

Social Media Adoption and Labor Migrants Protection: The Case of the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs

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Abstract: The Philippines is internationally recognized as a best practice in advancing migration governance despite its complex, yet comprehensive landscape of migration policies, norms and structures, and institutions. More recently, the rise of social media has created ripples across sectors and actors due to its transformational power. The country's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) acknowledged this development and commenced its social media adoption process in 2011 and has rapidly evolved to keep up with the changing environment. Key informant interviews with officials and staff from the DFA reveal, that the agency has opened accounts in key social media platforms and that, this undertaking was positively received by its employees. According to the Mergel and Bretschneider model, it can be characterized as belonging to Level 3: Institutionalization and Consolidation upon the release of DO No. 16-2014, which prescribes "Guidelines on the Use of Social Media Use by All Units and Personnel of the DFA". The cited document laid out specific rules and regulations on key facets of social media practices, such as access, content management, personal use of SM by DFA personnel, compliance mechanism, and administrative liability. Nevertheless, the DFA's social media adoption process is still challenged by inadequate resources and lack of a central sub-office, absence of success metrics, and spurious reports.

Keywords: Digitalization, OFW protection, Philippine foreign policy, social media adoption, social media platforms

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the phenomenon of labor migration has continuously thrived in a developing country like the Philippines, so much so that a 'culture of migration' emerged and eventually penetrated the various fabrics of the nation's society (Asis, 2006). As of 2013, there are approximately around

10.2 million Filipinos living or working abroad, which roughly translates to over 10 percent of the population (Commission on Filipino Overseas, 2013). As expected, this sheer number of migrants has proven to be an indispensable factor, both positively and negatively, in the pursuit of the country's development. A group that has always been experiencing firsthand, both the triumphs and tribulations of migration, is the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

Dubbed as the "modern-day heroes" by the government, OFWs are described as regular and properly documented Filipino workers, that are temporarily residing overseas due to employment-related reasons (Asis, 2017). Data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) show, that the country deployed 2.1 million OFWs in 2016, with 1.7 million land-based workers and more than 400,000 sea-based workers (POEA, 2016). The largest chunk of land-based OFWs is in the Middle East region (i.e., over 1 million labor migrants), followed by Asia and Europe. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain are included in the top ten destination countries of OFWs. In terms of occupation, the majority of workers are engaged in elementary occupations, as demonstrated by numerous household service workers (HSWs), cleaners and helpers in various establishments (POEA, 2016).

Notably, the Philippine government has ratified international conventions and implemented several laws at the domestic level. The landmark law is Republic Act (RA) 8042, also known as, the "Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995", which mandates the preservation of rights of OFWs, safeguarding of the welfare of their families, and extension of assistance to overseas Filipinos in distress. Correspondingly, three migration authorities, among others, are at the forefront of advancing the cited objectives, namely: (i) Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA); (ii) Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA); and (iii) Department of Foreign Affairs - Office of Migrant Workers Affairs (DFA-OMWA). To directly provide assistance and other types of services to Filipinos abroad and OFWs in distress, the government has strategically established numerous Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) at different locations globally. These FSPs host three equally important sub-offices, namely: Assistance to Nationals Unit (ATNU), Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO), and Social Service Office (SSO) (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

More recently, the field of governance is being disrupted by social media as it underpins transparency and accountability, political participation, citizen coproduction, environment, peace-building, and internal governance. Moreover, social media applications are being utilized: to build virtual communities, create new relationships in the online sphere, connect people (regardless of geographical proximity), and foster different types of cultural diplomacy (Figer, 2018). However, scholars note, the attendant risks and challenges brought by social media use, such as data privacy, cyber security, identity theft, digital divide exacerbated by online-centric inequalities, and outdated, traditional attitudes of employees and culture of organizations.

As the lead agency, responsible in upholding the safety and welfare of Filipino workers overseas, further research on the social media adoption by DFA to fulfill the cited function, is justified. Thus, this paper intends to address the inquiries: "How has the DFA responded to the social media adoption process? How has it utilized social media platforms to preserve the safety and welfare of Filipino labor migrants, especially those in distress?" Organizational reforms, or lack thereof, and

changes in engagement between the cited migration agency and the Filipino migrant workers are the main topics for discourse.

Accordingly, this paper mainly describes the DFA's social media adoption process and attempts to identify its adoption level via the three-stage model proposed by Mergel and Bretschneider (2013). To attain this objective, this article is divided into five sections, namely: an overview of the DFA's institutional environment, conditions experienced by OFWs in selected Middle Eastern countries, and social media use by Filipinos overseas (Section 2); description of the overall research design and framework (Section 3); discussion on the current adoption level of the DFA (Section 4); and concluding thoughts (Section 5).

2. Review of Related Literature

The related literature in this study focuses on the following areas: (a) Protection of Rights and Promotion of the Welfare of Filipinos Overseas; (b) A Snapshot of Conditions faced by OFWs in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates; and (c) Social Media Use by Filipinos Overseas.

2.1. Protection of Rights and Promotion of the Welfare of Filipinos Overseas

Republic Act No. 7157, or The Philippine Foreign Service Act of 1991, specifies the three pillars of the country's foreign policy which must be implemented by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), in partnership with other migration institutions. Specifically, these are: i) Preservation and Enhancement of National Security; ii) Promotion and Attainment of Economic Security; and iii) Protection of the Rights and Promotion of Welfare and Interest of Filipinos Overseas. Laws and regulations related to Pillar III are of particular interest to this sub-section and will be discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

The landmark law concerning the protection of Filipino workers overseas came to fruition in 1995, due to tremendous pressure from various groups faced by the Fidel Ramos administration (1992-1998). The national plead for the signing into law of the Republic Act (RA) 8042, or the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995, stemmed from the execution of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic worker, who was accused of murdering her ward, Nicholas Huang, and another Filipina domestic worker, Delia Maga. Many Filipinos believed that Contemplacion was innocent despite the convictions. Salient provisions of RA 8042 include the establishment of information, repatriation, and reintegration services, the availability of legal assistance to Filipinos abroad as well as a witness protection program for victims of illegal recruitment, and higher penalties for illegal recruiters.

