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Original Article

A study on the information seeking behaviour of Singapore-based Filipino domestic workers

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Abstract

This research examines the information seeking and use behaviour of Filipino domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore who collectively make up around 40% of about 173,000 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in this city state. It is based on the premise that low-paid migrants are generally typecast as “information poor,” who are left with very common, limiting, and homogeneous information sources. The FDWs are drawn to their co-equals to form an information ground where they can exchange information serendipitously. A survey questionnaire was administered to 138 FDWs to learn about their information behaviour and problems encountered during information seeking. A five-day ethnography study in their off-work context supplemented the quantitative data. The study found that FDWs inadequately meet the requisites for digital and information literacy, which are indispensable yet lacking among many low-skilled migrants. Implications about public governance, education, and the pedagogical component of technology use through streamlined information dissemination are discussed to benefit these FDWs.

Keywords

Domestic workers, migrants, digital literacy, information literacy, information seeking, information sources, information behaviour

Introduction

This research addresses the information seeking and use behaviour of low-paid transnational workers whose information needs and seeking patterns are often overlooked in information science literature. Previous studies were heavily concentrated on the information seeking behaviour of elite professionals and others, leaving a dearth of scholarly attention on the subpopulation of globalised communities who are generally typecast as “information poor” (Jaeger and Thompson 2005).

In particular, the study is aimed at analysing the information needs and information source preferences of overseas Filipino domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore, whose vulnerable standing in an international context subjects them to a multiplicity of disadvantages that leaves them content with highly common, less complex, and easily accessible information sources.

Several FDWs are also representative of technological incapacity in the global stage, reflecting the Philippines’ obvious lack of technological robustness and poor Internet infrastructure in many of the country’s remote communities (Ona, Ulit, and Hanna 2012). This leaves the plight of the FDWs more worrisome in their host countries, since technology adoption can potentially heed isolation, homesickness, and intercultural adjustments at virtually minimal or zero cost (Hechanova, Tuliao, and Hwa 2011).

The Philippines lies on the lip of the Southeast Asian border and sits on a land area of around 300,000 square kilometres (Philippine Statistics Authority 2010). Its longitudinal geographic makeup that

is further segmented by distance and seawater has overtime embedded regional, lingual, sociological, and technological gaps among the Filipino people. Worsening this geographic and socio-demographic divide is the country's cultivated psyche of automatic submission to foreign cultures as a result of its long history of cultural inferiority to the West (Okazaki, David, and Abelman 2008).

During the '90s, the country was known as one of the world's top exporters of household workers, and data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) website (2015) still reflect the same situation today. The country had the highest number of deployed labourers in the household service industry from 2009 to 2013, with statistics constantly rising year on year – more than doubling to 164,396 at the period's close. As such, the FDWs easily make the bulk of the 11 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), whose constant remittances keep the Filipino economy afloat through filling the Philippine coffers with foreign currencies (POEA 2015).

While the Philippine government is consistent with claims of forging strong economic relations especially with neighbouring countries, its efforts to maintain an informed Filipino citizenry dispersed worldwide remain to be thoroughly assessed from an academic perspective. In spite of heavily institutionalised migration policies that root back to the '70s Filipino diasporic era, the information gap among low-skilled and non-savvy FDWs still calls for joint action among the government, civic organisations, and the FDWs themselves.

In Singapore, which houses the third highest number of land-based OFWs at about 173,000, around 72,000 are employed as household helpers working domestically for the city state's multicultural families for at least 12 hours six days a week. They are mostly women at least 23 years old earning a monthly income of around USD 400 (SGD 560) (POEA 2015). Generally, they come from the Philippines' less economically privileged communities, and their services are mostly privatised and commoditised by

recruitment agencies, who charge around USD 1,484 (SGD 2,000) at the minimum payable in seven to eight months upon employment (Help Agency 2015).

These FDWs are culturally termed as *kasambahay* (the Filipino vernacular for household help, which translates to a contraction of two words, namely, “*kasama* for ‘companion’ and *bahay* for ‘house’”) (Viajar 2011 p.5). They partly comprise the Filipino workforce surplus, who were prompted to leave the Philippine boundaries to generally become breadwinners of left behind families (Arnado 2010). Collectively, they form a band of OFWs who may be information-deprived and less technology savvy, but have the capacity to maximise online use to service their information needs that cover varied areas inclusive of subsistence, rights protection, leisure, health and social security, employment, social and psychological support, government services, left behind families’ welfare, and local events (Wang and Chen 2012).

