



## Digital Family Bonding and Psychological Well-being among Inter-Island Migrant Students in Indonesia: A Positive Psychology Approach

Endonezya'daki Adalar Arası Göçmen Öğrenciler Arasında Dijital Aile Bağları ve Psikolojik Refah: Bir Pozitif Psikoloji Yaklaşımı

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### Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of inter-island migrant students in Indonesia who maintain psychosocial bonds with their families through digital family bonding-digitally mediated interactions that sustain emotional closeness despite physical separation-and examines its implications for psychological well-being. Twenty students who had relocated to different islands within Indonesia were interviewed over a one-year period, and the data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four main themes emerged: (1) emotional reconnection with family members, enhancing the sense of family presence; (2) digitally mediated psychological support, both instrumental and emotional; (3) emotional and technical disruptions in digital communication; and (4) the maintenance of purpose, motivation, and continuity, reflecting academic resilience supported by digital family bonding. The findings indicate that the psychological benefits of digital family interactions depend not only on communication frequency but also on the emotional quality and depth of exchanges, particularly in sustaining positive relations with others, a core dimension of psychological well-being. Digital family bonding functioned as a psychological buffer that supported resilience among students living away from home. The findings also underscore the need for institutional involvement. Higher education institutions should facilitate social connection opportunities, ensure easy access to psychosocial support, and implement regular well-being assessments to strengthen protective relational frameworks for inter-island migrant students.

**Keywords:** Digital Family Bonding, Psychological Well-Being, Inter-Island Migrant Students, Positive Psychology, Phenomenology.

### Öz

Bu fenomenolojik çalışma, Endonezya'da adalar arası göç eden üniversite öğrencilerinin aileleriyle Dijital Aile Bağlanması yoluyla sürdürdükleri psikososyal ilişkilerin yaşantısal deneyimlerini ve bu ilişkilerin psikolojik iyi oluş üzerindeki etkilerini incelemektedir. Dijital aile bağlanması, fiziksel mesafeye rağmen duygusal yakınlığı sürdüren teknoloji aracılı aile etkileşimleri olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Çalışmada, Endonezya içinde farklı adalara yerleşmiş yirmi öğrenciyle bir yıl boyunca derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmış ve veriler Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz (IPA) yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda dört temel tema ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) aile üyeleriyle duygusal yeniden bağlanma ve aile varlığı algısının güçlenmesi; (2) araçsal ve duygusal boyutları içeren dijital psikolojik destek; (3) dijital iletişimde yaşanan duygusal ve teknik aksaklıklar; ve (4) dijital aile bağlanmasıyla desteklenen amaç, motivasyon ve akademik dayanıklılığın sürdürülmesi. Bulgular, dijital aile etkileşimlerinin psikolojik katkısının yalnızca etkileşim sıklığına değil, aynı zamanda iletişimin duygusal niteliği ve derinliğine bağlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Bulgular ayrıca kurumsal katılımın gerekliliğini de vurgulamaktadır. Yükseköğretim kurumları, adalar arası göçmen öğrenciler için koruyucu ilişkisel yapıları güçlendirmek amacıyla sosyal bağlantı fırsatlarını kolaylaştırmalı, psikososyal desteğe kolay erişimi sağlamalı ve düzenli iyi oluş değerlendirmeleri uygulanmalıdır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dijital Aile Bağları, Psikolojik İyi Oluş, Adalar Arası Göçmen Öğrenciler, Pozitif Psikoloji, Fenomenoloji.



## Introduction

In a cross-cultural context, the educational mobility of university students is a growing social and demographic phenomenon. In Indonesia, the cultural and social practice of temporary migration for educational purposes is particularly significant. In 2022, more than 60,000 Indonesian students were enrolled in foreign educational institutions (GSL Global, 2025). Domestically, university enrollment is projected to reach 8.47 million in 2024, with a significant proportion of students living apart from their parents (Dataloka, 2024). National student mobility initiatives and government-supported higher education programs have further intensified domestic inter-island student movement across Indonesia (Kemendikbud, 2023). These trends highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics of domestic educational migration and the psychological well-being of migrant students (Fauzia & Komalasari, 2020).