It also paved the way for the institutionalization of the Migrant Workers and Other Overseas Filipinos Resource Centers in OFW-rich locations, the creation of the Legal Assistant for Migrant Workers Affairs (currently the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs), and the setting-up of the Legal Assistance Fund. More importantly, RA 8042 required that OFWs must be only deployed to countries that comply with any of the three conditions, namely: they have the

presence of legislation protecting workers, that they are party to a bilateral agreement with the Philippines, and a signatory to multilateral conventions on migrant workers. Notably, section 29 of the said law mandated the deregulation of recruitment activities and the incremental phasing out of the POEA's regulatory functions (POEA, not dated).

The enactment of RA 9422 in 2007 amended the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 by strengthening the regulatory functions of the POEA and by repealing sections 29 and 30 of RA 8042. Consequently, the passage of RA 10022 in 2010 fortified the mechanisms concerning the protection of OFWs via the restriction of deployment only to countries that are actively undertaking steps to preserve the rights of migrants. It likewise, reaffirms the joint and several liability (JSL) principle (section 7), which permits the employee, upon return to the Philippines, to file a claim against the employer and recruitment agency through court proceedings.

Furthermore, RA 10022 is lauded for instituting the provision of mandatory insurance to all migrant workers. The recruitment agency is obliged to pay the premium to a qualified insurance company which offers coverage encompassing accidental death, natural death, permanent total disablement, repatriation costs, subsistence allowance benefits, money claims, compassionate visit, medical evaluation, and medical repatriation. The mentioned law is also credited for the establishment of the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers, which is tasked to assist returning migrants in finding appropriate employment opportunities locally and re-settling into the society (Official Gazette, 2010).

The Philippine government has also enforced various sector-specific and agency-centric regulations, to improve the existing protection system. In particular, the POEA Governing Body published the Household Service Workers (HSWs) Reform Package in 2006, which laid out a set of requirements for interested HSWs. Battistella and Asis (2011) found that some of the provisions of the package were implemented, while others were not mainstreamed. Meanwhile, RA 10801 strengthened the charter of OWWA and mandated the national government to apportion regular budget for the operations and expenses of the agency (Asis, 2017).

More recently, the Philippine government enjoined the other 163 countries in adopting the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) in Marrakech, Morocco in December 2018 (Lee-Brago, 2018). GCM is the inaugural inter-governmentally negotiated agreement encompassing the several aspects of international migration. It is a non-legally binding document which carries 23 objectives and is founded on the principles of international cooperation, national sovereignty, shared responsibilities, human rights, and rule of law (GCM, 2018).

2.2. A Snapshot of Challenges faced by OFWs in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and UAE

According to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Report to the Congress for the period January-June 2018, the majority of the Assistance-to-Nationals Fund was utilized by Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Of the PhP418.8 million disbursed during the first half of 2018, the Philippine Embassy (PE) in Kuwait used the biggest chunk, which is around PhP96.1 million, to help 14,201 OFWs. It is followed by the Riyadh PE (PhP32.6 million for 1,108 beneficiaries), the Dubai PCG (PhP29.5 million for 1,928 beneficiaries),

and the Abu Dhabi PE (PhP26.3 million for 4,575 beneficiaries). Damascus PE rounds out the top five with Jeddah PCG coming in at the sixth spot, with an ATN utilization amount of PhP17.5 million for 751 beneficiaries. Services availed by OFWs in the three countries include repatriation, welfare assistance, medical assistance, and shipment of remains.

Filipino workers in the three countries, similarly receive the largest share of the Legal Assistance Fund. The FSPs in Saudi Arabia spent the most at PhP38.6 million over the period January-June 2018, followed by the Kuwait PE (at PhP24.3 million), and the FSPs in UAE (at PhP20.4 million). OFWs in Saudi Arabia registered the largest number of criminal cases at 2,187, with Kuwait placing fourth with 199 total cases, and Abu Dhabi, UAE ranking tenth with 91 cases, during the same period. The common cases faced by Filipino migrant workers encompass: drug-related charges, immigration cases, theft, falsification of documents, immorality/love case, non-payment of loans, adultery, illegal substances, murder, and embezzlement.

At the country level, the DFA (2018) reports, that Filipino workers in Kuwait experience underpayment, delayed, or non-payment of salary, overtime and holiday pays, vacation and sick leaves, and other benefits. They are also subjected to long working hours and reduced rest hours, alleged physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, contract substitution, and poor working and living conditions (e.g., inadequate food provisions, involuntary servitude). The FSP in Kuwait responded to these problems by facilitating the Assisted Voluntary Repatriation Program (AVRP) for undocumented OFWs without detention, as well as by extending legal assistance and other welfare services to Overseas Filipinos (OFs) in distress. More recently, the accidental discovery of the remains of Joanna Demafelis, an OFW maid murdered by her employers, in February 2018 resulted in the temporary ban on deployment of labor migrants to Kuwait, two months later. This ban was lifted in May 2018, after both governments of the Philippines and Kuwait signed a memorandum of understanding on the protection of OFWs (Colcol & Bigtas, 2018).

