

Discourse Analysis on the Digitalization of Social Services for Overseas Filipino Workers

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Abstract

The digitalization of government services has transformed the delivery of public services by improving accessibility, efficiency, and responsiveness through information and communication technology (ICT). For Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), digital social services have become essential in accessing government assistance while residing and working abroad. However, despite the increasing adoption of digital government platforms, limited qualitative studies have explored how OFWs experience these services and perceive their effectiveness. This study examined the lived experiences of OFWs in accessing and utilizing digitalized social services and explored their perceptions regarding the improvement of ICT-enabled government service delivery. An exploratory qualitative research design employing discourse analysis was utilized. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty (20) purposively selected OFWs who had experience using digital government platforms. The interview data were analyzed through discourse analysis to identify recurring patterns and dominant themes. The findings revealed that digitalized social services improved accessibility to government programs by providing convenient online transactions, efficient document processing, and real-time communication. However, participants also identified technical difficulties, internet connectivity issues, limited digital literacy, and insufficient technical support as barriers to effective service utilization. Furthermore, participants emphasized the need for user-friendly platforms, integrated digital government services, stronger cybersecurity measures, and responsive customer support to enhance public trust and user satisfaction. The study concludes that while ICT-enabled social services have substantially improved government service delivery for OFWs, continuous investments in digital infrastructure, user-centered system design, digital inclusion, and service integration are necessary to ensure accessible, secure, and sustainable digital governance. The findings provide practical insights for policymakers and government agencies seeking to strengthen digital public service delivery for Filipino migrant workers....

Keywords discourse analysis, digital government, digitalization, ICT, Overseas Filipino Workers, public service delivery, social services.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has transformed the way governments deliver public services, enabling faster, more accessible, and citizen-centered service delivery through digital platforms. Across the world, digital government initiatives have become essential in improving efficiency, transparency, and inclusiveness in public administration. In the Philippines, government agencies have increasingly adopted digital technologies to provide online services such as passport processing, overseas employment documentation, social welfare assistance, health insurance, and social security benefits. These initiatives are particularly significant for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), whose geographical distance from the Philippines often limits their access to traditional face-to-face government services.

Overseas Filipino Workers continue to play a vital role in the Philippine economy through their substantial remittance contributions and global labor participation (Asis, 2006; Parreñas, 2001). Despite their economic importance, OFWs frequently encounter challenges in accessing government services while residing abroad. Administrative procedures, geographical constraints, varying time zones, and limited physical access to Philippine government offices often delay the delivery of essential social services. The digitalization of government services seeks to address these challenges by providing online platforms that allow OFWs to access services regardless of location, thereby promoting convenience, efficiency, and continuity of government assistance.

Digital transformation in public service delivery extends beyond simply converting manual processes into electronic systems. It also involves enhancing user experience, improving service responsiveness, increasing institutional transparency, and promoting digital inclusion among diverse populations. Various Philippine government agencies, including the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), Social Security System (SSS), Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), and the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), have introduced digital platforms to facilitate transactions, applications, membership management, and information dissemination. While these initiatives demonstrate significant progress in e-government implementation, the effectiveness of these platforms ultimately depends on how users experience and perceive the accessibility, reliability, and responsiveness of digital services.

Existing studies have extensively examined overseas migration, labor mobility, remittance behavior, and the socio-economic contributions of OFWs (Asis, 2006; Rodriguez, 2010). Other scholars have explored digital government adoption and ICT-enabled public service delivery, emphasizing improvements in efficiency and administrative performance. However, relatively few qualitative studies have examined how OFWs themselves experience digitalized social services, the challenges they encounter during online transactions, and the improvements they consider necessary for more responsive service delivery. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for strengthening digital governance initiatives that are inclusive, user-centered, and responsive to the needs of Filipino migrant workers.

Guided by the principles of digital government, ICT-enabled public service delivery, and user-centered service design, this study employs discourse analysis to examine how Overseas Filipino Workers construct and describe their experiences with digital social services. Specifically, the study explores their experiences in accessing ICT-enabled government services, identifies the barriers and enabling factors influencing digital service utilization, and examines their perceptions regarding the improvement of online social service delivery. The findings are expected to contribute to the continuous enhancement of digital government initiatives, improve the accessibility and quality of social services for OFWs, and provide practical insights for policymakers, government agencies, and future researchers working in the fields of digital governance, public administration, and information and communication technology.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design using discourse analysis to examine how Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) construct and describe their experiences in accessing and utilizing digitalized social services. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives regarding the accessibility, effectiveness, challenges, and perceived improvements of ICT-enabled government services. Discourse analysis was employed to examine the language, meanings, and shared experiences reflected in participants' accounts, allowing the researchers to identify recurring patterns that explain how digital social services are experienced and interpreted by OFWs.

