the context of this study, similar symptoms were seen in migrant families who perceived the risk of working abroad much higher than before they intensively followed the news of the conflict, although statistically it was not necessarily that the proportion of cases of violence against migrant workers increased as sharply as the perception formed through repeated media exposure.

The doomscrolling mechanism identified in this study also showed different patterns between groups of informants in terms of duration and triggers. In migrant families, the urge to continue reading the news is usually triggered by one specific event, namely the emergence of a new case involving migrant workers, and lasts until the case is considered complete. In college students, similar impulses are more triggered by social media platform algorithms that constantly present related content without a clear time limit, making the duration of exposure more difficult to control even though the emotional intensity per exposure tends to be lower than in PMI families. These differences in triggers indicate that interventions to reduce the psychological impact of doomscrolling need to be tailored to the character of each group, as effective duration restriction strategies for one group may not necessarily be relevant for another.

Four forms of affective impact were identified from the overall findings, namely empathy, anxiety, fear, and emotional exhaustion, with different intensities following the level of personal proximity of the informant to the issue of migrant workers. A correlation was found between these findings with the doomscrolling research of Sharma, Lee, and Johnson (2022) which showed that repeated exposure to negatively charged news increases psychological distress and decreases subjective well-being, as well as with the findings of Harjana et al. (2021) regarding the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in Indonesian migrant workers facing crisis situations. The psychological impact of this study was evident not only on the migrant workers themselves, but also on news readers, especially migrant families who have an emotional attachment to the issues

being reported, an important extension of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's theory that media dependence in the context of migrant conflict reporting develops into complex emotional relationships.

Conative Effects of PMI Conflict Reporting

Real changes in attitudes and behaviors emerged as a conative consequence of reporting on PMI conflicts, reflected in increased caution in responding to labor migration information, changes in family communication patterns, intensification of official information searches, and coping strategies to reduce anxiety. Family communication regarding the safety of migrant workers increased significantly among informants with family members abroad. INF-03 admits that he now calls relatives or friends who work in Malaysia more often whenever news of cases of violence against migrant workers appears, a habit that makes his family's communication more intense than before. A sense of moral responsibility to share experiences also appears in INF-04 as a retired PMI, who now always advises neighbors or family who plan to become PMI to take care of documents officially.

Awareness of the importance of information verification has increased among students (INF-01), who are now more selective in receiving and disseminating information than the previous habit of directly sharing interesting news without checking. Educational activities increased for teachers (INF-05), who made the news of PMI conflicts as a class discussion material to train students' ability to assess the credibility of digital information, while ASN in the field of employment (INF-07) became more proactive in explaining safe migration procedures to the community in socialization activities. The coping strategy in the form of limiting the duration of reading news and avoiding social media comment columns that are considered to worsen anxiety has also been developed by some informants, as revealed by INF-08 who now limits himself to reading the news only once or twice a day. The ability to develop this kind of coping strategy seems uneven among informants, because informants with higher media literacy such as teachers and journalists are relatively quicker to realize the need to limit their exposure to the news, while the families of migrant workers who are most emotionally attached to the issue find it most difficult to implement similar restrictions despite being aware of the negative impact on their own psychological state, a capacity gap that shows that the Individual coping alone is not enough without external structural support, such as official information channels that are more accessible. A broader change in behavior is shown by migrant worker activists (INF-09), whose organization increases advocacy, legal education, and assistance to migrant workers' families whenever new cases appear in the media, showing the function of the media as a trigger for social mobilization. A similar pattern is also seen, albeit on a smaller scale, in state civil servants (INF-07) who claim that the reporting of PMI conflicts is often the subject of internal evaluation in their agencies to improve socialization procedures for prospective migrant workers, showing that the conative impact of news consumption not only moves at the individual and community levels, but can also enter the realm of bureaucracy and public service policies. Although in a more informal form than the formal policy formulation process.