This study presupposes that a substantial portion of the less educated and traditional FDWs remain information illiterate and technologically incompetent given their supposed backward orientation in their country of origin. They may have been used to traditional sources such as telephony, television, and interpersonal communication to address their information needs, given that the requisites for digital and information literacy are much more complex than just sustained Internet access (Eshet 2004). Further, they may be devoid of sophisticated information validation practices – rendering them inadequately informed of their legal rights as workers in a foreign country.

The FDWs are likely to consult their most immediate or accessible contacts for their information needs instead of tapping into systematic and institutionalised information sources. This information search tactic is reflective of Bates’ berrypicking framework (1989), which suggests that information seekers are selective of what sources to use and which information to consume.

Based on these premises, this study aims to address the following two research questions:

- (1) How does the FDWs' profile relate with their perceptions and usage of the online media for their information needs?
- (2) Do their exposure to and usage of the online media form enough grounds to meet the requirements of digital and information literacy?

The study heavily leans on Bates' berrypicking framework (1989) and Fisher and colleagues' theory of information ground (Fisher and Naumer 2006, Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton 2004) to analyse the information seeking patterns of the FDWs. The latter theoretical foundation suggests that information seekers of the same stature form a setting to serendipitously share information amongst themselves. This fits well with the common practices of the FDWs' information exchanges in a foreign country.

Further, in spite of the Filipino government's efforts to reach out to the global Filipino community through information dissemination using both traditional and non-traditional platforms, such seems to still fall short of penetrating into the information habit of the FDWs.

Review of the literature

Low-paid migrants' information ground

To the researchers' knowledge, this study pilots the enquiry into the FDWs' information seeking practices as majority of previous studies (Paragas 2006, Parreñas 2005, Uy-Tioco 2007) were heavily focused on the FDWs' use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for computer-mediated communication. This is understandable given their geographic distance from left behind Filipino families. And yet, their information seeking patterns in a globalised environment warrants further investigation.

Low-paid migrants' presence in borderless territories relegates them to second-class citizenship based on unspoken international hierarchy bylaws. This puts them at a state of information scarcity – earning the label of “outcasts” in global information ecologies (Fisher et al. 2004a, Fisher et al. 2004b, Gibbs 1994, Caidi, Allard, and Quirke 2010). Hechanova and colleagues (2011) argued that “information deficiency” adds up to the psychological pressures of pacing with an international setup, and this can dismiss low skilled migrants as either ‘placeless’ or ‘displaced’. In the diasporic information environment, these migrants reportedly have difficulties getting beyond the visceral stage and are less able to process an information need either through a formalised statement or a sophisticated system (Wang and Chen 2012). Their information needs are mostly contextual and dependent on country of residence.

On a macroscopic view, previous research found that these migrants prefer naturally embedded or easily accessible networks over formalised systems when looking for information (Fisher et al. 2004b). This is backed by Harris and Dewdney's (1994) information habit framework, which posits that the inner circle of interpersonal networks are more trusted over institutionalised information centres. Moreover, this information habit is occasionally complemented by the information ground, which according to Counts and Fisher (2010), is where migrants of similar social background serendipitously exchange social information with one another. This is especially true among the marginalised, whose status in the social strata pulls them together to form a synergistic information environment. Counts and Fisher (2010) suggested that the information ground can provide a reliable model for possible information services since such ground becomes functional with social actors from lived realities.

Stemming from Pettigrew's (1999) initial theory on information ground, Fisher and associates (2004b) elaborated on the contextual factors that affect the information behaviour of migrants. The theory

assumes that the interlinkage of contextual factors is temporal and dependent on the socio-demographic backgrounds of social actors involved in an information flow. These actors reportedly benefit cognitively or affectively in the information exchanges (Fisher et al 2004b).

Backed by Harris and Dewdney (1994), Wang and Chen (2012) reported that low-paid migrants' information ground is not easily penetrable by sophisticated and cutting-edge technologies. They argued that regardless of the costs invested in these infrastructures, these still have minimal impact on the informational gain of vulnerable groups. These groups are comprised of blue-collar workers, housewives, and the disabled, whose information gain are tied to a multitude of economical, social, structural, and psychological factors. Targeted and customised approaches are hence necessary to support informational and technological diffusion to special clusters of the global population (Wang and Chen 2012). Fisher and colleagues (2004a) seconded that technology is not an easy replacement for the habitual and long-time information sources. This grounded theory was used by Wang and Chen (2012) in scrutinising information-centric services initiated by the government for migrant-farmers in China.

Wang and Chen (2012) reported that there are beset barriers on the individual and social planes deterring the information access of migrant-farmers, whose information needs are commonly found in the public domain. The study highlighted the gap between the information supply and demand – with the former being largely facilitated by the government but unmatched with the consumption patterns of the supposed beneficiaries. The 2012 survey of Wang and Chen was heavily used as basis for the instrument in this study as explained in the succeeding section.