2.2. Population and sampling

The study involved twenty (20) Overseas Filipino Workers currently employed or previously employed abroad. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they possessed firsthand experience in using digital government platforms and online social services provided by Philippine government agencies. Eligible participants were Filipino citizens aged 18 years or older who had utilized at least one digital government service, such as those offered by the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), Overseas Workers Welfare Administration

(OWWA), Social Security System (SSS), Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), or other government agencies providing online public services. The selected participants provided rich and information-intensive narratives that addressed the objectives of the study.

2.3. Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were aligned with the study's objectives and were designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences with digitalized social services, the challenges they encountered while accessing online government platforms, the digital features they considered beneficial, and their recommendations for improving ICT-enabled public service delivery. The semi-structured format provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while allowing the researchers to explore emerging ideas relevant to digital government and social service delivery.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
To explore the lived experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers in accessing and utilizing digitalized social services.	Can you describe your experience using digital government or social service platforms as an OFW?
	What challenges have you encountered while accessing these digital services?
	What digital features or services have been most helpful to you?
To examine OFWs' perceptions of improving ICT-enabled social services for better accessibility and user satisfaction.	What improvements should be made to digital social services for OFWs?
	How do digital social services affect your trust and satisfaction with government agencies?
	What recommendations can you provide to improve ICT-enabled social services?

2.4. Data Gathering Procedure

Participants were recruited through Overseas Filipino Worker associations, migrant support organizations, and online communities on social media platforms. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria received an invitation explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality.

Upon obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through online communication platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Messenger Video Call, depending on the participants' location and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted in English, Filipino, or a combination of both languages based on the participant's preference. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that no new insights or patterns emerged from subsequent interviews. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifiable information was removed from the interview transcripts.

2.5. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using discourse analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the participants' narratives. The researchers examined recurring patterns in language use, expressions, meanings, and descriptions related to participants' experiences with digitalized social services. Similar statements were grouped into meaningful categories, coded systematically, and interpreted to identify dominant themes corresponding to each interview question.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, coding and theme development were conducted iteratively through continuous comparison of participants' narratives. Emerging themes were reviewed and refined until they accurately represented the participants' shared experiences and perceptions. The final themes formed the basis for

interpreting how OFWs experience digital government services, perceive service quality, and recommend improvements for ICT-enabled social service delivery.

3. Results

Research Objective 1. To explore the lived experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in accessing and utilizing digitalized social services.

Question No. 1. Can you describe your experience using digital government or social service platforms as an OFW?

1.1 Convenient Access to Government Services

Seventeen (17) participants shared that digital government platforms significantly improved their access to essential social services while working abroad. Through online portals and mobile applications, they were able to process membership records, verify contributions, submit applications, and obtain important documents without personally visiting government offices. Participants emphasized that digital platforms reduced travel time, minimized administrative burdens, and enabled them to access services regardless of their country of employment.

"I can process my documents anytime without traveling to the Philippine office. Everything is much faster"

"Online services save me time and allow me to monitor my government records even while working abroad."

1.2 Efficient and Time-Saving Digital Transactions

Fourteen (14) participants described digital services as more efficient than traditional face-to-face transactions. They appreciated the availability of online appointment systems, electronic payment facilities, downloadable documents, and automated status updates. These digital features reduced waiting times and allowed participants to complete multiple government transactions within a shorter period.

"I receive updates immediately after submitting my application, so I no longer worry about the status."

"The online payment system makes processing easier because everything can be completed in one platform."

Question No. 2. What challenges have you encountered while accessing these digital services?

2.1 Technical and Connectivity Challenges

Sixteen (16) participants reported experiencing technical difficulties, including unstable internet connections, system maintenance, inaccessible websites, and occasional application errors. These issues frequently delayed transactions and required repeated attempts before successfully completing online processes.

"Sometimes the website is unavailable when I urgently need to process my documents."

"Slow internet and system maintenance often delay important transactions."