Family communication patterns that change due to the news of PMI conflicts do not always take place in the same form in every family. Some informants develop the habit of contacting relatives periodically without waiting for specific news, while others only do so when cases arise that are considered relevant to the country where their relatives are located. This difference in



pattern shows that the conative impact of news consumption is adaptive, adjusted to the emotional capacity and communication resources that each family has, rather than a single, uniform response to the same news stimulus.

Four forms of conative impact were identified from the overall findings: changes in family communication patterns, improved information verification behaviors, the emergence of coping strategies, and increased social participation through education and advocacy. These behavioral changes are not spontaneous events, but the consequences of the cognitive and affective processes experienced by informants after consuming the news, showing that the media in the context of the migrant worker issue has the ability to mobilize real action, not just form opinions, while expanding the theory of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur by showing that the conative effect develops into collective action oriented towards education, advocacy, and strengthening social networks.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The three patterns of dependence, cognitive consequences in the form of knowledge reinforcement that go hand in hand with information ambiguity, and affective and conative consequences that reinforce each other actually form a series of causation centered on one determinant variable, namely the informant's personal proximity to the PMI issue. Personal closeness serves as a gate that determines the type of dependency that is formed, how much cognitive ambiguity is perceived to be disturbing, and whether affective distress leads to adaptive action or to a recurring cycle of anxiety.

The ambiguity of the social environment is placed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) as the main trigger of media dependence, assuming that the more ambiguous a situation the higher the individual's need for orientation from the media, a proposition that is emphasized in the follow-up work of DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) through the three basic motives of understanding, orientation, and entertainment that distinguish the intensity of inter-individual dependence. The perspectives of uses and gratifications from Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) are relevant expanding the framework by asserting that audiences are active agents who choose media according to their psychological and social needs, helping to explain why the PMI families in this study actively seek additional sources despite the risk of increased anxiety.

The ambiguity that drives dependence on family groups and PMIs is not entirely cognitive, but rather is called relational ambiguity, which is uncertainty about the safety of the closest people that cannot be resolved simply by increasing the amount of information consumed. Loges' (1994) idea that threat perception strengthens dependency relationships is expanded through these findings, because threats in the context of labor migration are personal and ongoing, rather than a single incident that is completed after information has been obtained. A similar pattern was reported by Valgas, Groot Kormelink, de Haan, and Kruikemeier (2025) in a study of immigrants in the Netherlands, who noted that news consumption from the country of origin was intentional and emotionally charged and maintained despite psychological distress, because the emotional attachment to the home country was proven to be stronger than the desire to avoid sad news. The similarity of the patterns in the context of the European diaspora and the context of the PMI family in South Sulawesi strengthens the argument that relational ambiguity is not a local phenomenon, but rather a common pattern that emerges whenever the media becomes the only bridge to a loved one in a distant place.

The character of this never-resolved ambiguity is further explained in the emotion-based social media dependency model proposed by Broda and Strömbäck (2024), who assert that pervasive ambiguity in the digital age pushes individuals into intense emotional states, and it is these emotional states, not just cognitive needs, that reinforce media dependence. This series of causes and effect is depicted in informants who do not stop accessing news despite realizing that reading the news actually increases their own anxiety, a pattern that Sharma, Lee, and Johnson (2022) call doomscrolling. Kresna, Lutfiana, Putri, and Valentiya (2024) in Gen Z students at the Faculty of Education and Psychology also noted a similar association between doomscrolling habits and mental anxiety, while Rahmawati, Rahayu, and Taufiq (2024) in students in West Sulawesi confirmed a comparable pattern in areas that are geographically and socioculturally adjacent to the location of this study. Wangqu, Xue, and Chen (2024) in a study of 1,210 college students in the Yangtze River Delta also noted that affective media dependence had a significant effect on psychological distress, while functional media dependence did not show the same effect, a distinction that is in line with the pattern in this study, where verifiable dependence on teachers and journalists tends to result in better emotional control than emotional dependence on the PMI family. Rohmah and colleagues (2023) in their interpretation of Media System Dependency Theory in the context of financial technology also show that the type of needs that underlie dependency, not just the frequency of use, which determines the form of the relationship between the audience and the media, is consistent with the distinction of functions and emotions in this study.