Relocating to a different island within Indonesia presents unique social, cultural, and environmental challenges for students. Students moving to a different island must adapt to unfamiliar housing, climate, and local signage. They also face communities with distinct dialects and cultural practices, which can complicate social integration. The degree of adjustment required can make it difficult to integrate into a new community, school, or living environment, demanding substantial self-regulation and independence. This increased demand for independence may reduce immediate access to family support, potentially affecting both individual emotional stability and overall family cohesion. Loss of primary sources of support, particularly parental presence, has been shown to increase obstacles for migrant students and may contribute to dropout risk (Sari & Malahati, 2025). These challenges underscore the need to understand and develop strategies that help migrant students maintain emotional stability while living away from their families.

Digital communication technologies have transformed the way families remain connected across distances. Video calls, instant messaging, and social media facilitate emotional closeness despite physical separation. This study conceptualizes this phenomenon as digital family bonding, defined as digitally mediated interactions between students and their family members that sustain emotional closeness despite physical distance. In collectivistic societies such as Indonesia, where family ties serve as emotional and moral anchors and social support is highly valued, digital family bonding may play a crucial role. Studies on ICT and migrant populations indicate that digital communication can reduce stress and loneliness while enhancing social support and coping capacities (Taufani, 2025). These findings suggest that digital family bonding may help migrant students maintain relational continuity and psychological equilibrium.

From the perspective of positive psychology, digital family bonding can be further understood in relation to psychological well-being. Positive Psychology emphasizes individual strengths, positive relationships, and intrapsychic resources that enable flourishing rather than mere harm avoidance. Ryff's psychological well-being model identifies positive relations with others as a key contributor to well-being, alongside domains such as self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and life purpose, all of which are shaped by interpersonal quality. Through this lens, digital family bonding provides students with self-defining relationships that foster a sense of safety, belonging, and identity. Furthermore, Positive Psychology highlights resilience—the capacity to adapt constructively to adversity. Digital communication with family can serve as a source of resilience, providing emotional support and facilitating collective coping, thereby helping students maintain control during stressful experiences (Widiyastuti & Hardita, 2024).

Empirical research has begun to examine the effects of digital communication on relational quality in migrant families. Fauk et al. (2024) describe how Indonesian migrant workers use digital media to satisfy emotional needs, maintain emotional ties, and mitigate the psychological impact of isolation. Similarly, Taufani (2025) documents how migrant students interact digitally with family members to combat loneliness and foster emotional closeness. While these studies enhance understanding of technology-supported family relationships, there is a potential paradox: frequent digital communication may sometimes increase homesickness or emotional distress if interactions lack depth or emotional meaning (Fauzia & Komalasari, 2020; Sinaga et al., 2024). This suggests that the psychological impact of digital connections depends more on interaction quality than frequency.

Despite these insights, several unresolved issues remain in the literature on migrant students, including conceptual, methodological, and cultural dimensions. First, there is a lack of systematic conceptualization and investigation of digital family bonding. While studies on social support and digital communication exist, digital interactions are often treated merely as forms of social support rather than culturally shaped relational processes grounded in emotional interdependence and the evolving nature of families (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). Consequently, theoretical development of digital family bonding remains limited, with many of its components, processes, and psychological implications unexplored.

Second, an overreliance on quantitative survey models limits understanding of the phenomenological, lived experiences of migrant students. Quantitative approaches fail to capture how students interpret and emotionally engage with digital family communication, nor do they illuminate ambivalence, relational discrepancies, or identity fragmentation in online interactions (Supriyati, 2023). These dynamics reflect the non-linear, complex relational processes that shape digitally mediated family communication.