2.2 Digital Literacy and Limited User Support

Thirteen (13) participants explained that navigating digital platforms can be difficult, particularly for first-time users or older OFWs who have limited digital skills. Participants also noted delays in customer support responses and insufficient online guidance when technical problems occurred.

"Some features are confusing, especially for those who are not familiar with technology."

"It takes time before someone responds when I ask for assistance online."

Question No. 3. What digital features or services have been most helpful to you?

3.1 Online Document Processing and Account Management

Fifteen (15) participants identified online document submission, membership verification, benefit applications, and downloadable certificates as the most valuable digital services. These features simplified administrative procedures and reduced the need for physical visits to government offices.

"I can download my documents anytime without requesting printed copies."

"Checking my membership and contributions online gives me peace of mind."

3.2 Real-Time Communication and Service Updates

Twelve (12) participants appreciated receiving instant notifications, email confirmations, SMS alerts, and online announcements regarding their applications. These communication tools enabled them to remain informed throughout the processing period.

"Receiving notifications helps me know exactly what happens after submitting my application."

"Real-time updates reduce uncertainty while waiting for approval."

Research Objective 2. To examine OFWs' perceptions of improving ICT-enabled social services for better accessibility and user satisfaction.

Question No. 1. What improvements should be made to digital social services for OFWs?

2.1 User-Friendly Digital Platforms

Eighteen (18) participants recommended simplifying website interfaces, reducing unnecessary procedures, and improving navigation across digital government platforms. Participants believed that a more intuitive system would encourage greater utilization of online services.

"The websites should be easier to understand, especially for first-time users."

"Simple instructions and organized menus would make transactions much faster."

2.2 Integrated One-Stop Digital Services

Fifteen (15) participants suggested integrating multiple government services into a single digital platform. Instead of accessing separate websites for different agencies, they preferred a unified system where multiple transactions could be completed using one account.

"It would be better if all government services were available in one application."

"One login for all agencies would make everything more convenient."

Question No. 2. How do digital social services affect your trust and satisfaction with government agencies?

2.3 Transparency Promotes Public Trust

Sixteen (16) participants expressed greater trust in government agencies when digital platforms provided clear processing timelines, application tracking, and regular status updates. Transparency throughout the transaction increased confidence in the service delivery process.

"Tracking my application makes me confident that my request is being processed."

"Clear updates make government services more trustworthy."

2.4 Reliable Digital Services Improve User Satisfaction

Fourteen (14) participants indicated that reliable and responsive digital services increased their satisfaction with government agencies. Efficient systems, quick processing, and dependable online services positively influenced their overall experience.

"When everything works properly, I feel satisfied with the service."

"Reliable online platforms show that government services are improving."

Question No. 3. What recommendations can you provide to improve ICT-enabled social services?

2.5 Strengthening Digital Assistance and Technical Support

Fifteen (15) participants recommended expanding online customer support through live chat, multilingual assistance, virtual help desks, and faster response mechanisms. Immediate technical assistance was viewed as essential for resolving user concerns efficiently.

"There should always be someone available online to answer questions."

"Live chat support would solve many problems immediately."

2.6 Expanding Secure and Inclusive Digital Services

Thirteen (13) participants emphasized the importance of strengthening cybersecurity, protecting users' personal information, and making digital services more accessible to OFWs with varying levels of digital literacy. Participants also recommended continuous system improvements to ensure that services remain secure, inclusive, and responsive to users' needs.

"Our personal information should always be protected."

"Digital services should be accessible even for OFWs who are not very familiar with technology."

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) experience the digitalization of social services and how ICT-enabled government platforms influence the accessibility, efficiency, and quality of public service delivery. Participants generally perceived digital government initiatives as significant improvements over conventional face-to-face transactions, particularly in reducing geographical barriers, processing time, and administrative burdens. These findings support previous studies emphasizing that digital transformation enables governments to provide more efficient, accessible, and citizen-centered services, especially for geographically dispersed populations (OECD, 2020; United Nations, 2022).

The first research objective explored the lived experiences of OFWs in accessing and utilizing digitalized social services. Participants highlighted the convenience of online government platforms, particularly for processing documents, monitoring applications, verifying government records, and receiving real-time service updates. These experiences demonstrate how ICT has transformed public service delivery by allowing migrant workers to complete essential government transactions regardless of their physical location. The findings are consistent with Asis (2006) and Parreñas (2001), who emphasized that OFWs often experience geographical and administrative barriers when accessing government assistance. The availability of digital platforms has reduced many of these barriers by providing continuous access to government services through online technologies.