The magnitude of psychological effects is determined not solely by the intensity of media dependency, but also by the motive that sustains it. The findings indicate that emotion-oriented dependency, which is driven by relational concern and personal proximity to migrant-worker issues, tends to produce stronger affective consequences than task- or function-oriented dependency, even when the frequency of news exposure is comparable. By contrast, dependency grounded in professional accuracy, situational orientation, or information verification tends to generate predominantly cognitive effects and is accompanied by greater emotional regulation. This study therefore advances the proposition that dependency intensity and dependency motive constitute distinct explanatory dimensions, with the latter playing a decisive role in shaping the form and magnitude of psychological outcomes. This distinction extends Media System Dependency Theory, whose original framework and subsequent development have not explicitly differentiated the psychological consequences of task-oriented and emotion-oriented dependency (Ball-Rokeach, 2010).

Conceptually, the findings suggest a sequential relationship in which personal proximity and perceived threat shape the motive for media dependency; the dependency motive influences patterns of cross-platform information seeking; and the interaction between dependency motive and information ambiguity determines cognitive, affective, and conative outcomes. Differences in framing and publication speed across media may intensify ambiguity, even while online news expands readers' knowledge of PMI issues. This pattern is consistent with studies of conflict and social-issue framing in Indonesian online media (Taufiq & Arifin, 2024; Siahaan & Vera, 2024). The agenda-setting proposition of McCombs and Shaw (1972) further explains how the sustained prominence of PMI conflict news makes such content difficult to avoid, including for readers who attempt to limit their exposure.

The cognitive orientation promised by the media in the era of fragmented digital media ecosystems no longer comes from a single institution, but must be assembled by the audience

themselves through cross-platform verification. Journalists and teachers understand this process as a form of media literacy that can be trained, while PMI families experience it as an additional cognitive burden due to limited capacity and time to verify the professional group's thoroughness. This gap in verification capacity is relevant to read together with the description of Oktavianus, Sun, and Lu (2022) regarding the behavior of seeking health information in domestic migrant workers, which emphasizes that access to accurate information greatly determines the psychological condition of vulnerable groups who often have limited resources to independently filter information.

Pressure on the affective realm is a continuation of this cognitive gap, because the unresolved cognitive burden on PMI families directly explains why the anxiety they experience is ongoing, not momentary. This pattern of sustained anxiety is in line with the epidemiological description of Harjana, Januraga, Indrayathi, Gesesew, and Ward (2021) regarding the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in migrant workers repatriated during the pandemic, although an important difference lies in the subjects who experience these impacts: Harjana and colleagues' descriptions focus on migrant workers themselves, while this study shows that similar psychological distress is also experienced by families who are far from the location work, solely through media exposure. Lin and colleagues' (2025) systematic review of the health of migrant workers and transnational families in the Asia-Pacific region reinforces this point by noting that more than half of family members left behind in their home countries report mental health disorders, a proportion even higher than the prevalence of occupational health disorders among migrant workers themselves, showing that the anxiety of migrant workers in South Sulawesi is not a special case but a part of it from larger regional patterns. Sumerlin, Kim, Chung, and Gnanaselvam (2025) on female domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong during the pandemic also confirmed that the disconnection of communication with families in the home country exacerbates psychological distress on both parties, showing that transnational anxiety relationships work in two directions, not just from families to migrant workers.

