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Research Paper

From Emotional Restraint to Relational Professionalism: A Qualitative Study of Male Student Digital Service Entrepreneurs in East Java, Indonesia

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Abstract

In the ecosystem of the digital services industry, client satisfaction may be more determined by sensitivity in communication and emotional responsiveness than by simple operational efficiency. While digital service ventures increasingly require text-based emotional labor, researchers have studied how young male founders navigate collectivist gender norms. This qualitative study addresses how male student entrepreneurs negotiate masculinity and learn relational professionalism. This study aimed to investigate the professionalism gained by East Java, Indonesian student entrepreneurs, through their client interactions. It emphasizes the relationships among male students. Data were collected through interpretative qualitative inquiry involving in-depth interviews with eight male student entrepreneurs, three university business incubator mentors and lecturers, and analysis of eight student reflective journals. It demonstrates that nascent entrepreneurs experience an initial dissonance between their attempts to preserve masculine control and authority and client expectations of sensitivity. In discussions about grievances and settlements, the students resorted to more subtle and transparent modes of communication. Cultural customs that emphasized interpersonal tranquility (rukun) and decorum spurred the change. In our study, we conceptualize this transformation as the emergence of relational entrepreneurial masculinity, which we define as a professional development model that harmonizes calm assertiveness with empathetic care. This transformation is a professional development model that harmonizes calm assertiveness with empathetic care. This study contributes to Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that entrepreneurial learning is an identity-based process shaped by emotional labor and socio-cultural values. Interestingly, the social learning process of today involves not only human participants but also artificial intelligence (AI). Founders engaged in social learning mediated by both human mentorship and generative AI conversational modeling to acquire text-based emotional scripts.

Keywords: *Social Learning Theory, Masculinity Negotiation, Digital Emotional Labor, Relational Professionalism, Text-Based Communication, Student Entrepreneurs.*

INTRODUCTION

The digital services industry is growing at a rapid rate, and its growth has changed the way that businesses operate. In addition, the communication between entrepreneurs and clients has also changed naturally with the change of business culture. There is no question that in the digital services sector, clients interact through text-based channels. Examples include instant messaging apps, e-mail, virtual services, and platform-based customer portals. This phenomenon, of course, has an impact on the success of entrepreneurship, no longer determined by technical expertise or operational efficiency alone, but by the ability to create relational trust and emotional engagement (Cheshin et al., 2026; Nielsen et al., 2025). Recent studies emphasize that sensitivity to emotional communication increases in text-based digital work settings. Text-based communications are prone to ambiguity, emotional distance, and misinterpretations (Cheshin et al., 2026).

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In the context of digital services, clients assess service quality not only on the basis of functional outcomes but also in terms of interpersonal warmth, responsiveness, and the emotional comfort experienced during interactions (Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Hochschild, 1983; Yoo et al., 2025). Consequently, emotional labor emerges as a critical strategic dimension of service professionalism. Unlike the first two, face-to-face service environments, text-mediated communication requires service providers to strategically manage tone of voice, response times, politeness, and emotional tone without the help of physical nonverbal cues (Cheshin et al., 2026). These are interpersonal expectations beyond the normal business skills for student entrepreneurs in this area. Entrepreneurship in the digital services sector is increasingly relational and involves emotions such as managing client expectations, emotional expression, and ongoing relational care (Harness, 2025).

Historically, masculine power has involved emotional restraint, stoicism, independence, and rational dominance in social interaction (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal that legitimizes male power but also serves as a barrier to emotional vulnerability (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Typical masculine communication values are problem-solving, directness, and emotional detachment. This is because the expression of emotions is often interpreted as a sign of weakness or a loss of professional authority (Seidler, 2006). In entrepreneurial contexts, these masculine norms are interwoven with historical ideals of business professionalism that valorize competitiveness, assertiveness, and emotional resilience (Bruni et al., 2004; Marlow & Swail, 2014).

But in reality, modern digital service businesses can create considerable pressure for male business practitioners who must show emotional responsiveness, active listening skills, and empathetic concern (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). This tension is further complicated in the Indonesian context by collectivist cultural values (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Louie, 2012). In Javanese society, which is the main regional context of East Java in this study, and in the wider collectivist Indonesian culture, social interaction is regulated by basic cultural imperatives of the maintenance of interpersonal harmony (*rukun*), politeness (*kesopanan*), indirect communication, and *mutual consideration (ewuh pakewuh)* (Geertz, 1961; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Louie, 2012). Interpersonal harmony (*rukun*), politeness, indirect communication, and emotional control are of great importance in Indonesian society. Men are expected to be in control of their emotions and keep their composure while maintaining social harmony and respect. Such cultural expectations produce a distinctive form of collectivist masculinity; male student entrepreneurs have to negotiate masculine composure and the empathetic communication and relational warmth required by digital clients. Such negotiations can be difficult at times when entrepreneurs never meet their clients in person but only communicate by text.

Gender studies have demonstrated that entrepreneurial communication is not a gender-neutral managerial competence. Rather it is a gendered relational practice where identity, power and professional legitimacy are continuously negotiated (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & Swail, 2014). Client complaints, negotiating revisions, or defusing conflicts create internal identity tensions for male student entrepreneurs. For example, when required to apologize, soften their tone of voice or accommodate a client's emotions, male entrepreneurs must reconcile the conflict between a defensive masculine ego and the need to maintain client trust (Seidler, 2006). Generative artificial intelligence.

Theoretically, navigating these interactional frictions requires male entrepreneurs to engage in an intensive process of social learning, involving emotional self-regulation and identity reflection (Bandura, 1977; Down & Warren, 2008), involving emotional regulation and reflection upon identity, to deal with tensions with clients. This communicative learning is intrinsically social and gendered, as entrepreneurs are always observing, assessing, and adjusting their interpersonal

communication strategies based on feedback from clients and interactions with peers. In Indonesian collective culture, which values social harmony (rukun), male student entrepreneurs are faced with the dilemma of balancing contradictory expectations: maintaining masculine authority while also showing the relational empathy necessary for their work in the digital services sector. Moreover, the social learning process is no longer confined to human modeling in today's digital service ecosystems. There is emerging evidence that novice entrepreneurs are increasingly relying on Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (e.g., conversational AI models) as non-human dialog proxies to simulate client interactions, experiment with polite phrasing, and internalize low-stakes emotional regulation routines before communicating with clients (Bandura, 1977; Down & Warren, 2008).