Their study found that though the government portals were intended to be both functional and usable, these were poorly subscribed to by majority of the 139 migrant-farmer respondents. The supposed patrons of the services either found no use to browse the government portals or were unaware of the

portal's functions. Others believed that the information provided by the government were outdated. Overall, the study recommended policies aimed at improving the information seeking and filtering processes of a targeted group of migrants. Findings showed that e-government services cannot be altogether templated, but should instead cover specific needs of distinctive population groups in the overseas market.

These fall backs were aggravated by the migrants' local mindset displaced in a global context. Yum (1982) postulated that diversifying information sources entails the interplay of social impetus and individual cognitive capacity, though Timmins (2006) challenges the intermarriage of the social and individual components on grounds that critical and adequate information (as a commodity) is a staple only in the networks of the elite. But the wider the acceptance of this notion, the greater is the information divide between the society's hegemon and those at the sidelines.

Technological adoption of globalised third world women

The international and intercontinental idea on e-diaspora has yet to become mature and saturated. In fact, it is only at its conception or at best at its infancy for a huge part of the diasporic populace (Srinivasan and Pyati 2007). Appadurai (2003) theorised that the diasporic or migrant archive is formed through a continuous exchange of thoughts and services. This led to the rethinking of a neoliberal globalisation (Lindio-McGovern 2003), where the discourse is shifted from the mainstream to the marginalised. Migrants with poor or low aptitude at information literacy using digital tools are left in untapped pockets of host countries. They do not form part of an *imagined* community and are instead locked up in cultural homogenisation. This contrasts the globalisation ideal, which was meant to bring countries closer together.

Previous studies picture the Filipino domesticised migrants as moderate users of ICT tools to vicariously connect back home (Hechanova et al. 2011, Parreñas 2005, Lindio-McGovern 2003). The studies are mostly concentrated on the use of the traditional telephony, mobiles phones, and computers. Thomas and Lim (2008) benchmarked a study on Singapore's 20 female domestic workers' ICT use through ethnographic interviews. The study reported that the respondent-domestic workers' most common tool for information and communication was the mobile phone. Filipino interviewees (n=9) reported emotional security, empowerment, and strengthened liaisons with social contacts for better job opportunities through mobile phone ownership. And yet, one of the stumbling blocks to continued online access was cost. The average monthly income of the FDWs was USD 340 (SGD 470), of which 10% was allotted for communication expenses. These financial limits required the domestic workers to periodically monitor their expenses on mobile phone usage. The research suggested that ICTs are inherently wired with the needs of domesticised third world women, whose day-to-day routines revolved around the needs of their employers. Given these premises, they may most likely be isolated in their respective work environments, and sustained connections through digital tools enhance their social, informational, and economical capital.

Chib and colleagues (2013) in a quantitative study with 60 foreign domestic workers supported previous findings that informal networks formed through ICT tools can alleviate social pressures and intercultural adjustments through informational support (Fisher et al 2004a, Kau and Sirmians 1977). Like previous studies (Wang and Chen 2012, Thomas and Lim 2010), Chib and team's research (2013) underscored the need for government policies that would effectively facilitate transnational ICT use especially among subaltern communities in international level. However, this assumption was further challenged by findings that sojourners' dense ICT use was skewed towards the males, and the females

(majority of whom are domesticised) had less techno-literacy (Hechanova et al 2011). The gender issue in ICT use suppresses marginal voices that are often less heard of in sanctioned platforms.

Altogether, the studies put focus on the migrants' interest in the public information realm, and the government's role in filling the former's information gaps (Wang and Chen 2012, Fisher et al. 2004a, Fisher et al. 2004b, Caidi et al. 2010). From a general (migrant-centric) to microcosmic (FDW-centric) perspective, the extensive literature underscored the need to focus on marginalised migrants, the FDWs in particular, and suggest means on how to improve their information behaviour – the serial processes of seeking, finding, filtering, disseminating, and using information – for everyday use.

Methodology

This study triangulated quantitative and qualitative data to address the aforementioned research questions. It employed a survey questionnaire and informal ethnographies in the FDWs' off-work context. The study protocol was approved by the Nanyang Technological University's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection that spanned from mid-March to mid-April 2014.