Third, the cultural specificities of collectivistic societies remain under-theorized in discussions of digital family bonding. Although some studies acknowledge interdependence and family closeness, few examine how these cultural orientations influence emotional expectations, familial responsibilities, and the psychological salience of digital ties (Barros, 2023). Migrant students from collectivistic backgrounds may experience digital communication differently than those in more individualistic contexts—a dimension often overlooked.

Finally, a theoretical gap exists in situating digital family bonding within the broader Positive Psychology framework. While literature addresses relational well-being, digitally mediated family relationships are rarely linked to constructs such as resilience, meaning, personal growth, and purpose (Chen & Billedo, 2025). Consequently, the psychological potential of digital family bonding—particularly its role in coping and adaptive functioning—remains underutilized.

These gaps collectively highlight the need for a deeper, nuanced understanding of digital family bonding in the lives of migrant students. To address these limitations, the present study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the essential lived experiences of university students in cultivating digital family bonding and examines its implications for their psychological well-being. By centering students' subjective interpretations and emotional worlds, this study contributes to theoretical development in three key ways: (1) elaborating the components and meanings of digital family bonding within a collectivistic cultural context; (2) illuminating how digital familial relationships function as psychological resources that sustain well-being and resilience; and (3) strengthening the integration of positive psychology and cyberpsychology in understanding migrant student experiences. Through this

study, we aim to enhance understanding of digital relationality and cultural dynamics among migrant students. The findings offer insights relevant for theory, practice, and policies supporting student well-being.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a phenomenological research design to explore the essential lived experiences of inter-island migrant students. Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences, emphasizing participants' subjective meanings while acknowledging the researcher's interpretative role. Accordingly, this study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a double hermeneutic process in which participants interpret their lived experiences and the researcher, in turn, interprets those interpretations (Creswell, 2021). The term "participants" is used to emphasize their active role in articulating and reflecting on their experiences within the context of digital family bonding. The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of students' experiences of digital family bonding and how these experiences shape their psychological well-being.

Inter-island migrant students experience geographical separation from their families and familiar social environments, which alters the availability of direct familial support. This study therefore focuses on how students perceive digitally mediated connectedness with their families, the emotional meanings they attach to these interactions, and the ways digital family bonding contributes to their psychological well-being and resilience in coping with academic and environmental stressors.

### **Participants**

Twenty migrant students were purposively selected to participate in the study. This sample size aligns with the idiographic focus of IPA, which aims to explore phenomena in depth rather than for statistical generalization, while allowing identification of patterns across cases. The students were required to be: active students at the university, within the age limit of 18-25, residing independently from their nuclear family for one year, and employed in regular digital communication with their family.

The geographical diversity of the participants reflects internal migration patterns and provides a nuanced understanding of digital family connectedness across different cultural regions. The key characteristics of the participants have been summarised in the table below:

**Table 1. Participants**

No	Participants Code	Gender	Age	Region of Origin	Study Location	Long time living away from home	Dominant Communication Media
1	P01	Female	25	West Sumatra	Yogyakarta	6 years	WhatsApp, Video Call
2	P02	Male	20	Riau	Solo	2 years	WhatsApp, Zoom
3	P03	Female	21	East Kalimantan	Solo	3 years	WhatsApp, Instagram
4	P04	Female	22	South Sulawesi	Yogyakarta	4 years	WhatsApp, Telegram
5	P05	Male	23	West Nusa Tenggara	Malang	6 years	WhatsApp, Line
6	P06	Female	20	Papua	Yogyakarta	8 years	WhatsApp, Video Call
7	P07	Female	21	NTT	Semarang	3 years	WhatsApp, Messenger
8	P08	Male	19	Aceh	Bandung	2 years	WhatsApp, Instagram
9	P09	Female	25	Jambi	Yogyakarta	7 years	WhatsApp, Video Call
10	P10	Female	21	West Kalimantan	Semarang	2 years	WhatsApp, Telegram
11	P11	Male	22	Maluku	Jakarta	3 years	WhatsApp, Video Call
12	P12	Female	19	Lampung	Surabaya	5 years	WhatsApp, Instagram
13	P13	Female	24	Bali	Yogyakarta	2 years	WhatsApp, Line
14	P14	Male	21	South Kalimantan	Bandung	3 years	WhatsApp, Messenger
15	P15	Female	22	Southeast Sulawesi	Malang	5 years	WhatsApp, Video Call
16	P16	Male	23	Bangka Belitung	Jakarta	3 years	WhatsApp, Zoom
17	P17	Female	20	Bengkulu	Yogyakarta	4 years	WhatsApp, Instagram
18	P18	Female	21	North Kalimantan	Jakarta	3 years	WhatsApp, Telegram
19	P19	Male	22	Gorontalo	Semarang	3 years	WhatsApp, Video Call
20	P20	Female	19	West Sulawesi	Surabaya	4 years	WhatsApp, Instagram

### Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and limited participant observation. Interviews focused on participants' emotional experiences and relational dynamics of digital family bonding. Observations were conducted ethically to examine indicators of digital communication, including frequency, modalities, and response patterns. Specifically, the data collection involved:

1. Timeline and Structure : Although the data collection period spanned one year (January-December 2024), each participant took part in 2-3 periodic interview sessions to capture the development of their emotional dynamics over time.
2. Duration: Each session lasted 60-90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online via Zoom/Google Meet, depending on the participant's location.

3. Instruments and Sample Questions: The researcher served as the primary instrument, supported by a flexible Interview Guide, Field Notes, and Digital Audio Recorders to ensure thorough and accurate documentation of participants' narratives. Sample questions included:
  - 1) "Can you describe a moment when you felt very close to your family despite interacting only through a screen?" (Emotional meaning)
  - 2) "How did a video call affect your mood when you were stressed by academic tasks?" (Psychological impact)

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' locations, with the researcher as the primary instrument, supported by an interview guide, field notes, and digital audio recording for accurate data capture.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the systematic procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as outlined by Smith et al. (2009), the study employed the following steps to ensure a rigorous and transparent analysis of participants' lived experiences:

1. Immersive Reading: Interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain deep familiarity with each participant's lived context and to engage closely with how participants make sense of their lived experiences.
2. Initial Coding: Significant statements, expressions of emotion, and relational experiences were highlighted as initial codes. For example, codes such as "*missing home*," "*checking in via WhatsApp*," and "*sharing daily routines*" were identified from participants' narratives.
3. Theme Development: Initial codes were clustered into broader conceptual themes. For instance, the codes above were grouped under the theme "*Maintaining Emotional Closeness through Digital Communication*." This step helped capture patterns across multiple cases while preserving individual nuances.
4. Cross-Case Analysis: Individual case analyses were conducted first to respect idiographic detail, followed by a cross-case comparison to identify convergent and divergent patterns in participants' experiences of digital family bonding. Differences and similarities in emotional responses, coping strategies, and digital communication habits were documented to contextualize findings culturally and regionally.
5. Theoretical Interpretation: Themes were interpreted through the lens of Positive Psychology and digital family connectedness. For example, the theme "*Maintaining Emotional Closeness*" was linked to psychological well-being constructs such as resilience, life satisfaction, and perceived social support.

To enhance rigor and credibility, the analytical process incorporated reflexivity and peer debriefing:

1. Peer Debriefing: Preliminary codes and themes were discussed with colleagues specializing in qualitative research and IPA, allowing assumptions to be questioned and interpretive bias minimized.
2. Reflexive Journaling: The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting assumptions, emotional reactions, and potential biases that could influence interpretation.

This structured approach ensured that participants' voices remained central in the analysis, while theoretical interpretations were firmly grounded in the data. By combining idiographic attention with cross-case thematic insights, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how domestic migrant students experience digital family bonding and its psychological implications.