The existing literature on entrepreneurship has focused extensively on communication skills, managerial competencies, and business networks. But previous studies show three main limitations, namely: (1) instrumental/technical bias. The main body of literature treats entrepreneurial communication almost exclusively as a technical managerial instrument and does not consider how communication practices are influenced by gender and mediated by emotional labor (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2013), and (2) a lack of focus on men's transformation. Most gender research focuses on female entrepreneurs and structural barriers, whilst empirical attention to how male entrepreneurs experience and adapt to changing relational demands remains very limited (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017; Hytti et al., 2023; Korede, 2024), (3) Western Context Bias. Current theoretical models are largely developed in Western individualist contexts, leading to a lack of insight into the influence of collectivist cultural norms on male entrepreneurial communication in non-Western societies (Louie, 2012). (4) Limited Exploration of Generative AI's Role in Social Learning: Although digital instruments are increasingly being adopted, there is insufficient research on the role of Generative AI as a conversational proxy in mediating emotional labor, communication modeling, and identity negotiation for young entrepreneurs.

To address this gap, this study examines how male Indonesian student entrepreneurs learn relational professionalism and negotiate masculine identity through social learning in the digital services sector. Specifically, this study addresses the following main research question: How do male Indonesian student entrepreneurs negotiate masculinity and learn relational professionalism through social learning in text-based digital service ventures, including the emerging role of Generative AI as a conversational proxy?

This study offers four key theoretical and contextual contributions, such as (1) extension of social learning theory: Extending Bandura's (1977) framework beyond the observation and imitation of behavior by demonstrating that entrepreneurial learning is an identity-based and emotionally driven process involving the negotiation of internal masculinity. This is also adapted to developments in text-based communication, which may also involve artificial intelligence as part of the digital services business ecosystem; (2) entrepreneurship as a gender-relational practice: conceptualizing the process of 'entrepreneurial becoming' (Down & Warren, 2008) as a social dynamic shaped by emotional labor and interactions with clients; (3) conceptualization of relational entrepreneurial masculinity: Investigating how male student entrepreneurs reconcile traditional masculine composure with calm assertiveness, emotional regulation, and empathetic care, characterized by calm assertiveness, emotional regulation, empathetic communication, and relational care, and (4) contextual insights into collectivist culture: Demonstrating how Indonesian cultural values (harmony and politeness) mediate modern digital communication and identity formation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Learning Theory and Entrepreneurial Becoming

Social Learning Theory (SLT) posits that human behavior, cognitive orientations, and emotional self-regulation are learned through observational learning, behavioral modeling, imitation, and social reinforcement (Bandura, 1977; Manz & Sims, 1981). In traditional entrepreneurial contexts, observational learning occurs primarily through direct human interactions, where novice entrepreneurs observe experienced mentors, senior business peers, and clients to internalize professional norms and communication standards (Holcomb et al., 2009). According to Bandura (1977), this process operates through four interdependent sub-processes: attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation. They are theorized as an identity-driven mechanism for male student entrepreneurs to negotiate traditional masculinity and learn digital emotional labor:

1. Attention Sub-process: Novice male entrepreneurs selectively attend to communicative behaviors that result in successful client outcomes or de-escalate conflict. When founders experience interactional friction (e.g., client complaints, canceled orders) in text-mediated digital service settings, they pay close attention to soft, empathetic communication cues (Cheshin et al., 2026; Holcomb et al., 2009) that are created by rigid, unemotional typing tones.
2. Retention Sub-process: Entrepreneurs store observed communicative practices in their cognition, encoding them into executable mental scripts and communication SOPs. Retention in digital contexts includes memory of polite textual phrasing, acceptable response latencies, and affective buffering strategies (Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Down & Warren, 2008).
3. Reproduction Sub-process In real-time client negotiations, entrepreneurs actively perform and tweak the stored communication scripts. For male founders, motor reproduction includes overriding defensive masculine reflexes ('fighting back' or insisting on technical authority) and translating stored empathic scripts into 'calm assertiveness' and polite text delivery (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017; Seidler, 2006).
4. Motivation Sub-process: Social and economic reinforcement mechanisms fuel the prolonged uptake of relational communication. When clients respond with greater trust, faster invoice settlements, and contract renewals, male founders receive tangible business validation, reinforcing the cognitive reframing of emotional regulation as a strategic professional asset rather than a compromise of male authority (Bandura, 1977; Zhao et al., 2025).

Entrepreneurs selectively attend to communication behaviors that confer status, maintain mental scripts of successful client interactions, replicate these practices in high-stakes negotiations, and sustain them when they are socially or commercially rewarded. But contemporary educational and sociological theorists argue that learning involves more than behavioral copy-pasting, including 'entrepreneurial becoming,' an identity-driven, reflexive process of reconstructing self-identity and professional maturity through lived social experience (Down & Warren, 2008; Illeris, 2014). In the present digital service environments this social learning process is not any more only a human-human interaction. Recent studies show that novice entrepreneurs increasingly interact with Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms (e.g., conversational AI models and text assistants) as conversational proxy (Bandura, 1977; Cheshin et al., 2026; Nature, 2024). Generative AI tools are not merely technical writing utilities, but low-stakes conversational proxies for young male entrepreneurs to simulate client interactions, test polite phrasing, defuse defensive tone, and practice digital warmth without risking public vulnerability or masculine status loss in front of real

clients (Nature, 2024; Yoo et al., 2025). Thus, social learning in digital entrepreneurship represents a hybrid observational process wherein emotional regulation and identity negotiation are mediated simultaneously by human client feedback and conversational proxy.

Student Entrepreneurship, University Incubators, and Higher Education in Indonesia

To understand the developmental trajectory of student entrepreneurs, we need to take into account the institutional and educational ecosystems in which young ventures operate. University business incubators and entrepreneurship education programs play a vital role in helping students transition from academia to the commercial world in emerging economies like Indonesia (Harness, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Indonesian higher education institutions have increasingly added experiential entrepreneurship courses, venture pitching, and business incubation services to stimulate youth entrepreneurship and reduce graduate unemployment. But the typical entrepreneurship curriculum in Indonesian universities still heavily focuses on technical execution, financial modeling, product development, and formal business plan writing, often at the expense of the interpersonal, emotional, and communicative aspects of client management (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Cope, 2005).