Next, OFWs, especially household service workers, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, basically face the same issues encountered by Filipino migrant workers in Kuwait (DFA, 2018). Other challenges that are experienced by OFWs in Jeddah are maltreatment, physical abuse, sexual advances and rape by employers, lengthy detention period for Filipinos in custody, lack of medical attention by government hospitals for undocumented workers, and cumbersome procedure in repatriating runaway workers. Correspondingly, the FSP in Jeddah provided legal and counseling services to clients and assistance in filing of complaints at the Saudi Labor Courts. It has likewise, halted temporarily, the processing of documents submitted by Saudi Recruitment Agencies (SRA) that are still attending to grievances filed by OFWs. In addition, the said FSP reached out to the concerned Saudi authorities for the prompt resolution of cases involving Filipino migrant workers and fortified its partnership with the Filipino community in implementing activities which cater to OFs in distress (DFA, 2018). Detailed reports for Riyadh and Al-Khobar, both cities in Saudi Arabia, by their respective FSPs were not included in the DFA 2018 Report to Congress.

Lastly, Filipino workers in UAE, specifically in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, continue to encounter problems, such as contract substitution, non-payment, delayed, and underpayment of salary and other monetary considerations, long working hours without rest days, absence of medical and health

insurance, and harsh living conditions. They are likewise maltreated, physically, verbally, and sexually abused, exploited by illegal recruiters, mentally tortured, and falsely accused. Actions taken by the FSPs in the cited cities, include the repatriation and legal assistance to documented and undocumented workers, regular visits to various facilities, shipment of remains and personal belongings, and assistance to runaways/wards. OFWs can also participate in financial literacy and livelihood trainings, reintegration seminars, and public diplomacy campaigns organized by the ATN units in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

2.3. Social Media Use by Filipinos Overseas

Web 2.0 is a technological platform that is founded on a “simple, usable, participatory, self-service and decentralized model” and covers all types of connected devices (Zambonini, 2006). Its open nature enables the sharing of creative ideas and collaboration among individual users. O’Reilly (2005) noted that the availability and accessibility of data from multiple sources, which can be consumed, modified and updated, is guided by the Web 2.0’s “architecture of participation”. Social media builds on this platform to create different kinds of Internet-based applications, which host “media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers” (Blackshaw, 2006).

For O’Reilly (2007), social media can be defined as a combination of economic, social and technological trends grounded on the principles of open user participation and networking. Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2011), highlighted the social aspect of the said media, by identifying it as a set of online tools that are crafted to cater to social interactions. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), underlined the empowerment promise of social media to communities which can be realized through their access to user-friendly applications, that allow the establishment of linkages, exchange of data, and the co-production of content among various users. It is further depicted, as an enabler for individuals to create their public or semi-public profile in an enclosed system, compile a list of other users with a shared connection, and review their and other’s lists of connections within the bounded system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) classified six types of social media applications, namely, blogs, social networking, virtual worlds, collaborative projects, multimedia sharing services, and content syndication. Blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter) are web diaries that are regularly updated by the user, while social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) are platforms for individuals to cultivate online communities. Virtual worlds (e.g., Microsoft Flight Simulator) are venues for role-playing of real-life scenarios, involving three-dimensional characters, such as humans, landscapes, and other objects, while collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia) are those that permit a community of users to develop and modify content appropriately. Multimedia sharing services (e.g., Youtube), are sites where users can store and share files, such as videos, music, and photos while content syndication (e.g., RSS) refers to a feed which hosts updated content from social media applications.

Public sector organizations use social media to reach out to their diaspora. Salazar (2017) mentioned that the Philippine Embassy in Washington, DC developed RadyoTambuli, a mobile application, which permits users to listen to news from Philippine-based radio stations, Filipino music and language lessons and events organized by the embassy. The app has a two-way emergency

notification for Filipinos in need of assistance and it is also linked to the e-mail address and Facebook and Twitter pages of the embassy. In Tokyo, the Philippine Embassy (PE) utilized Facebook to evacuate Filipinos affected by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and meltdown at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant (GMA News Online, 2011).

The Philippine Embassy in Seoul, South Korea followed Tokyo PE's lead by utilizing social media platforms to interact with Filipino marriage migrants living with their Korean families in far-flung rural areas. This means was very useful during emergencies, such as the 2013 North Korean nuclear crisis and the 2015 Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak (Hernandez and Atienza, 2016). Social media may also be employed to “disseminate information on logistic, financial, and in-kind support from governments around the world (Hernandez and Atienza, 2016, 109).” This is evidenced by London PE's active engagement in its Facebook page, which eventually raised a total of USD119 million donations by ordinary citizens to victims of Typhoon Haiyan (McElroy, 2013).

Regarding Filipino migrant workers, they utilize social media platforms in a variety of ways. Caguio and Lomboy (2014) examined the comments on national issues by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in the Pinoy OFW Facebook Page and found that they actively express their feelings on several issues, involving the state of the government, negative traits of Filipinos (e.g., crab mentality, manana habit), positive characteristics of Filipinos (e.g., hospitality, respectfulness), religion, and Pinoy pride. McKay (2019, 43) then examined the “care-for-control exchanges between migrants and leftist activists” and discussed in detail the rise of ‘ambient surveillance’, or the “ubiquitous and middle-distance mutual observation that pervades everyday diasporic life.”