### **Trustworthiness**

A number of different approaches were taken in order to ensure that the findings of this research were trustworthy.

- 1) Cross-participant thematic comparison and observational integration represented method and source triangulation.
- 2) Participants were presented synthesized interpretations to check the credibility of the accounts through member checking.
- 3) Within peer debriefing oversight of the analytical process, assumption questioning, and interpretive bias mitigation were completed through collaboration with colleagues possessing expertise in both qualitative research and IPA.

Reflexive journaling and audit trails were maintained throughout the study to enhance rigor and minimize researcher bias.

## **Results**

Phenomenological analysis of interviews with twenty migrant students revealed four superordinate themes describing the meanings of digital family bonding and its impact on students' psychological well-being : emotional closeness through digital communication, digital psychological support, obstacles to family communication, and digital family bonding and resilience.

### **Emotional Closeness through Digital Communication**

Participants consistently used digital communication-primarily video calls and instant messaging-as the primary medium to reproduce emotional closeness and recreate the warmth of home despite physical distance. Twelve participants highlighted that daily or weekly video calls became a crucial routine for mitigating longing and sustaining a sense of presence.

P01 (female, 25, West Sumatra) shared, *“Despite physical separation, I engage in nightly video calls with my mother, which helps me maintain a sense of familial presence and emotional stability.”* P18 (female, 21, North Kalimantan) emphasized that family-involved video calls served as an important ritual that maintained her sense of belonging to household dynamics.

Instant messaging also played an essential role for eight participants. Brief but personalized messages—often containing motivational words or reminders—were perceived as emotionally potent signals of care. P09 (female, 25, Jambi) noted that *“Every morning, my mother sends a motivational message, which reinforces my sense of being cared for and supports my academic motivation.”*

Many participants reported that these digital interactions reduced feelings of distance and loneliness, helping them feel part of a community. These interactions reinforce **Positive Relations with Others** (Ryff, 1989), showing that digital communication can recreate co-presence, foster belonging, and reduce loneliness

### Digital-Based Psychological Support

Participants described two primary forms of psychological support transmitted digitally: Instrumental support and emotional support. Instrumental support was reported by ten participants and typically involved academic advice or motivational guidance offered through calls or messages. Such support strengthened students’ confidence and facilitated academic coping.

P02 (male, 20, Riau) explained, *“When I was stressed about my thesis, my father always gave advice over the phone. It made me more confident and helped me know where to start.”*

Similarly, P15 found that encouraging messages from her father helped her stay focused and prepared before major exams.

Emotional support, emphasized by 11 participants, manifested in simple gestures such as reminders to eat, prayers, or brief check-ins. These small actions were perceived as intimate demonstrations of affection and validation.

P04 (female, 22, Sulawesi) pointed out, *“My mother always reminds me to eat. Even though it’s simple, it warms my heart and makes me feel appreciated and cared for.”*

The combination of emotional and instrumental support provided students peace of mind and psychological comfort as well as a sense of having a safe place to land. Both forms of support enhanced emotional stability, self-confidence, and psychological comfort, aligning with multiple PWB domains, including self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life.

### Barriers to Maintaining Digital Family Communication

Despite the benefits of digital family bonding, participants encountered several challenges that reduced the quality and consistency of communication. These barriers were categorized into technical-practical obstacles and emotional-personal obstacles.

**Technical-Practical Barriers:** Poor internet connectivity and mismatched schedules disrupted consistency.

P03 (female, 21, East Kalimantan) shared, *“Sometimes the signal in my boarding house is terrible. The video call keeps disconnecting. It’s frustrating and makes us end the call quickly.”* And P10 echoed that misaligned schedules between her academic workload and her family’s routines disrupted communication consistency.

**Emotional-Personal Barriers:** Delayed or brief replies sometimes led to misinterpretation or feelings of neglect.

P05 (male, 23, West Nusa Tenggara) explained, *“My parents are busy, so they often reply late. Sometimes it makes me feel less noticed, like they’ve forgotten about me.”* P07 (female, 21, NTT) recalled misinterpreting a short text from her mother as anger, only to later realize it was due to fatigue.