The empirical literature shows that mentors and lecturers at the university incubators often become important human role models in the early stages of venture creation (Holcomb et al., 2009). Incubator mentors give student founders needed space for reflection to wrestle with technical idealism and learn relational norms when they face significant client friction or breakdowns in text-based communication. Student entrepreneurs in the Indonesian higher education context are doubly pressured by academic demands and the demands of real clients under the conditions of the digital market (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Thus, university incubators are not simply technical business accelerators, but rather important social environments for young founders to obtain behavioral feedback, internalize professional etiquette, and negotiate the emotional complexities of digital service work (Harness, 2025).

Masculinity Ideologies and Emotional Restraint

Hegemonic masculinity represents the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that legitimizes male authority, emotional stoicism, and competitive dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). From a young age, men are socially conditioned to suppress their emotional vulnerability, to have a rational detachment and to portray a firm authority (Seidler, 2006). This ideology is represented in the commercial and organizational spheres by 'rational professionalism' where emotional expression is devalued as unprofessionalism, weakness or a threat to managerial authority (Bruni et al., 2004; Marlow & Swail, 2014).

To systematically understand the internal tensions that male founders experience, this study draws on the Gender Role Strain Paradigm (Levant & Richmond, 2016). The strict requirement of emotional detachment in digital service projects is at odds with customer expectations of constant emotional availability, listening and empathetic concern (Cheshin et al., 2026; Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017). When male entrepreneurs are handling customer complaints or contract negotiations, an authoritative or emotionally aloof approach often exacerbates the human conflict. Thus, male student entrepreneurs experience high levels of gender role strain, caught between socialized expectations of masculine control and market-driven needs for digital emotional labor (Korede, 2024; Levant & Richmond, 2016).

Relational Professionalism and Digital Emotional Labor

In this study, relational professionalism is conceptualized as a working definition to describe an attitude where professional competence is assessed not only by functional technical

deliverables, but primarily by the quality of interpersonal care, emotional reassurance, response promptness and trust built during the process of service delivery (Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Yoo et al., 2025). This conceptualization draws from, but explicitly extends, the seminal work of Arlie Hochschild (1983) and Amy Wharton (2009) on emotional labor. Whereas Wharton (2009) addresses the sociological dimensions of emotional labor in a general workplace context, relational professionalism explicitly defines the combination of technical skills and strategic affective warmth in online client management. The idea is based on the concept of emotional labor, which is work done to induce or suppress feelings to sustain a surface expression that creates the appropriate state of mind in others (Hochschild, 1983). In digital text-based communication, emotional labor includes strategically framing the crafting of polite phrasing, managing response times, using softening language, and validating client anxiety (Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Harness, 2025).

The emotional labor involved in text-based digital service work demands disciplined affective attunement: developing polite written phrasing, managing response latencies, employing softening linguistic markers, and validating client anxieties through written symbols alone (Cheshin et al., 2026; Nielsen et al., 2025). Because text-mediated channels lack non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions, vocal tone and body language), service providers need to actively compensate by embedding 'digital warmth' into text interactions (Cheshin et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2025).

Sociocultural context strongly modulates gender performance and business communication. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, interpersonal behavior is governed by cultural imperatives of maintaining relational harmony and avoiding overt interpersonal confrontation (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Indonesian male entrepreneurs are at the intersection of traditional patriarchal authority and collectivist courtesy. In Indonesia, not only is emotional restraint seen as a masculine virtue, but it is also a social etiquette to maintain peace in relationships (Louie, 2012). Understanding how young Indonesian men blend these cultural values with digital service demands is important contextual depth. The conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