Despite these advantages, participants also identified several challenges associated with digital government services. Technical issues, unstable internet connectivity, occasional system failures, and limited digital literacy remained significant barriers to effective service utilization. Many participants explained that while digital platforms increased accessibility, difficulties navigating online systems and delays in technical assistance often discouraged users from fully utilizing available services. These findings reinforce the concept of digital inclusion, which argues that successful digital transformation requires not only technological infrastructure but also adequate user support, accessible system design, and sufficient digital competencies among citizens (United Nations, 2022). Likewise, the findings align with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which suggests that user adoption of digital systems is strongly influenced by ease of use, facilitating conditions, and available technical support (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

The second research objective examined participants' perceptions regarding improvements in ICT-enabled social services. Respondents consistently recommended simplifying digital platforms, integrating government services into a unified online system, strengthening technical assistance, and enhancing cybersecurity measures. These recommendations highlight users' expectations that digital government should not merely replicate traditional services electronically but should redesign service delivery around users' needs. Such findings are consistent with digital government principles emphasizing interoperability, user-centered design, service integration, and continuous technological innovation to improve public service quality (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018; OECD, 2020).

Participants also associated transparency and reliable online services with increased trust in government institutions. The availability of application tracking, timely notifications, and consistent communication enhanced their confidence that government agencies were efficiently processing their requests. Reliable digital platforms likewise improved overall user satisfaction by reducing uncertainty throughout administrative procedures. These findings support previous research suggesting that transparency, responsiveness, and accountability are fundamental outcomes of successful digital governance initiatives (World Bank, 2021). As governments continue expanding ICT-enabled services, maintaining system reliability and protecting users' personal information become equally important in sustaining public trust and encouraging continued utilization of digital government platforms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digitalization has substantially improved the delivery of social services for Overseas Filipino Workers by increasing accessibility, efficiency, and communication between government agencies and service users. However, the study also highlights that technological advancement alone is insufficient to achieve effective digital governance. Continuous investment in user-centered platform development, digital literacy initiatives, technical support services, cybersecurity, and integrated government systems remains necessary to ensure that ICT-enabled social services are inclusive, accessible, secure, and responsive to the diverse

needs of Filipino migrant workers. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on digital government, ICT adoption, and public service innovation by providing qualitative evidence of how OFWs experience and evaluate digitalized social service delivery in real-world contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in accessing and utilizing digitalized social services and examined their perceptions of improving ICT-enabled government service delivery. The findings revealed that digital platforms have significantly enhanced the accessibility and efficiency of social services by enabling OFWs to process documents, access government information, monitor applications, and communicate with government agencies regardless of their location. These digital services have reduced many of the geographical and administrative barriers traditionally associated with obtaining public services while working abroad.

Despite these benefits, participants identified several challenges that continue to affect the effectiveness of digital government services. Technical issues, unstable internet connectivity, limited digital literacy, and inadequate user support remain barriers to maximizing the potential of ICT-enabled public services. These findings indicate that successful digital transformation requires not only technological advancement but also user-friendly platforms, reliable technical assistance, inclusive digital policies, and continuous system improvements that address the diverse needs of OFWs.

The study also found that participants value digital government services that are transparent, responsive, secure, and integrated across multiple government agencies. Features such as real-time application tracking, online document processing, prompt notifications, and efficient customer support strengthen users' trust and satisfaction with government institutions. Furthermore, participants recommended the development of simplified interfaces, one-stop digital service platforms, enhanced cybersecurity measures, and expanded digital assistance to improve the overall quality of online public service delivery.

In conclusion, the digitalization of social services has become an important mechanism for improving public service accessibility and responsiveness for Overseas Filipino Workers. While considerable progress has been achieved, continuous investments in digital infrastructure, system integration, user-centered platform design, digital literacy initiatives, and data security are essential to ensure that ICT-enabled social services remain inclusive, efficient, and sustainable. The findings contribute to the growing literature on digital governance and public service innovation by providing empirical evidence on how OFWs experience and evaluate digitalized government services. Future studies may further examine digital service utilization across different sectors, government agencies, and migrant populations to support the continuous enhancement of ICT-driven social service delivery in the Philippines.

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