

## **Digital media and the cultural imaginaries of migration in the Global South**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines how digital media shape the ways international migration is imagined and valued in the Global South. It situates international migration not only as an economic decision but largely as a socially approved path toward success and status across Global South. Through digital ethnographic research, the study shows how media circulate positive images of life abroad, making migration appear desirable, achievable, and necessary. Using Nepal as a representative case, it illustrates how these imaginaries connect personal aspirations with collective expectations. Drawing on the concepts of geographical imagination and exit-voice, the analysis explains how digital media reproduce and reinforce the belief in international migration, encouraging exit over local engagement. The study suggests that digital media do more than reflect migration by actively shaping aspirations, values, and ideas of a good life in contexts of global inequality.

**Keywords:** migration imaginaries; geographical imagination; digital media; exit and voice; culture of migration; Global South; Nepal; Migration aspiration

### **Introduction**

Global South-North migration<sup>1</sup> has become central to social, economic and political change in the contemporary world. Dominant explanations often rely on push-pull frameworks, global structural asymmetries, labour dynamics, and state policy analyses. While these perspectives remain important, they tend to understate the cultural and social processes that sustain migration over time. Studies on culture of migration indicate that migration can become embedded within collective habitus, where it shapes aspirations, values, and life decisions as much as it responds to economic factors (Massey et al. 1993; Kandel and Massey 2002). Drawing on this insight, this study approaches migration not only as a response to structural

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<sup>1</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN DESA (2020), there were approximately 281 million international migrants worldwide, with a significant portion moving from Global South regions (Africa, Latin America, South Asia, etc.) to Global North countries (North America, Europe, Australia, etc.). In 2019, Europe hosted about 82 million migrants and North America about 59 million, with increasing numbers originating from Global South countries.

inequality or limited local opportunity but equally as a normative and socially validated life decisions that reflects notions of success, responsibility, and belonging.

This study examines how digital media shape the ways migration is understood, imagined, and experienced within contexts where a culture of migration is already well established. It explores how social media circulate images that help normalise migration and present it as an expected life path. The digital representations of migration both reflect existing aspirations and play an active role in shaping them. Empirically, the study draws on material from Nepal, where migration has become a part of social and economic life (Koirala, 2025). The Nepali case represents broader patterns across the Global South, where limited local opportunities, expanding transnational networks, and circulating imaginaries of a “better life” have made migration central to how many people imagine progress, possibility and future.

The study draws on a combination of digital ethnography, visual content analysis, and in-depth interviews to examine how migration is narrated and communicated in everyday life. The interview-based fieldwork was carried out in Kathmandu in March 2023 as part of my doctoral research at the University of Jyväskylä. This stage of the research focused on everyday conversations, family expectations, and the ways young people seek and share information about migration. During this period, semi-structured interviews were conducted with aspiring labour migrants, student migrants, and individuals who had chosen to stay. These interviews provided insight into how people interpret migration-related messages and how such messages influence aspirations and decisions.

The visual component of the research was conducted in Spring 2025 and extended the digital ethnographic approach. This stage involved systematic observation of online environments, including social media posts, comments, recruitment advertisements, consultancy materials, and images shared by migrants abroad. The visual content analysis focused on recurring imagery, themes, and emotional tones in these materials. Combining interviews with digital and visual analysis made it possible to trace how migration narratives circulate across both online and offline settings and how they shape shared understandings of opportunity, progress, and the idea of a better life.

The analysis draws on the concepts of geographical imagination and exit–voice as central analytical tools. The notion of geographical imagination (Fuller and Chapman 1974; Gieseeking 2017; Koirala et al., 2025) entails how people perceive and rank places according to culturally shaped understandings of opportunity, belonging, and worth. These imaginations are

influenced by media narratives and transnational connections, producing hierarchies of desirability that link migration with dignity and fulfilment. Hirschman's (1970) framework of exit and voice provides a complementary perspective for understanding how, in contexts of structural constraint and limited opportunities, migration emerges as a socially prescribed form of exit. The digital and visual media amplify this prescription by amplifying imaginaries of prosperity and freedom abroad while diminishing confidence in local participation and efforts for change.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on ideas from migration studies, anthropology, and digital media research to understand how people imagine migration and how digital media influence these imaginations. As point of departure, I view migration not only as a reaction to economic inequality but also as a social and cultural process. People make sense of migration through stories, images, and examples shared within families, communities, and online spaces. These shared ways of imagining influence how individuals and families decide whether and where to migrate and what they expect from migration.