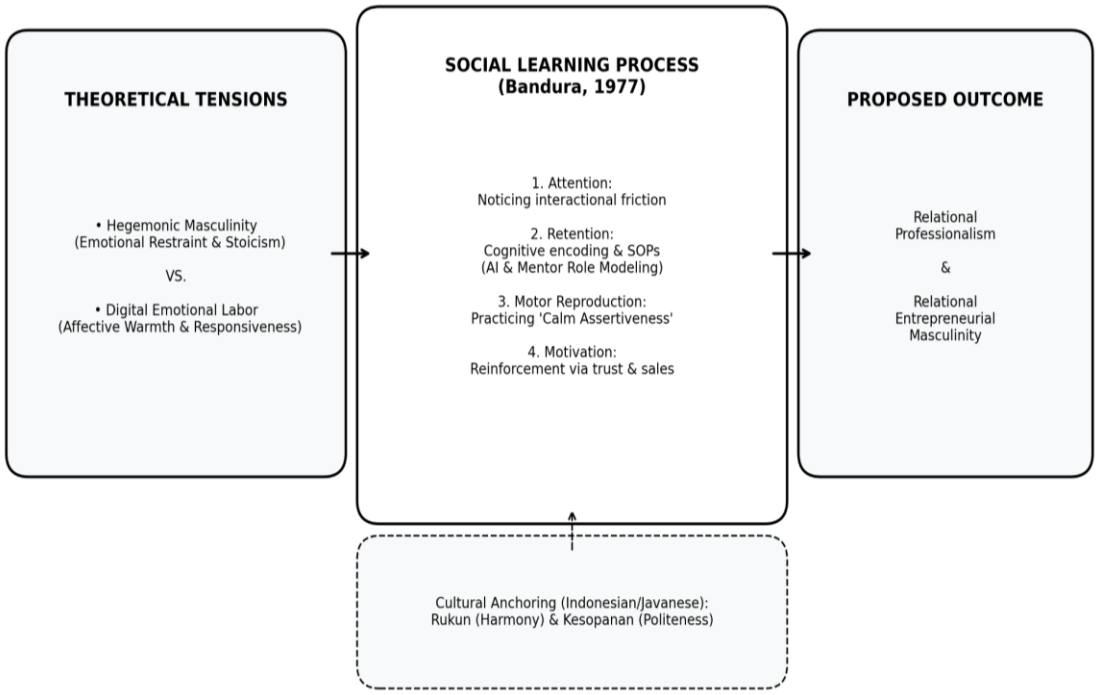


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1. conceptual framework models the adaptation process of male student entrepreneurs in bridging the theoretical tension between traditional hegemonic masculinity values (stoicism and emotional control) and the demands of the digital service sector, which requires digital emotional labor and warmth of empathy. This transformation is explained by four sub-processes of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), starting from attention to rigid communication friction, retention of friendly message scripts, motor reproduction in the form of calm assertiveness style, to motivation based on commercial reinforcement, strengthened by the moral bridge of Indonesian/Javanese collective culture (harmony and politeness) and conversational proxy Generative AI dialog, finally resulting in the formation of relational professionalism and relational entrepreneurial masculinity.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study used a qualitative interpretative research design based on a constructivist paradigm (Charmaz, 2014). The study operationalized through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Analysis followed a two-phase workflow: inductive open coding to capture raw emotional friction, followed by deductive theoretical integration linking empirical categories to Bandura's (1977) four social learning stages.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich, relevant qualitative data. The main sample consisted of eight male founders (aged 20–24, running text-based digital agencies for >=1 year) recruited from three university incubators in East Java. Data were collected (Jan–June 2025) through 60–90 min semi-structured interviews, weekly reflective journals (3 months), and mentor validation interviews. Institutional ethical clearance and informed consent obtained. NVivo 14 was used to analyze transcripts and a back-translation protocol was applied. Theoretical saturation was reached at the 6th interview, no new codes were generated from the 7th and 8th interviews.

Table 1. summarizes the demographic and venture profiles of the research participants

Participant Code	Participant Category	Digital Venture Sector	Venture Duration
P1 / P1-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Digital Creative Media	2 Years
P2 / P2-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Freelance Web Design	1 Year
P3 / P3-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Social Media Agency	3 Years
P4 / P4-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Digital Marketing Services	2 Years
P5 / P5-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Web & Software Development	2 Years
P6 / P6-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Video Content Production	1.5 Years
P7 / P7-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	Branding & Design Agency	2.5 Years
P8 / P8-JR	Male Student Entrepreneur	SEO & Digital Consulting	1 Year
L1	Incubator Mentor / Lecturer	University Business Incubator	Mentor
L2	Incubator Mentor / Lecturer	University Business Incubator	Mentor
L3	Incubator Mentor / Lecturer	University Business Incubator	Mentor

JR: Journal Record form Student Reflective Journal
Source: Empirical data collected by authors (2025).

Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, qualitative reflective journals, and mentor observations. In-depth interviews with students explored their experiences communicating with clients, conflict scenarios, emotional reactions in negotiations, and views of professional male identity. Student entrepreneurs' reflective journals offered raw, real-time documentation of emotional distress, ego struggles, and communicative adaptations after difficult client encounters. Interviews with lecturers provided external observational validation of students' interpersonal maturity and development trajectories over time.

Data were analyzed systematically using an iterative, constructivist thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic workflow was conducted in four rigorous stages: (1) Open Coding, line-by-line, to extract raw emotional expressions, interactional friction, and communication habits; (2) Axial Coding, to group open codes into higher-order categories such as ego defensiveness, empathy awkwardness, emotional regulation, and digital warmth adaptation; (3) Selective Coding, to build central interpretive themes connecting social learning to masculinity negotiation; and (4) Theoretical Integration, to connect empirical categories to Social Learning Theory and gender literature.

Qualitative data were managed using Microsoft Excel and processed with the assistance of NotebookLM (Google) as a grounded analytical tool for document querying and preliminary code verification. Because NotebookLM operates strictly on uploaded source documents, it provided verifiable citation points back to the raw anonymized transcripts. All final themes, node hierarchies, and interpretive categories were independently synthesized and validated by the researchers following Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework.

Trustworthiness was achieved through rigorous qualitative safeguards: (1) data triangulation between student interviews, reflective journals, and lecturer perspectives; (2) iterative comparative analysis to verify consistency across transcripts; (3) researcher reflexivity to reduce subjective bias in relation to the gender norms; and (4) theoretical saturation to ensure that sampling continued until no new conceptual dimensions or thematic insight were identified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of the study suggest that the development of relational professionalism among the Indonesian male student entrepreneurs is an identity-driven and emotionally mediated social learning process. This move from traditional masculine emotional restraint to client-centered relational communication is not simply the acquisition of tactical business skills but rather a broad reconstruction of entrepreneurial self-identity. The findings, based on systematic open, axial and selective coding of eight male student entrepreneurs, three supervising university lecturers, and eight reflective journal sets, are structured around six key thematic dimensions that correspond to an extended model of Social Learning Theory.

Theme 1: Recognizing the Relational Limits of Masculine Emotional Restraint

Empirical data demonstrate that student founders entered the digital entrepreneurship context with strongly internalized ideals of traditional masculine communication. In this baseline orientation, professional competence was defined by technical efficiency, directness ('straight to the point', '*ceplas-ceplos*'), formal authority, and emotional detachment. Participants' managerial legitimacy was founded on technical superiority and rational control, and emotional expression or soft communication could be interpreted as signs of weakness or unprofessionalism.

"*As long as the work gets done... I focused purely on technical execution and solutions. As a CEO, I felt I had to look firm, decisive, and confident in front of people.*" (P1, Digital Creative Media)

"Proper communication means being logical, technical, direct, "ceplas-ceplos," and straightforward. Being firm and holding onto technical idealism is what being professional means." (P2, Freelance Web Design)

For student founders who provided digital services via text, however, this rigid, task-oriented style of communication soon led to relational friction. Clients perceived the brief, direct, or unemotional messages as blunt, dismissive or arrogant because text-mediated channels (such as WhatsApp, email, and social media messaging) lack nonverbal cues. This led to a critical juncture, coded as "Communication Failure Awareness" in open coding, where participants realized that technical execution alone cannot sustain client satisfaction.

"Service businesses often collapse because of poor communication... text chat easily triggers misunderstandings. Just one wrong typing tone on WhatsApp can be misinterpreted, leading to severe client complaints." (P1, Digital Creative Media)

"My stiff, overly direct communication style was often considered 'weird' or stubborn. Clients responded with a defensive tone and started distancing themselves from working with me." (P2-JR, Freelance Web Design)

Through these critical incidents, student entrepreneurs entered the Attention stage of social learning. They began observing that client satisfaction in digital services hinges on emotional comfort, psychological safety, and relational reassurance rather than purely technical deliverables.