These experiences indicate that digital communication, despite fostering connection, may simultaneously create emotional distance and misunderstandings due to asynchronous interaction and limited nonverbal cues, illustrating the Digital Paradox.

### **Meaning of Digital Family Bonding for Resilience**

For several participants, digital family bonding provided psychological support that enhanced resilience during periods away from home. Nine participants reported that their main source of emotional strength was family contact maintained digitally.

P06 (female, 20, Papua) reflected, *“My family is my main source of motivation. Without digital communication, I might have given up. Knowing they’re there, even just through a screen, is enough.”* P01 (female, 25, West Sumatra) similarly described feeling psychologically secure because she knew that emotional support was always accessible online.

Moreover, seven participants indicated that family support digitally inspired them to commit to their studies and pursue their long term goals.

P16 (male, 23, Bangka Belitung) reported, *“Support from my family through chats and video calls makes me feel confident that I can graduate on time. It’s like extra energy that reminds me why I’m here.”* P18 highlighted the importance of rituals such as receiving prayers over the phone, which provided deep comfort during academic pressure and acted as an effective coping mechanism.

Overall, digital family bonding enhanced students’ emotional stability, resilience, and psychological well-being, confirming the importance of meaningful digital interactions beyond mere frequency.

**Table 2.** Researchers' Analytical Interpretation

Theme & Subtheme	Representative Quotes	Interpretive Insights
Emotional Closeness through Digital Communication; Ritualized video calls; Affective micro-messages	"Despite physical distance, I maintain nightly video calls with my mother, which help sustain emotional closeness." (P01); "Morning motivational messages make me feel cared for." (P09)	Digital interactions recreate co-presence and strengthen family connections, supporting Positive Relations with Others (Ryff, 1989).
Digital-Based Psychological Support; Instrumental support; Emotional validation	"When I was stressed about my thesis, my father guided me through the phone, and I felt more confident." (P02); "My mother's reminders to eat warm my heart." (P04)	Provides practical coping resources and emotional reassurance, enhancing multiple PWB domains.
Barriers to Digital Family Communication; Technical constraints; Emotional misunderstandings	"The signal keeps disconnecting, so the call ends quickly." (P03); "Late replies make me feel less noticed." (P05)	Connectivity and asynchronous communication may create misunderstandings, reducing relational effectiveness.
Meaning of digital family bonding for Resilience; Motivation source; Academic purpose reinforcement	"Without digital communication, I might have given up." (P06); "Family support through chats makes me confident I can graduate on time." (P16)	Acts as a psychological safety net, enhancing resilience and reinforcing academic and personal goals.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Indonesian inter-island migration students in cultivating digital family bonding and its implications for their psychological well-being. Through a phenomenological inquiry, the findings reveal how digital communication functions as a psychological resource that sustains students' emotional security, mitigates academic and social stressors, and reinforces resilience in the migratory context. Across the narratives, digital family bonding emerges not merely as a channel for informational exchange but as a technologically mediated emotional foundation that preserves familial attachment despite geographical separation. Four interrelated themes were identified: (1) maintenance of emotional closeness, (2) provision of digital psychological support, (3) barriers to remote communication, and (4) digital family bonding as a source of resilience. Together, these themes illustrate how digital technologies integrate into the broader ecosystem of student well-being.

### Emotional Closeness Through Digital Communication

One of the most prominent findings was that daily interactions through video calls, voice messages, and texts were central to maintaining emotional closeness with family members. This aligns closely with Ryff (1989) positive relations with others, emphasizing the importance of warm, trusting relationships for psychological well-being. Students perceived digital relationships as sufficiently capturing the presence of family, reinforcing belonging, connectedness, and protection against psychological distress.