Appadurai (1996) describes imagination as a social practice, a way through which people create possible futures beyond their immediate conditions. Building on this idea, Salazar (2011) explains migration imaginaries as shared understandings of what migration means and what it can bring. Such imaginaries could make migration appear desirable, possible, and even necessary. They connect individual hopes to broader social expectations, turning migration into a shared goal and a measure of success.

Carling's (2014) distinction between aspiration and ability can also be relevant in this process. While many people aspire to migrate, not everyone can. The ability to move depends on access to resources, networks, and opportunities. This gap between wanting and being able to migrate shapes much of the emotions of migration. In many parts of the Global South, migration is imagined not only as a way to earn a living but also as a way to gain recognition, respect, and a sense of moving forward in life.

Digital and visual media play a key role in sustaining these aspirations. Social media platforms allow people to share and consume stories about migration every day. These platforms make distant destinations visible and relatable. Watching vlogs, browsing recruitment ads, and following influencers all contribute to a shared sense that migration is both achievable and

desirable. Even for those who cannot move, these digital spaces provide a way to imagine participation in global migration.

The concept of geographical imagination (Fuller and Chapman 1974; Giesecking 2017; Koirala 2025) helps explain how people imagine and rank different places. Certain destinations, often in Europe, East Asia, or the Anglophone world, are imagined as more advanced, fair, and full of opportunity. These perceptions are shaped by class, education, and media exposure, creating a hierarchy of places where “abroad” represents progress and staying behind may indicate stagnation. As Vigh (2009) notes, people often develop a “global awareness from below,” a sense of living in a world divided between areas of opportunity and exclusion. Digital and visual media make these differences visible, strengthening the belief that migration is the way forward.

Hirschman’s (1970) framework of exit and voice offers another useful perspective. In situations where local institutions are weak and opportunities are limited, people often choose exit, leaving the country, over voice, which would mean staying to improve local conditions. In our study case of Nepal, migration has become a socially accepted form of exit. Through everyday images and online stories that highlight discipline, prosperity, and respect abroad, digital media reinforce this belief that leaving is the best alternative available.

This study brings digital media as central to how migration is imagined, justified, and experienced. By using the ideas of migration imaginaries, geographical imagination, and exit–voice, the framework explains how digital media do more than represent migration and actively shape it. Under conditions of limited opportunity, these media make migration appear as both a practical and necessary.

Building on this framework, the research asks two main questions:

1. How do digital and visual media curate and share stories and images of migration?
2. In what ways do these media reinforce a culture of migration and make exit appear more desirable than staying and engaging locally?

## **Methodology**

This study used an ethnographic approach to understand how digital and visual media shape ideas and conversations about migration in Nepal. The research combined fieldwork in physical locations with observation of online spaces, allowing an exploration of how migration is imagined, discussed, and made meaningful in everyday life. By following both local

experiences and digital practices, the study traced how images, stories, and aspirations travel between communities in Nepal and the wider world.

Fieldwork was carried out in Kathmandu, which serves as a key centre for migration-related media, consultancies, and education agencies. Studying in these settings made it possible to see how global aspirations intersect with local realities and how digital media link them together.

The fieldwork was conducted over two months in Spring 2023 and combined participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. The fieldwork focused on how young people use social media and engage with migration consultancies and peer networks to seek information and share experiences.

Alongside in-person fieldwork, a digital ethnography was carried out to follow how migration-related content circulates online. Observation was conducted on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Public posts, videos, recruitment advertisements, and influencer content were analysed to see how they portray success, mobility, and everyday life in destination countries. Comments and discussions were also studied to understand how people react to and share these narratives.

### *Visual Content Analysis*

To complement the ethnographic work, a visual content analysis was used to examine how images contribute to share ideas about migration. The materials included posters from recruitment agencies, consultancy advertisements, vlogs by migrants, and curated social media posts. The analysis looked for recurring themes such as success, independence, family responsibility, and progress. By studying these patterns, the research identified how visual media make migration appear both attractive and achievable, while also reinforcing the idea that leaving is the best way to move forward in life.