"Clients want more than just a vendor who 'can execute work'; they want someone who is pleasant to talk to and makes them feel reassured." (P1, Digital Creative Media)

"People want to be listened to and feel comfortable. Clients need more than just technical solutions; they also need emotional reassurance. (P3, Social Media Agency)

This baseline rigidity has been confirmed by university mentors who acknowledged that male student entrepreneurs often find it difficult to detach themselves from their communication until a reality check through market feedback.

"These male students usually start out very stiff and task-oriented in communication. They think if the final video quality is great, the client will automatically be happy. But in real business, they are shocked to learn that rudeness or a cold typing tone can cancel an entire project." (L1, Incubator Mentor)

The student founders became strategically aware of relational communication and repositioned interpersonal sensitivity as not a soft personal trait but as vital strategic capital necessary for client retention and business sustainability.

Theme 2: Entrepreneurial interaction: Negotiating masculinity & empathy

Understanding the need for empathic communication did not result in an immediate and

frictionless change in behavior. Instead, it produced acute internal identity tension—an emergent extension of Social Learning Theory where behavioral adaptation is mediated by gender identity negotiation. When faced with client complaints or revisions, the participants' first instinct was ego defensiveness, driven by masculine pride and a desire to maintain rational dominance.

> *"If a design was bad, I used to tell them directly without filtering. I felt their sensitive emotional state was their problem. My male ego was definitely bruised when a client complained."* (P3, Social Media Agency)

> *"My ego was immediately defensive... I hated feeling like I was 'losing' or being proven wrong in front of others. When blamed, my instant reflex was to fight back to defend myself."* (P4, Digital Marketing Services)

Furthermore, the use of soft empathic communication language resulted in an identity dissonance that the participants referred to as 'Empathy Awkwardness' and 'Fear of Masculinity Loss.' They considered softening the tone of the digital chat, validating the client's frustration, or offering formal apologies to be unnatural, subordinate, or threatening to their masculine self-image.

> *"At first, it felt really awkward to speak softly, validate their frustration, or apologize. I felt like, "Hey, this isn't my masculine self at all.' ' I used to think apologizing or being too soft made us look weak."* (P3, Social Media Agency)

> *"It felt super awkward and unnatural. I was terrified of losing my masculine edge in front of the client if I yielded too much."* (P4, Digital Marketing Services)

This identity strain was compounded by social anxiety and mutual consideration (ewuh pakewuh) in collectivist Javanese culture. In dealing with high-profile clients, the participants felt panicky, caught between masculine defensive impulses and cultural demands for social harmony ('rukun'). But the business world required survival, and that led to a cognitive shift. Student entrepreneurs began to redefine masculinity: controlling one's ego and being able to stay calm under pressure was a higher form of male maturity and professional strength than aggressive self-defense.

> *"Ego doesn't generate revenue. Subduing masculine ego to listen to the client is a highly profitable strategic investment."* (P8, SEO & Digital Consulting)

> *"Yielding and showing empathy doesn't mean I am losing my masculinity or becoming weak. Yielding is a strategy to win the long-term relationship."* (P4-JR, Digital Marketing Services)

> *"Drop the Pride, Raise Flexibility [Gengsi Turun, Fleksibilitas Naik]. Yielding is not losing, but humbling oneself to serve. Mentors constantly remind them: Win the Contract, Not the Argument."* (L1, Incubator Mentor)

Theme 3: Learning relational emotional practices & AI role modeling

To bridge the gap between intent and execution during the retention stage, participants developed concrete emotional regulation routines and cognitive behavioral scripts. To prevent impulsive defensive replies when receiving aggressive client messages, student founders

implemented tactical pause rules, such as taking a three-second deep breath or setting their phones aside for 3 to 10 minutes before responding.

> "*I put my phone down for 2 to 3 minutes... I forbid myself from typing a response while angry. I set up a 'Mental SOP' in my head.* (P4, Digital Marketing Services)

> *"I use a 3-second pause rule... calming myself down first before typing back to a frustrated client."* (P5, Web & Software Development)

Participants also learned 'Digital Warmth Adaptation,' which teaches how to use affective symbols in text-based digital messages, such as polite greetings, softening emojis, and structured digital etiquette, to build interpersonal rapport.

> *"I deliberately insert softening emojis like 🙏 (P4 put emoji picture in Reflective Journal) or 👍 (P4 put emoji picture in Reflective Journal) and warm greetings. I learned that how you type a message dictates whether communication feels warm or cold."* (P4-JR, Digital Marketing Services)

Importantly, the empirical data reveal an emergent theoretical finding regarding observational learning in digital environments: AI-mediated social learning. Polite, non-defensive communication scripts were not only developed by student entrepreneurs based on human role models (e.g. university lecturers or senior peers). Instead, they actively utilized generative artificial intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT and Gemini AI) as conversational proxies. Founders used AI platforms to simulate client interactions, test different text phrasings, de-escalate defensive tone and create polite digital response templates.

> *"I learned to build this SOP by asking ChatGPT or Gemini AI. I ask AI to draft a polite, calm response to a client complaint, and then I adapt it into my words."* (P3-JR, Social Media Agency)

> *"I also use ChatGPT to figure out how to explain technical issues to clients without sounding emotional or stiff."* (P5, Web & Software Development)

> *"I like asking ChatGPT to refine my wording so I don't sound aggressive, and then I confirm the draft with my university incubator mentor."* (P6, Video Content Production)

> *"They actually use ChatGPT templates to learn digital appropriateness and polite phrasing. AI acts as a digital mirror for them."* (L3, Incubator Mentor)

Some participants (P3, P5, P6, and L3) reported use of generative AI as an auxiliary text-refinement tool. While not universal across all founders, this practice demonstrates an emerging conversational proxy during the retention stage. Thus, generative AI provided a safe, low-stakes cognitive laboratory for male student entrepreneurs to practice soft, empathic communication without feeling vulnerable or losing masculine status in front of peers, thereby facilitating the transition toward relational competence. The operationalization of generative AI in this study serves as a 'digital sandbox' and text-refinement mechanism rather than a total replacement for human social agents. For instance, student entrepreneurs utilized AI to translate technical complexity into soft relational messages and to draft initial responses to client complaints before

adapting them into personal SOPs (e.g., P3-JR; P5). Furthermore, as observed by incubator mentors, AI served as a 'digital mirror' allowing founders to reflect on and de-escalate defensive communication tones in a low-stakes environment prior to seeking human mentor validation (P6; L3).