The concept of polymedia proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012), that the media is the main means of transnational families maintaining cross-border emotional relationships as well as anxiety channels when information is uncertain, is strengthened and expanded as well as the pattern. Transnational anxiety now flows through a second channel separate from direct contact, namely the consumption of public news, while the concept of polymedia originally focused on personal communication between family members, and the two channels reinforce each other's perceived anxiety intensity. The impulse to act was ultimately born from the accumulation of cognitive and affective burdens, moving in two different directions, namely within the family and outward towards the collective realm in the form of strengthening family communication to intensifying advocacy activities by migrant worker activists. The psychosocial resilience strengthening program for female migrant workers studied by Rahmasari and colleagues (2024) and Gusman (2024) obtained empirical weight from the pattern of individual movement towards the collective, because this study shows that psychosocial support is not only needed by migrant workers in the country of settlement, but also by families left behind in the area of origin.

The agentive capacity that rarely receives attention in the study of classical media dependence is also reflected in the coping strategy in the form of limiting the duration of reading news developed by some informants, showing that the audience is not completely passive in dealing with media dependence even though the gate of personal closeness has paved the way for sustained anxiety. The study of classical media dependence from the beginning of its development tends to

describe the audience as a party that is directly dependent on the media system, as noted in the bibliometric mapping of Nurlina, Huda, Brenda, Rohmah, and Putra (2024). The gate of personal closeness discussed in the opening section does not stop as an abstract concept when traced from the beginning to the end of the series of descriptions above, but can be traced in every dimension analyzed, starting from the type of ambiguity faced, the type of dependency motive formed, the way the informant processes information, the intensity of anxiety felt, to the form of action taken.

Three interrelated ideas as an extension of the Media System Dependency Theory can be formulated from this continuity. The ambiguity that triggers the media's dependence on the issue of labor migration is relational and personal, not purely cognitive as the theory's initial proposition assumes, a pattern that is also reflected in the news consumption of the diaspora in Europe. The type of dependent motive, both function-oriented and emotional, determines the magnitude of the psychological consequences rather than just the intensity of news consumption, a pattern that is consistent both in the context of migrant families in South Sulawesi and in students in digital environments that are much different geographically and culturally. The consequences of the media's dependence on issues of high personal relevance do not stop at the level of attitudes, but move into collective action that has the potential to strengthen social protection networks for vulnerable groups, a need whose scale is now supported by data in the Asia Pacific region. The relationship between audiences and media in the era of fragmented media ecosystems can no longer be understood as a single, homogeneous relationship based on these three ideas, but rather as a relationship that takes different forms and consequences, depending on who reads, why they read, and how close the issue being read is to their own lives.

The position of Media System Dependency Theory in this study also needs to be read side by side with other theoretical frameworks that have been developed relatively separately. Agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) explains why the issue of PMI gets a wide coverage space, uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) explain the active motives of audiences in choosing media, cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) explains how repeated exposure shapes risk perceptions, while Media System Dependency Theory explains why the three processes produce different intensity of dependency on each Reading group. These four frameworks are essentially complementary, not in competition, when applied in the context of news that has high personal relevance for some audiences and remote relevance for others, as this study shows in the case of reporting on PMI conflicts in South Sulawesi. The contribution of this research lies in the affirmation that the meeting point of the four frameworks is the reader's personal closeness to the issue reported, a variable that has so far received less explicit attention in the application of Media System Dependency Theory to the issue of migrant employment.

The qualitative approach used in this study also provides its own added value in the midst of the dominance of contemporary media dependence studies that rely more on large-scale surveys, such as the research of Wangqu, Xue, and Chen (2024) on more than a thousand students and the theoretical model of Broda and Strömbäck (2024) which is built from a broad literature review. Such survey data excels at measuring the strength of relationships between variables in a measurable way, but often loses the nuances of the processes that explain why they are formed. In-depth interviews in this study allow us to capture the process in more detail, for example, how relational ambiguity in the PMI family differs qualitatively from cognitive ambiguity in the general reader, a distinction that is difficult to see only from the numerical media dependency score. The combination of the qualitative findings of this study and the quantitative findings of these studies ultimately

complements each other, providing a more complete picture of how media dependence works at the level of subjective experience as well as at the level of large-scale patterns.