### *Interviews*

A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with different groups of participants: 15 aspiring labour migrants, 15 aspiring student migrants, and 10 non-migrants. These interviews explored how people understand migration, what they hope to gain from it, and how digital media shape their ideas. Participants were found through convenient sampling. All interviews were conducted in Nepali, translated, and transcribed to English for analysis.

### *Reflexivity and Ethics*

As a Nepali researcher who has personally experienced migration-related processes and digital environments, I approached the field with both familiarity and critical distance. This position made it easier to build trust and understand the meanings participants attached to migration, while also requiring reflection on my own assumptions. Ethical standards were followed throughout the study. All participants gave informed consent, and names have been changed to protect privacy. Online content was handled carefully to respect authorship and confidentiality. The study aimed to represent participants' experiences with sensitivity and avoid reproducing stereotypes or sensational images of

### **Findings and discussion**

The study findings indicate that digital and visual media play a central role in shaping how people in Nepal imagine migration and define what it means to live a successful life. Across recruitment materials, consultancy advertisements, and social media platforms, migration is portrayed as normal, attainable, and desirable. These media messages suggest that migrating abroad is a way to earn a better living and also a respected life choice that brings recognition and dignity. Digital media reflect people's existing aspirations as well as they produce and circulate shared ideas about what progress and success look like. By portraying migration as a pathway to self-improvement and social mobility, they turn leaving the country into a socially accepted form of exit and a valid response to limited opportunities at home.

The way destination countries are represented adds further meaning to this imagination. Countries such as Japan, Korea, Australia, the United Kingdom, and those in Europe and North America are presented as places of modernity, fairness, and reward. The cities appear clean and modern, and people there look confident and successful. Advertisements and social media posts often use bright colours, clear designs, and images of airplanes, luggage, or smiling students to create a sense of excitement and purpose. Migration is shown as a journey toward growth and respectability rather than a desperate attempt to escape hardship. Slogans such as "Dream, Believe, Succeed" and "Apply Now" transform migration into a decision that rewards ambition and hard work. These portrayals give migration a moral and emotional value, suggesting that leaving is not abandoning one's home but fulfilling responsibility to oneself and one's family. Through such messages, migration symbolizes shared social expectation and a key marker of what it means to be successful in contemporary Nepali society.

Figure 1: Recruitment and visa advertisements circulated through Nepali digital media.



### CROATIA TO GERMANY WANT TO WORK IN CROATIA?

- One Year Work Permit **VISA FROM NEPAL**
- Any ECR / ECRN Holders can apply
- Age : 20 to 55 Years
- Skilled & Unskilled jobs
- Can earn 50k to 60k + OT
- Free Accommodation

30 to 45 Days Process    NO Advance Payment  
Embassy fee by client    Low Service Charges

**UK**  
UK Visitor Visa  
Congratulations  
Mr. M. ...  
From Nepal  
for UK Visitor Visa Grant  
Nepali Citizen  
NEP TO UK  
Currently in Malta on work visa    Visa granted in 2 weeks



### Romania Work Visa Hiring from Nepal & India

**OPEN POSITIONS**

- Cleaners -10 Male/ Female
- Kitchen Helpers -10 Male/ Female
- Assistant Waiters -10 Male/ Female
- Bartenders -10 Male/ Female

12 Month Visa - 12 Months Valid  
• Travel Insurance  
• Accommodation Provided  
• Free Visa Fee  
• Free Flight to Romania  
• Free Return to Nepal  
• Free Health Insurance  
• Free Medical Checkup  
• Free Airport Transfer  
• Free Local Transport

**CONTACT US TODAY**  
• Direct Form  
• 100% Correct Form Fill-up  
• Support for Nepalis Working Abroad  
• Affordable & Fast Service

**REQUIRED DOCUMENTS**

- Old Passport Copy
- Recent Photo

### Your Gateway to Permanent Residency in Schengen Countries- Live, Work, Thrive!

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With permanent residency, you may secure your future in the nation of your dreams and open up a world of options.