Aguirre (2014) offers an interesting perspective on the identity construction via social media of Filipinos based in New Zealand. He categorizes the strategic development of migrant identity as binary, hybrid, or essentially Filipino, by intensively perusing a Facebook account of a Filipina and a blog referred to as Ka Uro. Both accounts also contribute to the rebuilding of a better Philippines, through embodying the good qualities of a Filipino and/or undertaking initiatives to bring together the “best kinds of Filipinos” in New Zealand. Further, Figer (2018) writes that the Filipino diaspora in Japan preserve their national identities while living in the host country, by extensively engaging in two websites, namely, Timog Online and Malago network. He surmises:

“Filipino diaspora in Japan have used their facility of imagination to connect with the homeland, and in this process of imagination, became part of a larger location where they get to belong to a community or a nation, as a case in point. This in essence locates the migrant in the community, attaches family members and friends, and moulds one’s identity. Memory of place, of home, is then a significant praxis (101).”

On maintaining social relationships between migrants and their families, a study by Alampay et al. (2012) involving 308 adolescent and young children left behind by their OFW parents, reveals that children who use the internet to communicate with their parents know more about their parent/s’ lives overseas than those who did not. They also found, that the location of internet access significantly affects the level of relationship between an OFW parent and his/her child/ren. Specifically, left behind children with internet access at home, expressed that they have better knowledge of their parent/s’ lives, compared to those who use internet in public access venues (PAVs) such as

cyber-cafes. The former, similarly reported that they experience higher levels of parental monitoring than the latter.

Ariate et al. (2015) did a somewhat similar study, involving respondents in Laguna and concluded that Facebook sustains the relationship among OFW families by bridging the spatial gap between them. Respondents use the mentioned platform 1-2 hours every other day to communicate with their parents about their daily activities and/or events, mainly through chat. For Cabalquinto (2018), social media use in transnational family life has catalyzed the 'paradox of intimate connectivity'. It is because:

"Facebook use has enabled separated family members to stay intimately involved in each other's lives, and yet, at the same time, using Facebook also stirs disruptive connections and a feeling of sadness. It is by employing the coping mechanisms described here – limiting visibility of posts and suppressing emotions – that transnational family members ensure the sustenance of long-distance relationships" (259).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design as it seeks to ascertain the extent of the problem or issue by qualifying the factors and indicators needed to accomplish the cited agenda. It employs a case study approach, since the paper delves into a detailed exploration of the Department of Foreign Affairs' social media adoption process and its effects on the organization's governance system and mechanisms, with a view of safeguarding the safety and welfare of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in various locations around the world. Given the novelty of the phenomenon being analyzed (e.g., social media adoption in public sector), this study is exploratory in nature, as it tries to gain valuable insights and familiarity with the said topic, as well as identify a possible direction for future studies.

It utilized the model developed by Mergel and Bretschneider (2013), due to its focus on the changes in organizational dynamics and policies, in the adoption of social media platforms. The cited framework, also underpins the concept of institutional embeddedness throughout the process, which is a crucial element in the new institutionalism theory. Hence, it is necessary to briefly peruse the three stages of the adoption process, for social media use by public sector organizations.

The first phase is described by the presence of decentralized, informal early experimentation within their respective department or service by social media mavericks, or individuals who are familiar with technology before joining the organization or from recreational activities. Free accounts are set-up through third-party social media platforms, to bypass the established IT-related rules and regulations.

Stage 1, permits government agencies to communicate with citizens in a two-way manner, thus, the benefit of soliciting feedback from users across various experimental projects. The informal sharing of experiences and expertise across agencies catalyzes the desire for better innovations. Social media mavericks exhibit a high degree of voluntarism and coordinates with other interested parties, through the word-of-mouth. A handful of projects only succeed at this nascent point. However, the

downside of this informal, experiment-driven structure is the presence of different instantaneous experiments in potentially detached areas within organizations. There is likewise, duplication of content, weak coordination and/or branding, and disparity between official agency communication protocol and social media engagement efforts.

Stage 2, is referred to as coordinated chaos, because it concentrates on the consolidation of a wide range of social media practices, redundant social media accounts, and overlapping audiences. The lead adopters (i.e., mavericks or entrepreneurs) try to mainstream their ideas among stakeholders in the organization, to gain support from the top management. According to Mergel and Bretschneider (2013), “employees involved in social media efforts start to agree on and co-write informal standards, describe best practices to provide guidelines, and pay increased attention to their peers across government” (394).

The last stage, is the institutionalization and consolidation of behavior and norms. An outcome document, which can be expected, is an official organizational social media strategy or policy, which lays out clear guidelines and standards in social media practices as well as protocols in daily posting schedules, information-vetting, information production, and intellectual property rights. Some public sector institutions, then provide norms for the employees’ personal consumption of social media accounts, and for acceptable online etiquette of citizens when transacting with the government via social media platforms. To reflect the changes in user behavior, public sector organizations regularly update their guidelines and regulations. Phase 3, similarly underpins the embedding process of technical considerations into the institution’s structure and mechanisms.

The main methods for data gathering were key informant interviews (KIIs) and document review. Both methods are expected to yield qualitative data and information pertinent to the researcher’s area of study. The author conducted in-person interviews and e-mail correspondence with staff and officials of the DFA who occupy key positions from the Office of Strategic Communications and Research (OSCR), Office of Migrant Workers Affairs (OMWA), and Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. In particular, the KIs are as follows: three from the OSCR; three from the OUMWA and OMWA; and two from the FSPs in Saudi Arabia, and one each from Kuwait and UAE, respectively. Five were females and five were males. The key informants may be divided into two main groups, namely, KIs 1-6-HO as belonging to the Home Office, and KIs 7-10-FSP as belonging to FSPs.