The practical implications of these overall findings point to two key stakeholder groups. For online media editors, PMI conflict coverage should be structured to minimize avoidable psychosocial harm, particularly among readers with close personal ties to migrant workers. Editorial practices should avoid sensational or emotionally manipulative headlines, verify information before publication, clearly distinguish confirmed facts from developing claims, and provide timely corrections or follow-up updates as cases evolve. Reports should also include accessible help channels, such as contact information for migrant worker protection agencies, emergency services, legal assistance, and psychosocial support. In addition, conflict narratives should be balanced with contextual information on safe migration procedures, available protection mechanisms, and progress in case resolution. These measures would preserve the public-interest value of conflict reporting while reducing information ambiguity and prolonged distress among highly involved readers (Taufiq & Arifin, 2024; Siahaan & Vera, 2024; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Indonesian migrant worker protection institutions have generally concentrated psychosocial initiatives on workers in destination countries, as illustrated by resilience-building programs for Indonesian women migrant workers abroad (Rahmasari et al., 2024; Gusman, 2024). However, the national protection framework also recognizes migrant workers' families as rights holders. Law Number 18 of 2017 guarantees families access to information concerning workers' conditions, problems, and return, while assigning central, district or municipal, and village governments responsibilities for information provision, integrated protection services, monitoring, reintegration, and family empowerment (Republic of Indonesia, 2017). Government Regulation Number 59 of 2021 further operationalizes these responsibilities through integrated information systems, complaint services, communication access, case coordination, and social and economic reintegration involving migrant workers and their families (Republic of Indonesia, 2021).

Within this policy framework, protection agencies could extend psychosocial communication support in origin regions by establishing family information and referral desks through BP3MI offices, district or municipal manpower agencies, and village governments. These services should provide verified and regularly updated case information, dedicated telephone or digital complaint channels, scheduled briefings during crises, and clear referral pathways to local health, social, legal, or psychological support services. Frontline officers should also be trained to recognize signs of sustained distress and to connect affected families with appropriate professional assistance. Integrating these mechanisms with existing family empowerment and reintegration programs would reduce the burden of independent cross-platform verification and provide families with both informational certainty and accessible support.

CONCLUSION

This study identified three dominant patterns of media system dependency among readers of news about Indonesian Migrant Worker (PMI) conflicts in South Sulawesi: emotionally oriented dependency among PMI families and former migrant workers, verification- and function-oriented dependency among educators, journalists, and public officials, and incidental dependency among general readers. These patterns produced interconnected cognitive, affective, and conative effects. Online news expanded readers' understanding of migrant worker issues but also generated

information ambiguity, persistent anxiety, and tendencies resembling doomscrolling. At the behavioral level, exposure to PMI conflict reporting encouraged stronger family communication, more careful information verification, coping strategies, and participation in educational and advocacy activities.

The main theoretical contribution of this study is the finding that the psychological consequences of media dependency are determined not only by the intensity of news consumption but also by the underlying motive for dependency and the reader's personal proximity to the issue. In the context of labor migration, ambiguity is therefore relational as well as cognitive because uncertainty concerns the safety and well-being of relatives or acquaintances working abroad. This finding extends Media System Dependency Theory by distinguishing the consequences of emotionally oriented dependency from those of function-oriented dependency.

Practically, online media organizations should consider the psychosocial consequences of PMI conflict reporting, particularly for readers with direct personal connections to migrant workers. Conflict coverage should be accompanied by contextual information, verified updates, available assistance channels, and relevant protection mechanisms. Migrant worker protection institutions and local governments should also expand psychosocial and informational support to families remaining in migrant-sending areas, rather than focusing exclusively on migrant workers in destination countries.

This study was limited by its small number of informants and its geographical concentration in selected areas of South Sulawesi; consequently, the findings are context-specific and cannot be statistically generalized. Future research should involve broader regional samples and mixed-method designs using validated measures of anxiety, psychological distress, and media dependency. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine changes in dependency patterns over time, while cross-issue comparisons could determine whether the patterns identified here are specific to PMI conflict reporting or also occur in other high-relevance crisis contexts.

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