Theme 4: Performing Relational Professionalism

In the reproduction stage of social learning, student entrepreneurs translated retained emotional scripts into active behavioral performance during daily client interactions. This performance was characterized by a shift from solution-first dominance to listening-centered communication.

> *"I start by calming them down... listening fully without interrupting. I say, "I'm truly sorry for the inconvenience, Sir."* (P7, Branding & Design Agency)

> *"I say, 'I understand you must be tired and stressed about this deadline'... validating their feelings before explaining technical fixes."* (P5, Web & Software Development)

Founders developed 'Relational Assertiveness,' a healthy communication style that is firm on scope and technical standards but soft and respectful in interpersonal delivery ('*tegas tapi lembut*'). They also set firm professional emotional boundaries, learning to compartmentalize emotions to keep frustrations within the team from affecting client interactions.

> *"I lock away my frustration tightly. Internal team issues and client service belong in two completely separate rooms. In front of the client, we present a unified, calm professional front."* (P6, Video Content Production)

> *"I integrate my natural assertiveness with warm delivery. Yielding for the sake of team unity and client relationship integrity."* (P6-JR, Video Content Production)

Theme 5: Reinforcement through Entrepreneurial Relationships

Powerful social, economic, and reputational reinforcement mechanisms in the entrepreneurial environment sustained the persistence of relational communication practices. Positive client responses served as immediate social reinforcement, rapidly softening aggressive client tone and building interpersonal trust.

> *"Panicked, angry clients softened immediately when sent warm, empathic messages. Their respect for us grew, final payments were released without hassle, and they renewed monthly retainer contracts."* (P3, Social Media Agency)

> *"Clients relaxed and fully trusted our technical recommendations. Their trust index skyrocketed."* (P4-JR, Digital Marketing Services)

Economic reinforcement provided definitive validation. Relational professionalism directly translated into smooth invoice payments, contract renewals, and repeat orders, proving to male founders that emotional labor yields tangible commercial returns.

> *"Final invoice payments were cleared effortlessly, and we secured repeat orders for three consecutive tournament contracts. The revenue kept flowing!"* (P5, Web & Software

Development)

"The most valuable currency in service businesses is digital politeness and empathy. Repeat orders and client referrals are real proof." (L2, Mentor)

The transformation was further stabilized through reputational reinforcement, as student founders were perceived by university mentors and industry clients as mature, reliable young professionals.

Theme 6: Becoming Relationally Professional Men & Conceptual Model

The final motivation stage was characterized by a constant social reinforcement that led to the internalization of empathy and the emergence of a reconstructed masculine identity: relational entrepreneurial masculinity. Student entrepreneurs have radically rethought masculinity, no longer linking emotional control and domination with strength. Instead, they began to define male maturity as emotional self-regulation, calm assertiveness, patience, and relational responsibility.

"Empathy is not a weakness. Empathy is the ultimate power. True male maturity and professionalism is not about being the loudest or most dominant guy in the room but being able to stay calm, control your temper, and make others feel comfortable. (P3-JR, Social Media Agency)

Personable, patient face-to-face communication is a valuable commodity in business, not a masculine defect. "That shows a new level of personal maturity. (P6, Video content creation)

Their male ego has been re-defined. They didn't lose their manhood; they gained mature manhood, a calm, patient, and relationally professional manhood." (L2, Mentor)

Discussion

The empirical results contribute to the academic understanding of the intersection of social learning theory, gendered entrepreneurship, digital emotional labor, and collectivist culture. First, this study extends Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that in entrepreneurial settings, observational learning is not a linear, purely cognitive-behavioral process. Rather it is mediated by internal gender identity negotiation and extended through conversational proxy. Generative AI tools serve as interactive conversational proxies for male entrepreneurs to assist them in bridging cognitive dissonance, practicing digital warmth, and internalizing soft relational scripts.

Second, the findings add to gendered entrepreneurship literature (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & Swail, 2014) by showing that masculinity is not fixed or inherently antithetical to relational care. As opposed to dominant narratives of heroic, individualist masculinity (Bruni et al., 2004), digital service venture male founders need to reconfigure their gender performance, forging a 'Relational Entrepreneurial Masculinity,' a mature identity that marries technical assertiveness with emotional adaptability.

Third, the study adds to digital emotional labor scholarship (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 2009; Cheshin et al., 2026) by demonstrating how text-based digital work requires affective attunement. Student entrepreneurs believe that digital warmth, speed of response, and textual politeness are critical strategic assets. Finally, this transformation is grounded on javanese collectivist culture (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Louie, 2012). Cultural values of social

harmony ('rukun'), politeness, and mutual consideration (ewuh pakewuh) provide strong cultural legitimacy for male emotional moderation, enabling young men to adopt relational empathy not as a capitulation of authority, but as a dignified expression of cultural wisdom and professional leadership.

The empirical results of this study describe a complex and transformative journey, in which male student entrepreneurs in Indonesia gradually reconstruct their initial rigid masculine communication orientation to a highly adaptive relational professionalism. This discussion expands four analytical pillars linking our field data to literature in communication sociology, gender studies, and organizational behavior so as to provide a rigorous theoretical synthesis.

This study shows that entrepreneurial communication in digital service ventures is not just a neutral, technical management skill but a gendered relational practice where professional authority and male identity are constantly negotiated (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Bruni et al., 2004). Traditional entrepreneurial narratives have long glorified a heroic, individualistic masculinity based on dominance, independence, emotional detachment, and rationality in problem-solving (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). But for the delivery of digital services in text, functional execution is not sufficient. Client satisfaction and retention depends on psychological comfort, affective responsiveness, and relational attentiveness (Cope, 2005; Harness, 2025). When critical communication friction happens (angry client complaints, lost contracts, etc.), it creates a disorienting dilemma that destroys the effectiveness of blunt, unemotional masculine communication.

The findings are structured around six key thematic dimensions that correspond to an extended model of Social Learning Theory, based on the systematic open, axial and selective coding of eight male student entrepreneurs, three supervising university lecturers, and eight reflective journal sets. Figure 2: Authors' Conceptual Model mapping the six empirical themes onto Bandura's stages. Table 2: Qualitative Coding Matrix showing the analytical progression from open codes to categories and final themes.