- ✓ PR RENEWAL
- ✓ VISA CONSULTATION
- ✓ ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT
- ✓ APPLICATION ASSISTANCE



Figure 2: Recruitment advertisements for international study and work in Korea, Malta, Japan, France, and the United Kingdom circulating on Nepali digital platforms.



### Study in South KOREA D-4-1 Visa from Korea



### STUDY IN MALTA

NO IELTS | PTE REQUIRED

**COURSES** BUSINESS | IT | HOSPITALITY | HEALTH

**BENEFITS**

- ✓ Low Fees & Affordable Living
- ✓ Work Up to 20 Hours Weekly
- ✓ Exchange Visa - Travel Across Europe
- ✓ Permanent Residency Opportunities

INTAKE : NOVEMBER 2025

**APPLY NOW**

### STUDY IN JAPAN

NO IELTS | PTE COMPULSORY  
NO JAPANESE LANGUAGE

**BACHELORS IN**

- ✓ English Education
- ✓ Hospitality & Tourism Management
- ✓ Global Liberal Art
- ✓ International Business Management

INTAKE : OCTOBER 2025

**APPLY NOW**

### STUDY IN FRANCE

NO IELTS | PTE REQUIRED

**COURSES** BACHELOR | MBA | MIM | MSc

**BENEFITS**

- ✓ Fees from 48,000/year
- ✓ Bachelor's 2.8M+ GPA
- ✓ Master's 4.8M+
- ✓ Internships & placements
- ✓ Top universities with scholarships
- ✓ Unlimited interview prep

INTAKE : JANUARY 2026

**APPLY NOW**

### UK dream blocked by tuition cost?

We've got the fix  
before time runs out!

*Dream, Believe, Succeed*

**Apply now**

Abroad Study Connect

This visual and emotional framing also reshapes how people think about home and belonging. In most digital representations, foreign cities appear clean, organized, and full of possibility. Nepal's everyday realities are rarely shown. The local environment becomes invisible, while distant places are imagined as the only spaces where success can be achieved. Migration symbolizes a shift from a place seen as limited to one imagined as modern and rewarding. Such imagery makes migration appear both logical and inevitable, as if progress can only occur by leaving.

Social media interactions strengthen this imagination in daily life. Young people constantly encounter photos and stories of relatives or friends who have gone abroad. Images of airport departures, visa approvals, and moments of success are shared widely and repeatedly. Over time, these digital practices create a sense of shared aspiration and pressure. For many, they form a silent social rule about what it means to be ambitious and responsible. As Ramesh, a 21-year-old student preparing to apply to Japan, explained, *"My cousin is already in Japan and shares photos from his university and everyday life. If I don't apply and go, people will think I am wasting my time here."* His experience indicates how migration has become a collective measure of success and self-worth. The desire to migrate is no longer only about income or opportunity; it has become a way of proving maturity, effort, and respectability within one's family and community.

This pattern appeared consistently across participants' accounts. For many young people, migration represents far more than a search for work or income; it is a way to gain respect, independence, and a sense of progress. Anisha, a 23-year-old preparing to go to Australia, explained, *"In Nepal we only get degrees without jobs. In Australia I can study and work part-time, at least there is opportunity for that."* Dipesh, aged 22, who was aspiring to move to Europe, added, *"I see seniors posting about their life in Europe. I don't want to stay stuck here in uncertainty. I want to experience it like them"* These reflections reveal how deeply the culture of migration has become tied to ideas of personal growth and social value. Migration is no longer imagined as a temporary project or a response to crisis. It has become a way of expressing ambition and proving one's worth to family and society. Those who manage to migrate are seen as capable and forward-looking, while those who remain, as participants indicated, are often viewed as lacking motivation or courage.

Digital media have intensified this divide by creating new forms of visibility and comparison. Participants frequently described the pressure of watching others succeed abroad through social

media posts and online conversations. Many participants shared a constant fear of being left behind, a feeling that their lives were not moving forward if they stayed in Nepal. This sense of exclusion, often described in terms of FOMO or fear of missing out, was strongest among students and unemployed youth. Sita, a 20-year-old from a rural village, said, *“Most of my classmates are already abroad or preparing. Even though I never planned to go, people ask me why I am still here.”* Rajesh, a 22-year-old unemployed man from western Nepal, shared a similar feeling: *“Even though I never tried to migrate, I sometimes hear people call me lazy. They think if you don’t go abroad, you are a failure.”* Such experiences show how migration has become a shared social standard. Through digital platforms, success is constantly displayed and compared, turning the decision to stay into something that must be explained or defended.