Recent studies support these findings. Wilczewski & Alon (2023) quantitatively demonstrated that digital communication enhances bonding social capital and subjective well-being among international students. In the collectivistic Indonesian context, family represents the primary social unit, and digital family bonding is a reflection of social expectations around mutual care (Malau & Abdullah, 2024). Digital technologies alleviate the emotional burdens of loneliness, homesickness, and identity conflicts.

The analysis also highlights that quality of interaction outweighs frequency. While some digital exchanges were described as sincere and emotionally meaningful, others were perceived as superficial or lacking depth. Emotional vulnerability, co-presence, and attentive listening are essential for meaningful digital family bonding, consistent with Ryff's construct of Positive Relations. This finding challenges overly optimistic views of digital communication by emphasizing that emotional intentionality is critical.

Building upon the established emotional bonds, digitally mediated support functions as a continuing resource for students' psychological stability and resilience.

### **Digital Forms of Psychological Support**

Instrumental support (academic advice and motivational reminders) and spiritual support (care and encouragement) are the ways families offer psychological support digitally. These supports are synergistic in the psychological well-being of students by lowering stress and increasing self-confidence, and providing safety when faced with the stressors of academics.

This duality aligns with earlier research such as Taufani (2025), who documented increased emotional support with a decreased well-being deficit, and Widiyastuti & Hardita (2024), who showed social support was a determining participants' well-being among students living away from home. In Positive Psychology, the duality of support provided, instrumental and emotional, map on to different sections of Ryff's model. For example, Academic support from parents gives students direction and reinforces the Purpose in Life dimension. In contrast, frequent emotional support reinforces Self-Acceptance by nurturing the psychological stability, self-worth, and internal support.

From the perspective of the resilience theory, emotional support serves as a protective factor that bolsters students' capacity to manage stress, corroborating the findings of (Palimbu et al., 2025) who associate external emotional resources with adaptive functioning to a greater degree. This study contributes to this body of literature by demonstrating the support mechanisms that are dynamically adapted to digital environments, affirming digital family bonding as a psychologically meaningful, albeit technologically mediated, support system (Hofhuis et al., 2023).

Students' support needs varied according to geographic distance. Those originating from more distant regions reported a greater reliance on emotional support, whereas students from proximate regions emphasized instrumental support. This indicates that physical separation modulates emotional sensitivity and informs what support type is the most significant. This indicates that digital family bonding functions as a form of customized digital social support.

While these forms of digital support play a critical role in sustaining well-being, they are not without challenges; technological limitations and communication dynamics can impede the effectiveness of these supportive exchanges.

## **Barriers to Maintaining Digital Family Communication**

Digital family bonding is not without limitations. Technical, temporal, and emotional barriers-including poor internet connectivity, mismatched schedules, delayed responses, and shallow interactions-disrupted communication consistency. Similar challenges were noted by Barros (2023) and Paez & Tan (2021).

The Emotional Distance Feedback Loop, consistent with Media Richness Theory, (Daft & Lengel, 1998), explains that low-richness media, such as texts, reduce emotional expression and non-verbal cues, increasing miscommunication and emotional ambiguity. Real-time communication paradoxically can create emotional silences, referred to as the digital paradox, where cues are filtered or lost.

These disruptions negatively affect environmental mastery and positive relations (Ryff, 1989), demonstrating that digital family bonding is not universally protective. Effectiveness depends on the balance between digital technology availability and emotional expectations.

Despite these disruptions and obstacles, students continue to derive meaningful psychological resources from their digitally mediated family connections, which contribute to resilience and adaptive coping strategies in the migratory context.

## **Meaning of Digital Family Bonding for Student Resilience**

An essential conclusion that can be drawn from the phenomenological analysis is that inter-island migrant students derive particular forms of resilience from the bonding they do with their cyber families. Communication through devices offers a symbolic sense of ‘home’, which strengthens the students’ determination, resilience, and steady emotional base during their studies. This closely correlates with the positive psychology theory of resilience and the broaden-and-build theory by Fredrickson (2001), which posits that positive emotions broaden behavioral repertoires and facilitate the development of coping resources.