At the beginning of the interview proper, a brief overview of the study, as well as its objectives was provided. It was then followed by discussions on the level and nature of social media adoption by the sub-offices, under the DFA. The interview covered questions on the institutional processes/es that has/have impeded or accelerated the adoption of social media platforms (see Appendix 1 for the guide questions). Discourses on the impact of social media platforms in upholding the rights and welfare of Filipino migrant workers, specifically household service workers, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates were similarly included. The preliminary interpretations to the responses of the participants were jotted down in the form of notes. The notes were then validated through an audio recording which was used during the interview, with consent from the participant.

To validate the data collected via KIIs, the author reviewed secondary sources such as public records, personal documents, and physical evidence. The first source, refers to official records of an organization, such as annual accomplishment reports, policy manuals, and strategic plans while the second source, covers e-mails, blogs, Facebook posts, duty logs, incident reports, and editorial articles. The last source includes artifacts such as handbooks and training materials. These materials are to be gathered through formal requests, visits to an organization's website, and/or internet downloads.

4. Assessing DFA's Social Media Adoption Level: Evidence and Analysis

KI 2-HO noted, that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) created its website as early as 1998, but only joined the social media sphere recently, upon the opening of an official DFA Facebook account (i.e., Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines) in 2012. This was followed by the rebranding of the Department's Twitter account, which was originally launched in August 2012, from the DFA Spokesperson towards the @DFAPHL handle. Hernandez and Atienza (2016) stressed that the DFA initially utilized, both social media accounts in a monologic transmission media manner - similar to Mergel's (2017) uni-linear mode of communication - to reflect its outputs, but gradually moved towards the production of original content, specifically its Twitter account.

Aside from the aforementioned social media accounts, KI 1-HO also stated that, the agency has an Instagram account (i.e., @dfaphl), which was operationalized in December 2018, and a Youtube account, which has been running since October 2011, but only posted its first audio-video presentation in January 2017. She added, that the Department owns a Flickr account (i.e., DFA Philippines), which came into fruition in July 2016. Table 1, shows the social media presence of the DFA in major social media platforms, as well as the total number of users in the Philippines as of February 2022 according to the Digital 2022 report by Hootsuite and WeAreSocial. All the interviewees from OSCR emphasized that around 90-95 percent of the queries received via DFA's social media accounts are passport-related. The remaining five to ten percent is composed of other consular-related concerns and Assistance-to-Nationals (ATN) cases.

Table 1: DFA Social Media Presence

Social Media Account*	Date opened	Total number of social media users in the Philippines (as of February 2022)	Number of followers/likes/subscribers (as of 16 June 2022)
Youtube: DFA Philippines	October 2011	56,500,000 (estimated)	9,120 followers 687,296 views
Twitter: @DFAPHL	August 2012	10,500,000 (estimated)	121,200 followers
Facebook: Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Philippines	December 2012	83,850,000 (estimated)	1,200,000 followers
Flickr: DFA Philippines	July 2016	Over 60,000,000 users monthly (estimated)	30 followers

Instagram: @dfaphl	December 2018	18,650,000 (estimated)	51,100 followers
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* OSCR handles and operates all accounts.

In the case of Posts abroad, KI 4-HO mentioned that, all Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) were required by Secretary Allan Peter S. Cayetano (2017-2018), to open and operate their respective Facebook accounts to cultivate a deeper and more extensive engagement with the Filipino community overseas and with the foreign governments and audiences. Notably, the Philippine Embassy (PE) in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) may be labeled as one of the early movers in social media adoption as the post's Facebook account was created in December 2010 and has 361,555 followers as of 16 June 2022 (see Table 2). KI 8-FSP likewise cited the PE's Instagram account (i.e., @phlinksa) which was operationalized in January 2019 and has 6,419 followers as of 16 June 2022.

The PE in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed suit by opening its Facebook account in January 2016 and has already amassed 121,552 followers, as of 16 June 2022. It also posts through Instagram (i.e., @phinuae) and Twitter (i.e., @PHinUAE) which were both launched in January 2019 and already secured 3,906 and 1,587 followers, respectively, as of 16 June 2022. In addition, the official Facebook account of the Philippine Consulate General in Dubai (i.e., @PHinDubai) has 106,928 followers as of 16 June 2022 since it was launched in June 2016.

The last post to open a Facebook account, in June 2017, is the PE in Kuwait, State of Kuwait, and is followed by 262,115 accounts as of 16 June 2022. It also operates an Instagram account (i.e., phinkuwait) with 7,226 followers, opened in September 2020, and a Twitter account (i.e., PHinKuwait) created in July 2017, with 5,491 followers as of 16 June 2022. To support the Department in its digital diplomacy efforts and in protecting the Filipino workers abroad, KI 4-HO shared that she regularly uses her personal Facebook account to repost stories and/or reports of OFWs in distress rescued by the DFA.