This emotional and normative dimension of migration closely reflects Hirschman’s (1970) idea of exit and voice. In contexts where opportunities are limited and institutions are weak, people increasingly see leaving the country as the most effective way to act on their frustrations and hopes. Digital media play a key role in amplifying this orientation toward exit. They glorify the idea of departure by celebrating success stories, visa approvals, and images of a better life abroad, while rarely showing the importance of staying and working for local change. Migration is thus framed as a legitimate and rational response to structural stagnation.

However, these narratives are not entirely one-sided. Several participants were aware of the emotional and physical costs of living abroad. Returnees, such as Suman, a 27-year-old worker in Qatar, described migration as both a necessity and a sacrifice. He said, *“It’s hard in Qatar; but at least I can send money home and build a house. If I had stayed, I’d still be unemployed and a burden.”* His reflection captures the ambivalence at the heart of migration imaginaries. Migration promises freedom and progress, yet it also brings separation, hardship, and uncertainty.

These accounts point to a broader transformation in how progress and responsibility are imagined in Nepal. Migration has become a public measure of success through which personal effort, worth, and responsibility are expressed. Choosing to migrate signals ambition and worth, while staying behind often requires justification. For many young people, the decision to remain in Nepal feels like standing still while others move forward. Digital and visual media intensify this perception by constantly celebrating stories of departure and achievement abroad. They make the experiences of those who stay largely invisible. Over time, migration has shifted from being an individual aspiration to becoming a shared social norm. It now defines what it

means to be modern, responsible, and hopeful about the future, shaping both personal identities and collective expectations.

Digital media function both as mirror and as driver in culture of migration. They mirror social inequalities and aspirations that already exist, yet they also generate new forms of distinction between those who move and those who stay. Through everyday practices, these media turn global hierarchies into personal stories of progress, sacrifice, and success. Images and narratives of life abroad create emotional connections to distant places and give migration a meaning. Migration becomes framed not only as an individual goal but as a shared social project that defines belonging and modernity.

In Nepal, and across much of the Global South, this influence of digital media on migration has reshaped the imagination of a good life. The desire to migrate now carries the promise of self-realization and recognition within a global system that appears unequal yet still open to those who try. Digital and visual platforms do more than provide information about opportunities; they cultivate longing, guide aspirations, and shape how people understand themselves in relation to the wider world. By transforming migration into a marker of achievement, these media sustain the everyday logic in culture of migration and make it a central part of how people imagine their futures.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how digital and visual media shape the ways migration is imagined, discussed, and pursued in Nepal. The findings show that media representations do not merely inform people about migration; they play an active role in producing meanings, emotions, and expectations around migration. Advertisements, consultancy materials, and social media posts together build a persuasive narrative that presents migration as a normal, honourable, and necessary path. Through these everyday digital practices, migration is transformed into a shared choice that connects individual aspirations with family expectations and broader social ideals.

Digital media intensify the emotional force of migration by turning it into a visible measure of achievement. Photographs, videos, and online stories of success abroad become part of social comparison and evaluation. For many young people, these representations create both motivation and pressure. Staying behind increasingly feels like a sign of failure or passivity, while leaving signals ambition and responsibility. Migration thus becomes a keyway to express modern identity and worth in a context where local opportunities remain limited.

At the same time, the study highlights the contradictions within these imaginaries. Although digital media selectively celebrate migration as a pathway to freedom and dignity, they often silence stories of difficulty, loss, and exclusion. Not everyone who aspires to migrate can do so, and the digital visibility of success often deepens feelings of frustration among those who remain. These contradictions show that the culture of migration is sustained as much by longing and uncertainty as by achievement.

This study also points to wider patterns across the Global South. Digital and visual media have become central to how people imagine migration, opportunity, and belonging in an unequal world. They give shape to hopes and identities, turning migration into a choice that defines what it means to move forward in life. Understanding this dynamic helps explain why migration remains such a powerful social force as an economic strategy as well as shared vision of a better and meaningful future.

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