Sinaga et al. (2024) and Fauk et al. (2024) suggest that reducing social isolation can enhance individual well-being. This effect is mediated through positive social capital bonding. The current findings extend these insights by demonstrating how digital family bonding eases students’ challenges in the various phases of their university life (Apriani et al., 2025; Fauzia & Komalasari, 2020; Thomas et al., 2017). Early-phase students require greater emotional support to cope with adjustment challenges, whereas advanced students primarily rely on digital family support for motivation, reflecting increased autonomy in managing their academic and personal goals.

The dynamic nature of cyber-family relationships demonstrates that support functions adaptively, reflecting psychological needs over time. Furthermore, in collectivist Indonesian culture, family serves as a core source of duty, emotional attachment, and identity. Digital family bonding extends relational responsibilities rather than replaces physical presence, contrasting with individualistic societies where peer support often dominates. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of cyber-family interactions in fostering resilience and emotional stability, and they provide a basis for practical interventions and academic exploration aimed at supporting students’ well-being.

## **Practical and Academic Implications**

The findings of this study offer several practical and academic implications. Facilitating structured conversations between students and family members about emotional experiences may reduce feelings of loneliness and enhance psychological well-being. Brief yet meaningful interactions, such as daily check-ins or motivational messages, may effectively mitigate feelings of social isolation. Additionally, institutions could provide remote support to families through digital counseling services and foster online community platforms that connect families of students, further reducing social isolation among participants.

From an academic perspective, the findings highlight the need to further explore both positive and negative dynamics of digital family relationships. These insights can be integrated with existing theories on positive digital relationships to refine and expand conceptual frameworks surrounding digital relationality. Research on digital relationships, culture, and Positive Psychology can be further developed to examine how cultural norms interact with technology-mediated family bonding.

For future research, increasing the number of participants in qualitative studies is recommended to enrich the depth and variability of insights. The current study's sample size limits the generalizability of conclusions, though it provides detailed idiographic understanding. Moreover, mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative and quantitative analyses could offer a more comprehensive understanding of digital family bonding. Finally, to capture culturally nuanced experiences, future studies should focus on populations from collectivistic societies, where family interdependence and digital communication play a critical role in psychological well-being.

Taken together, these insights underscore the centrality of cyber-family interactions in supporting psychological well-being, offering a foundation for concluding remarks and targeted recommendations for students, families, and institutions.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This phenomenological inquiry demonstrates that digital family bonding plays a crucial role in sustaining the psychological well-being of inter-island migrants within Indonesia. Four key findings emerged from this study: (1) the maintenance of emotional ties through virtual contact, (2) the provision of both instrumental and emotional support via digital communication, (3) the silences and disruptions in communication arising from geographical distance and technological limitations, and (4) the perception of digitally mediated connections as a source of psychological endurance and motivation. These findings indicate that digitally connecting with family and friends equips participants with resilience, a sense of purpose, and the ability to cope with loneliness and academic challenges.

This study contributes to the broader positive psychology literature by identifying digital family bonding as a mechanism through which positive relations with others (Ryff, 1989) are preserved, particularly in the context of student mobility within collectivist societies. A central takeaway is that the quality of digital communication, especially its emotional depth and authenticity, is more impactful than the quantity of interactions.

The findings also underscore the need for institutional involvement. Higher education institutions should facilitate social connection opportunities, ensure easy access to psychosocial support, and implement regular well-being assessments to strengthen protective relational frameworks for inter-island migrant students.

However, the study has limitations due to the small number of participants and the specific context. Future research is encouraged to include more diverse participants, utilize mixed-methods designs combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, and adopt cross-cultural perspectives. Such studies would deepen the understanding of digital family bonding and support the development of a more generalizable model for promoting the psychological well-being of students living away from home.

### **Declarations**

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