Table 2: Social Media Presence of Philippine Foreign Service Posts

Foreign Service Post	Social Media Account	Date opened	Number of followers/likes/subscribers (as of 16 July 2022)
PE in Riyadh, KSA	Facebook: Philippine Embassy in Saudi Arabia	December 2010	361,555 followers
	Instagram: @phlinksa	January 2019	6,419 followers
	Twitter: @PHinKSA	January 2013	4,267 followers
PE in Abu Dhabi, UAE	Facebook: Philippine Embassy in UAE	January 2016	121,552 followers
	Instagram: @phinuae	January 2019	3,906 followers
	Twitter: @PHinUAE	January 2019	1,587 followers
Philippine Consulate General in Dubai	Facebook: Philippine Consulate General in Dubai	June 2016	106,928 followers
PE in Kuwait, State of Kuwait	Facebook: Philippine Embassy in Kuwait	June 2017	262,115 followers
	Twitter: @phinkuwait	July 2017	5,491 followers

	Instagram: @PHinKu- wait	September 2020	7,226 followers
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All interviewees perceived the Department as a leader in social media adoption, vis-à-vis other migration authorities, such as the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) and the Overseas Welfare Workers Administration (OWWA), given the DFA's level of engagement with the public and scope of social media presence. However, KI 5-HO argued that, the organization is a laggard in SM adoption, since OWWA and POEA have a mobile application for managing and attending to the needs and concerns of their clients. This application, further enables both agencies to collect from and store information by users through requiring them to register a personal account.

4.1. Stages 1 and 2: Informal Experimentation and Coordinated Chaos

It can be observed, that the Department's first foray into the social media sphere over the period 2011-2012, can be categorized as falling under stage 1, of the Mergel and Bretschneider's model. Specifically, the DFA opened free accounts in three major third-party social media platforms, namely: Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter. These unofficial social media accounts, were set-up for exploring the said platforms and for engaging audiences and peers, by representing their organization in ongoing conversations (e.g., passport-related concerns, other consular-related issues). In the case of FSPs, KI 7- and 8-FSP, it was relayed that the Philippine Embassy in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia opened its Facebook account for two purposes: i) to gain popularity with Filipinos; and ii) to receive messages from Filipinos in the Kingdom, in real time.

Moreover, the Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) in Tokyo, Seoul, and London can likewise, be credited for carrying out decentralized experiments when they utilized social media platforms, specifically Facebook, to focus on information dissemination involving overseas Filipino communities during times of crisis. The communication during this juncture, can be characterized as one-way, since a feedback mechanism was yet to be instituted. Due to the efforts of the aforementioned FSPs, the DFA experienced overlapping contents, underdeveloped nation-branding initiatives, and differences between official agency communication protocol and social media engagement efforts.

More importantly, two notable deviations from the model are worth discussing. First, the primary source of informal experiments is the DFA sub-offices, which are located outside of the country. This pattern may be explained by two factors: (i) the presence of large Filipino communities in the cited localities; and (ii) the prevalence of both natural and man-made disasters in Japan and South Korea. Japan is known to experience frequent occurrences of earthquakes and tsunamis while South Korea is still on heightened alert due to its relations with North Korea.

In the case of the FSP in London, Facebook was used to provide relevant news and updates about the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. The said platform, was similarly utilized to garner support and assistance from foreign governments and external partners for the victims and affected communities by the disaster. These endeavors, when taken collectively, can be described as informal experiments by external actors, which are in contrast with the internal parties – Office of Public Diplomacy (OPD) (before it became the OSCR) and the OMWA. This is because the OPD was mainly focused

on acting as the official ‘spokesperson’ of the DFA while the OMWA fulfilled its duties through traditional, manual channels.

Secondly, the move to conduct decentralized experiments by the sub-offices of the DFA lacked a vital component – the existence of social media mavericks. The entrance of these entities only took place during the third and final stage of the model. What is quite surprising, is the fact that the operationalization of social media accounts by FSPs and the OPD was led by individuals who have no recorded expertise in social media use. Perhaps this may shed light on the quality of engagement pursued through social media platforms, as well as the strategic social media use, or lack thereof, by the DFA.

Next, the agency moved to the second phase, also known as coordinated chaos, around 2012 upon the consolidation of numerous social media practices and the creation of official social media accounts (e.g., DFAPhl, @dfaphl) representing the organization. The OPD, operated the Department’s official social media accounts. The foremost objectives of these accounts were, to pursue public diplomacy and nation-branding initiatives and to provide relevant news and information about the DFA’s services, especially those relating to passport and consular concerns. In addition, the low level of involvement by employees in the social media adoption hampered the creation of informal standards. Instead, the direction came from the top officials of the OPD and the Office of the Secretary.

The absence of benchmarks, due to the novelty of the phenomenon, likewise impeded the OPD in identifying best practices necessary to outline guidelines for social media use by the employees and concerned sub-offices. With the task of operating the Department’s social media accounts being concentrated into the OPD, deeper collaboration between and among peers in different offices was hindered. Remarkably, the nonexistence of social media mavericks did not negatively impact the perception of top management towards social media uptake. Conversely, the positive reception of the officials and staff towards social media may be taken as a signal of the buy-in of the stakeholders into the initiative. This reaction may be better explained, by highlighting the personal transactions of these individuals conducted through social media platforms. The popularity of social networking sites (SNS) among Filipinos, including DFA officials and staff, hence played a vital role in influencing their general sentiment towards social media adoption.

4.2. Stage 3: Institutionalization and Consolidation

The evidence illustrate that the DFA can be characterized as belonging in the nascent stages of the third and final phase of Mergel and Bretschneider’s three-step adoption process model. It can be argued that, the organization reached this phase in 2014, upon the release of DO No. 16-2014 which prescribes “Guidelines on the Use of Social Media Use by All Units and Personnel of the DFA”. The cited document laid out specific rules and regulations on key facets of social media practices, such as access, content management, personal use of SM by DFA personnel, compliance mechanism, and administrative liability.

To regulate the online etiquette of citizens when transacting through the DFA Facebook page, the Department has implemented a Facebook Moderation Policy which stipulates that the followers are

“encouraged to adhere to certain good practices and conventions of courteous and constructive discourse.” The DFA also reserves the right not to publish offensive, abusive, indecent, racist, and pornographic content and comments. However, one hallmark of the third phase is missing in the DFA experience – there is no social media strategy that guides the organization’s SM direction in the short-term. Instead, KI 2-HO exclaimed that the direction of the social media use is steered by the OSCR, in coordination with OCA and other sub-offices, which is then guided by the DFA Strategic Plan.