Table 2. Qualitative Coding Matrix: Progression from Open Codes to Final Themes

Bandura's Learning Stage	**Representative Open Codes (Empirical Data Snippets)**	**Axial Categories (Higher-Order Concepts)**	**Final Empirical Themes**
Stage 1: Attention	• "Purely focused on technical execution & solutions" • "Direct, 'ceplas-ceplos,' and straightforward style" • "Wrong typing tone on WhatsApp triggers severe complaints" • "Stiff communication style led to client defensive tone"	• Baseline Masculine Restraint & Directness • Communication Failure Awareness	**Theme 1: Recognizing the Relational Limits of Masculine Emotional Restraint**

Bandura's Learning Stage	Representative Open Codes (Empirical Data Snippets)	Axial Categories (Higher-Order Concepts)	Final Empirical Themes
Identity Negotiation (Strain)	• "Male ego was bruised when the client complained." • "Instant reflex was to fight back to defend myself." • "Terrified of losing masculine edge / looking weak" • "Gengsi Turun, Fleksibilitas Naik (Drop Pride, Raise Flexibility)"	• Defensive Male Ego & Pride • Identity Dissonance & Cultural Reconciliation	**Theme 2: Entrepreneurial Interaction: Negotiating Masculinity & Empathy**
Stage 2: Retention	• "3-second pause rule / 3-minute mental SOP before replying" • "Inserting softening emojis and warm greetings" • "Asking ChatGPT/Gemini AI to draft polite, calm responses" • "AI acts as a digital mirror to refine wording without aggression"	• Tactical Pause & Self-Regulation Routines • Digital Warmth Adaptation • Generative AI Dialog Modeling	**Theme 3: Learning Relational Emotional Practices & AI Role Modeling**
Stage 3: Motor Reproduction	• "Listening fully without interrupting, validating client feelings" • "Tegas tapi lembut (firm on scope, soft on delivery)" • "Locking away internal team frustration; separate rooms"	• Active Empathic Listening • Relational Assertiveness • Emotional Compartmentalization	**Theme 4: Performing Relational Professionalism**

Bandura's Learning Stage	Representative Open Codes (Empirical Data Snippets)	Axial Categories (Higher-Order Concepts)	Final Empirical Themes
Stage 4: Motivation (External)	• "Panicked, angry clients softened immediately." • "Final invoice payments cleared effortlessly; repeat contracts" • "Repeat orders and referrals are real proof of digital politeness."	• Interpersonal Trust Building • Economic & Commercial Reinforcement • Reputational Validation	**Theme 5: Reinforcement through Entrepreneurial Relationships**
Stage 4: Motivation (Internalized)	• "Empathy is not weakness; empathy is ultimate power" • "Yielding for long-term relationship is a high-yield investment." • "Redefined male ego: calm, patient, relationally mature manhood"	• Internalized Emotional Maturity • Relational Entrepreneurial Masculinity Reconstruction	**Theme 6: Becoming Relationally Professional Men**

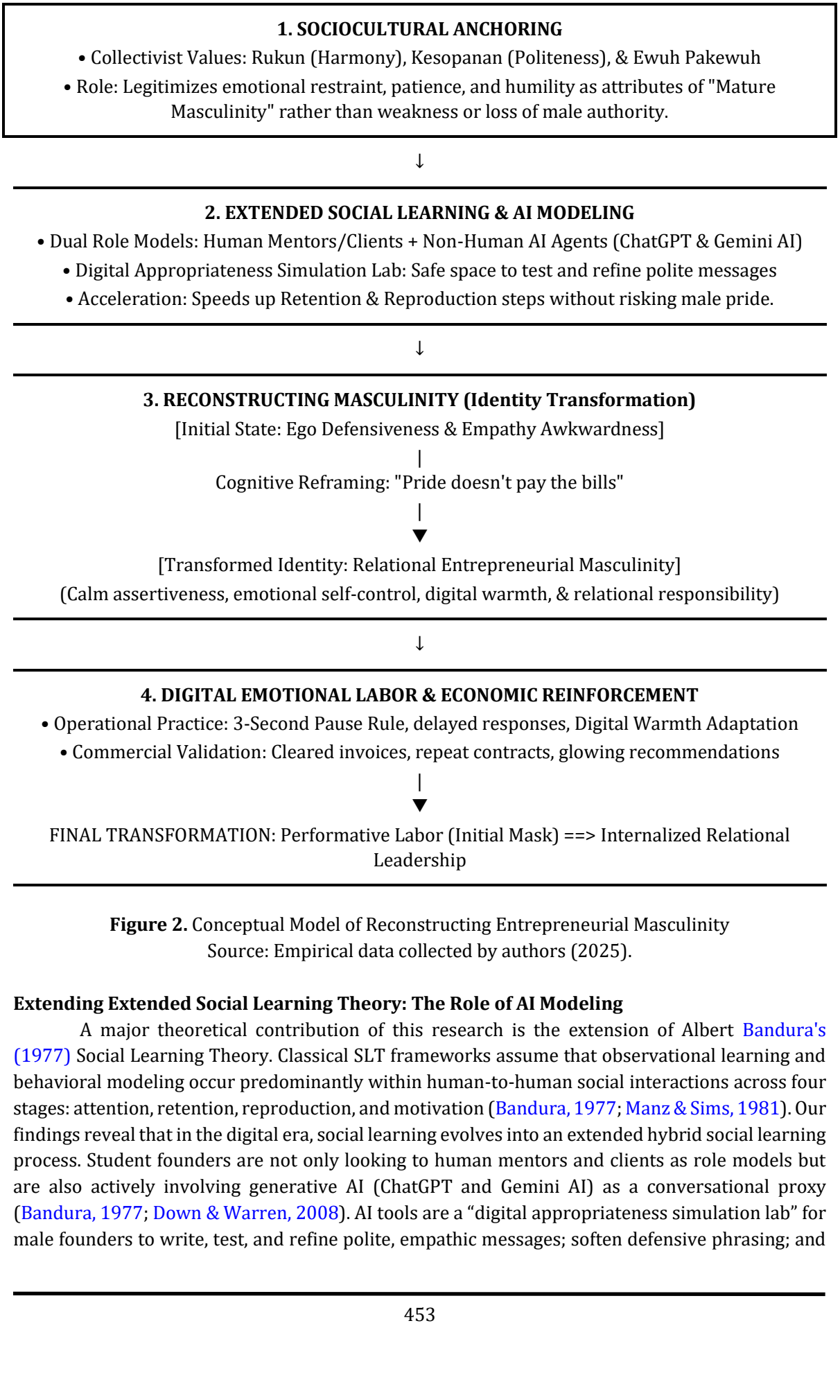


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Reconstructing Entrepreneurial Masculinity
Source: Empirical data collected by authors (2025).