Furthermore, it can be stated that social media adoption only took off in 2016 under the Duterte administration and during the leadership of former Sec. Cayetano. The rebranding of the OPD to the Office of Strategic Communications and Research (OSCR) to cater to a wider audience and the introduction of a social media team in November 2018 are manifestations of the institutionalization process being undertaken by the Department. In the case of FSPs, the PE in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia was a leader in social media adoption as it operated its Facebook account since 2010, followed by the PE in Abu Dhabi and PCG in Dubai in 2016, and the PE in Kuwait in 2017.

Two essential observations are worth stressing. First, the drive to venture into social media platforms was boosted by Sec. Cayetano’s mandate to all FSPs to manage their respective accounts in prominent SNS, such as Facebook. According to KI 4-HO:

“A lot of the officials now realize that they have to communicate a lot of our plans, projects and initiatives through social media, through Facebook...At the same time, there's a feedback mechanism, when you post something, they will say you're doing a good job; or most of the time, we receive questions or complaints...but at least now, you know that they're engaged. We know that the public...can interact with us.”

Second, the initiative of increasing the Department’s online visibility in social media platforms may not necessarily be led by a Foreign Service Post acting as the sole representative of the Philippine government. It underscores that as much as social media adoption is an organizational undertaking, the role played and the level of engagement by the top officials are crucial factors in determining the realization of the cited endeavor. Although the initiative of Philippine Consul General Cortes is commendable, the presence of two social media accounts representing the Dubai PCG only creates confusion among OFWs and possibly perpetuates the duplication of contents and overlapping audiences. As discussed earlier, this scenario is symptomatic of the first stage which is dominated by decentralized, informal experiments.

OMWA opened a Facebook account in September 2019, which is managed by a social media administrator. According to its profile, the OFW Help page “serves as the official Facebook emergency help page for OFWs in distress. This provides practical alternative in reaching out to OFWs and their families. This page is primarily for EMERGENCY purposes and NOT for labor claims.” It has 110,833 followers as of 16 June 2022. Another key indicator of the DFA’s current level of adoption process is the entrance of social media mavericks such as former Sec. Cayetano, KI 4-HO, and KI 3-HO (who was the social media manager of the Official Gazette under the Noynoy Aquino administration). Correspondingly, these three individuals demonstrated a high degree of voluntarism and actively coordinated with other sub-offices to push for greater social media adoption and use. A two-way

flow of interaction can likewise be observed during this level. Evidently, this is peculiar as the emergence of social media mavericks is expected to take place during the first phase.

4.3. Challenges concerning Institutionalization and Consolidation

Despite the achievements, a handful of conditions must be addressed by the DFA to continuously advance institutionalization and consolidation. Specifically, the absence of a budget solely allocated for social media uptake, must be prioritized by the top management. The lack of social media-centric trainings and seminars for new hires, especially those members of the SM team, must also be considered. Confirmed by KI 10-FSP, he states that:

“The consulate does not have funding, specifically to attend social media related marketing concerns and requirements. If there is a need to boost an announcement so that it reaches out to more people, it is the officers and the staff themselves that shell out the cost.”

Further, the nonexistence of success metrics must be afforded proper and adequate attention by the concerned offices. The incorporation of this mechanism can substantially support the Department in attaining two objectives: (i) legitimizing its social media-related initiatives; and (ii) constantly upgrading its capacities and capabilities needed for greater social media use and adoption.

Indeed, the DFA’s path from hosting decentralized, informal experiments to ushering in institutionalization and consolidation into the organization can be described as dynamic and fast-moving since this development occurred over the period 2011-2014. Nevertheless, it is paramount to emphasize that, the consistent shift of the Department towards higher levels of adoption, does not automatically equate to the fulfillment of specific indicators and criteria provided in the Mergel and Bretschneider model. Hence, it can be said that the Department partially met the procedural requirements of each stage and considerably attained the substantial goals of every phase.

To have a better understanding of the nature and pace of the agency’s social media adoption process, two vital factors should be discussed. The first element refers to the frequent transition of management duties to different officials. This set-up is crucial because it puts the Department’s said project under the leadership and direction of the incoming official, who may either follow the track laid out by the previous decision-maker or chart a new course based on his/her perceived legacy. This is illustrated in the case of OMWA and OSCR, with the assumption of KI 4-HO and KI 3-HO. Given their background as social media mavericks even before joining the Department, they were able to mainstream their ideas regarding deeper social media adoption to key stakeholders. However, few positive examples are not accurate predictors of future success of the mentioned endeavor. Thus, the formulation and implementation of a long-term social media strategy for the institution will be critical in ensuring policy stability and continuity and in sustaining the momentum of the current adoption process.

The second and final factor pertains to the ever-changing thrust of social media use by the sub-offices. As mentioned earlier, the early adopters (2011-2012), FSPs in Seoul and Tokyo, used social media platforms to inform Filipino communities about news related to the crises situation. Domestically, the accounts opened by OPD served as tools to represent the DFA in numerous discussions being held online. The focus then shifted during the second phase (2012-2014), when the OPD begun

to conduct public diplomacy and nation-branding efforts through various social media platforms. This thrust was intensified in the institutionalization and consolidation stage (2014-present), as exemplified by projects, such as Filipino Food Finder and Global Filipino Stories. The OSCR, supported by a social media team, primarily handles the cited task and has enjoyed considerable backing from top management.