Extending Extended Social Learning Theory: The Role of AI Modeling

A major theoretical contribution of this research is the extension of Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. Classical SLT frameworks assume that observational learning and behavioral modeling occur predominantly within human-to-human social interactions across four stages: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977; Manz & Sims, 1981). Our findings reveal that in the digital era, social learning evolves into an extended hybrid social learning process. Student founders are not only looking to human mentors and clients as role models but are also actively involving generative AI (ChatGPT and Gemini AI) as a conversational proxy (Bandura, 1977; Down & Warren, 2008). AI tools are a “digital appropriateness simulation lab” for male founders to write, test, and refine polite, empathic messages; soften defensive phrasing; and

internalize mental SOPs before sending to real clients. Such AI-mediated modeling speeds up the steps of retention and reproduction without threatening masculine pride or social awkwardness. Participants felt that relational communication improved rapport with clients and linked these improvements to prompt payments of invoices and contract renewals.

Reconstructing Masculinity: From Ego Defensiveness to Relational Masculinity

This study contributes to gender scholarship by demonstrating that entrepreneurial masculinity is dynamic, fluid, and malleable (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017; Korede, 2024). When they first met client friction, the male founders felt ego defensiveness and empathy awkwardness. To apologize or to yield would threaten their male authority (Seidler, 2006). Iterative interactions led founders to cognitive reframing: "Pride doesn't pay the bills." Compromising ego for client rapport is a high-yield strategic investment. Most importantly, founders did not abandon their masculinity; they reconstituted it into what we call relational entrepreneurial masculinity, a mature identity combining calm assertiveness, emotional self-control, digital warmth, and relational responsibility.

Digital Emotional Labor & Economic Reinforcement

Operationally, this identity reconstruction relies on disciplined digital emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 2009; Cheshin et al., 2026). In the absence of physical nonverbal cues, founders developed structured self-regulation routines, including the 3-Second Pause Rule, delayed response strategies, and Digital Warmth Adaptation using polite greetings and softening emojis (Nielsen et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). While initially performed as an artificial 'mask', positive entrepreneurial reinforcement, such as cleared invoices, monthly repeat contracts, and glowing client recommendations, validated the commercial efficacy of empathic communication (Zhao et al., 2025). Over time, performative emotional labor transformed into habitual, ongoing identity reconstruction.

Sociocultural anchoring: Collectivist Indonesian values

This identity transformation is powerfully catalyzed and legitimized by Indonesian collectivist cultural values (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Louie, 2012). Unlike individualist Western paradigms that often frame empathy as antithetical to male toughness, Indonesian cultural principles instead emphasize interpersonal harmony (*rukun*), politeness (*kesopanan*), and mutual consideration (*ewuh pakewuh*). Specifically, these values include interpersonal harmony (*rukun*), politeness (*kesopanan*), and mutual consideration (*ewuh pakewuh*). It provides a legitimate moral foundation for men to exercise emotional restraint and humility. In Indonesian society, a man who controls his temper, shows patience, and preserves social harmony is honored as a wise, mature man (mature masculinity). Thus, local cultural norms bridge the gap between traditional male ego and modern client-centered digital service expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesian male student entrepreneurs learn relational professionalism through an extended social learning process that transforms both their communication practices and their masculine identities. Operating digital service ventures forces young male founders to transcend the relational inadequacies of traditional masculine emotional restraint. Through iterative encounters with clients, conflict resolution and internal identity negotiation, founders learn to regulate emotional responses, engage in empathic communication and practice digital warmth. This change is supported by positive client relations and commercial sustainability. It results in relational entrepreneurial masculinity, a mature, emotionally regulated,

and relationally responsible form of male business leadership.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the literature on gender, entrepreneurship, and organizational learning in four major ways. (1) Extending Social Learning Theory Beyond Behavior: The study extends the framework and offers insights into how Bandura's (1977) framework can be extended to encompass internal identity work and conversational proxy through generative AI tools; it is deeply mediated by internal identity work, emotional negotiation, and reflective self-reconstruction. (2) Conceptualizing Communication as Gendered Identity Work: It shifts the perspective on entrepreneurial communication from a neutral managerial skill to a gendered relational practice where professional authority and male identity are continuously negotiated. (3) Formulating Relational Entrepreneurial Masculinity: The study introduces a novel theoretical construct that articulates how male entrepreneurs integrate emotional regulation, calm assertiveness, empathic care, and relational responsibility into business leadership; and (4) Contextualizing Gendered Entrepreneurship in Asia: It enriches global gender research by detailing how collectivist cultural ideals of harmony and politeness intersect with digital service demands to shape non-Western entrepreneurial masculinities.

Practical Implications

The findings have practical consequences for university incubators, business educators, and student venture mentors: (1) Curriculum Reform: Entrepreneurship programs at universities should go beyond technical pitching and financial modeling to include formal instruction in relational communication, managing client emotions, and internet etiquette; (2) Gender-Sensitive Mentorship: Venture incubators should employ gender-sensitive mentoring that positions emotional regulation, active listening, and empathy as core business skills, rather than “soft” add-on skills; and (3) Digital Service Toolkits: Young founders want realistic frameworks to manage client expectations in digital environments, resolve text-based issues, and maintain such things as the 3-second tactical pause rule, response latency guidelines, and text-softening SOPs to manage client expectations.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study provides rich qualitative insights, but there are limitations: (1) The empirical scope is limited to eight male student founders of East Java in digital service sectors; (2) Comparative studies in broader demographics of founders were beyond the immediate scope of this study; and (3) Data collection was cross-sectional, relying on participants' retrospective accounts and 3-month incubation journal logs to examine identity transformation. Longitudinal qualitative designs can be used to examine the evolution of relational masculinity across mature venture stages, and comparative cross-cultural studies can be conducted between collectivist and individualistic economies. The impact of AI-mediated communication tools on entrepreneurial emotional labor can also be explored.

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