Aside from projecting a positive image of the country to foreign audiences, social media platforms are also being increasingly utilized for responding to and resolving assistance-to-nationals cases. As noted by KI 1-HO:

“A lot of Filipinos have social media accounts, the OFWs have social media accounts, be it Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, because they realized the use of technology especially by facilitating chat rooms or communications; which prompt Filipinos to go online more often.”

OMWA’s drive to leverage social media platforms for the protection of migrant workers, was led by KI 4-HO who has vast experience in public relations and communications via social media, and who has witnessed the plight of OFWs in distress, through viral stories posted in social media platforms. To demonstrate the link between the protection of OFWs and social media platforms, the case of Joanna Demafelis, a Filipina household worker in Kuwait who was murdered by her employees, is instructive. This national issue served as a catalyst for the Department’s proactive global push towards ending the Kafala system.

Interestingly, the primary challenge faced by the DFA is one which is enabled by the immense networks and velocity of speed, cultivated within the social media sphere. However, the Department has yet to formulate and implement a mechanism addressing this issue, thus, leaving them with little to no option but to verify every case that comes their way. KI 9-FSP states:

“We evaluate it by examining the authenticity and veracity of the post...Then we validate it... we confirm if there is such a thing that exists and if there is really a need. Do they really need assistance? If we have already identified it, that there is such a need for it, then we will immediately act”.

For the home office, KI 6-HO shares:

“If the information contains the contact details of the distressed Filipino, then we will immediately send it through social apps we use to communicate with our counterparts. If in case, the information contains the number of the next-of-kin (NOK) then OMWA will contact the NOK to determine the accuracy of the requested assistance or complaints, we will gather further information before sending communications to the concerned Posts. We apply our work ruling, to send requested assistance within 12-24 hours. If the case is viral on social media, then we immediately forward it to our counterparts for immediate action”.

5. Conclusion

The emergence of social media (SM) as a viable tool for public sector organizations around the world, prompts governments to carefully examine the need to adjust their policy thrusts and programs, in alignment with the dynamics and developments within the online sphere. To illustrate, SM platforms are utilized by government agencies to primarily respond to the concerns and demands of the

citizens, while simultaneously capitalizing on the projected benefits of social media, such as minimal costs, better efficiency and productivity, and greater engagement with the citizens. Several studies find that social media is used for governance, especially in two key issue-areas – political participation and transparency and accountability.

In the Philippines' case, the adoption and use of social media platforms by government agencies offers tremendous benefits to a particular field: migrant workers' protection. Presently, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) is at the early stages of the third and final step which focuses on institutionalization and consolidation. It can be argued, that the organization reached this phase in 2014 upon the release of Department Order No. 16-2014 which prescribes "Guidelines on the Use of Social Media Use by All Units and Personnel of the DFA". The organization has similarly implemented a Facebook Moderation Policy to regulate the online etiquette of citizens when transacting through its Facebook page.

In spite of the cited strides, it is important to note that, the DFA is still in the nascent level of stage 3. This is evidenced by the absence of an agency-wide social media strategy, lack of social media trainings for new hires, and lack of specific budget for social media adoption. The Department is likewise pestered by fraudulent reports and the resurfacing of already resolved cases. These altogether, threaten to hamper the organization's march toward a higher level of SM adoption. Hence, much improvement is still to be accomplished by the DFA.

Indeed, the DFA's path from hosting decentralized, informal experiments to ushering in institutionalization and consolidation into the organization, can be described as dynamic and fast-moving, since this development occurred over the period 2011-2014. Nevertheless, it is paramount to underscore, that the consistent shift of the Department towards higher levels of adoption does not automatically equate to the fulfillment of specific indicators and criteria provided in the Mergel and Bretschneider model. Thus, it can be said that the DFA partially met the procedural requirements of each stage and considerably attained the substantial goals of every phase.

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APPENDIX 1. Guide Questions for the KIIs with Officials and Staff of DFA

Main questions	Sub-questions
How are social media platforms used in your office's operations?	What social media accounts does your office maintain? When was/were it/they opened?
	What is/are the reason/s for adopting social media platforms?
	What are the main uses of social media platforms in your organization?
How will you describe the current resources being utilized by your institution/organization in attending to social media-related needs and concerns?	Is there a budget allocated for social media adoption and use?
	Are there adequate facilities and equipment for social media adoption and use?
	Is there a dedicated manpower for social media maintenance and monitoring?
	What are the capacity-building activities relating to social media adoption and use by officials, case workers, staff, and employees of the organization?
How does your institution perceive social media platforms vis-à-vis the protection of rights and welfare of OFWs?	What instrument/s regulate the use of social media for work-related operations?
	How did officials and employees react to social media adoption and use?
How have social media platforms, specifically Facebook, contributed to the protection of rights and welfare of OFWs?	How often do you use Facebook in fulfilling your duties and responsibilities?
	How frequent do you receive reports of, complaints from, and requests for assistance for OFWs in distress via social media (Facebook and FB Messenger)?
	What are the mechanism/s in dealing with reports of, complaints from, and requests for assistance for OFWs in distress social media (Facebook and FB Messenger)?
	Based on an estimate, what is the success rate of effectively responding to cases reported

	via Facebook and FB Messenger?
What are the challenges commonly experienced in using social media platforms?	How do you ensure the privacy of data collected and disseminated through social media platforms, specifically Facebook and FB Messenger?
	What are the mechanism/s to verify the accuracy and timeliness of reports, complaints, and requests for assistance?

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