Survey

The questionnaire is divided into five main sections. These include: Part A - demographic questions to profile the FDWs based on length of stay in Singapore, age group, and educational attainment; Part B - a set of 10 statements written in the "I" perspective that measures the FDWs' perceptions of the online media use pertaining to migrant-sensitive information needs (inclusive of employment, social support, Filipino communities, legal rights, Filipino news and current events, online government services, among others). These areas were adapted from previous studies (Wang and Chen 2012, Gibbs 1994). The

responses to these statements, ranging from Strong Agree to Strongly Disagree, have corresponding numerical values using a Likert-type scale from 5 to 1, respectively. The self-generated scale has a Cronbach alpha of 0.528 and a Cronbach alpha based on standardised items of 0.834 (thus suggesting a high covariance) (Yu 2001). According to Pallant (2010), scales with 10 items or less have a 0.5 raw Cronbach alpha on the average (which tallies with the above result) – but less than the required decent alpha of 0.7 or more. Still, the scale may be accorded face validity since most items were used and approved in a previous study (Wang and Chen 2012).

Parts C, D, and E comprised 15 multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. Part C asked about the attributes of the FDWs' ICT use including the devices used for information seeking and acquisition; and the amount of time and money allotted for the use of these devices; Part D asked about the FDWs' perceived top information needs and perceived information sources.

The questionnaire also adapted questions from the Wang and Chen study (2012) to determine the difficulties encountered during information search and acquisition (Part D), and the perceived problems when availing information from e-government services, as covered in Part E. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question to learn of user-centric recommendations to improve e-government services.

A Filipino version of the original English questionnaire was developed and pilot-tested with five FDWs in February 2014. All questions were clearly understood by the respondents during the pilot test. The questionnaire was subsequently administered to 138 FDWs using convenience sampling in the absence of an authoritative list to derive a stratified sample. The spearman rho for ordinal data and chi square (test for independence) statistics for nominal data were computed using SPSS version 19. Both non-parametric tests were chosen since the study dealt with lower level data and had a small sample.

Inferential statistics showed whether or not there were statistically significant results with $p < 0.05$ set as the statistical threshold. The instrument may be available upon request from the corresponding author.

Participant observation

The corresponding author gained an intimate knowledge of the FDWs' non-work environment. Such "partial membership" in their social community was un-obstructively built over a set time period, albeit short and less extensive. The experience afforded first-hand accounts about the FDWs' leisurely activities. The ethnographic fieldwork was done for five consecutive Sundays from mid-March to mid-April 2014 in areas frequented by the FDWs in Singapore. This was done simultaneously with paper-based survey administration. The ethnographic observations and casual interviews with the respondents were kept through semi-structured field notes.

Findings

Survey

Descriptive statistics. The majority of the surveyed FDWs ($N=138$) were employed in Singapore for five years or less ($n=74$; 53.6%), finished college ($n=39$; 28.5%), and were in their early 30s ($n=41$; 29.7%). Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the distribution of the FDWs in the attributes for the demographic variables, namely, length of stay in Singapore, educational attainment, and age group, respectively.

Table 1. FDWs' length of stay in Singapore ($N=138$)

Length of stay (in years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
---------------------------	---------------	----------------

0-5	74	53.6%
6-10	40	28.9%
11-15	13	9.4%
16-20	5	3.6%
21-25	5	3.6%
Missing	1	0.7%

Table 2. FDWs' educational attainment (N=138)

Educational attainment	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Elementary education and below	2	1.4%
Unfinished high school education and below	3	2.2%
Finished high school education	33	23.9%
Unfinished bachelor's degree	35	25.4%
Vocational course	16	11.6%
Bachelor's degree	39	28.3%
Postgraduate	4	2.9%
Missing	6	1.3%

Table 3. FDWs' age group (N=138)

Age group (in years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
20-24	3	2.2%
25-29	24	17.4%
30-34	41	29.7%
35-39	31	22.5%
40-44	20	14.5%
45-49	12	8.7%
50-54	6	4.3%
Missing	1	0.7%

Table 4 summarises the FDWs' perceptions about online media use, with corresponding values for mean, mode and standard deviation. The mode of responses in the Likert-type questionnaire was either 5 (strongly agree) or 4 (agree). It should be noted that all items in Table 5 (except item 5 on online media as a source of legal and employment rights information) had standard deviations of less than 1. This showed that respondents had nearly the same (favourable) responses on online media as a source of useful

information (excluding that of the mentioned item). Item 5 had a standard deviation of 3.44 – signalling a wide distribution of responses over a larger range of values. This may suggest the need to develop online law literacy programmes especially for the migrant populace, many of whom are used to online information seeking but remain inadequately informed of their legal rights as foreign workers.

Table 4. FDWs' perceptions on the uses of online media with values for mean, mode and SD

Statement	Mean	Mode	SD
1. Belief that online media is a useful tool when looking for information.	4.53	5	0.64
2. Belief that online media is useful when looking for employment.	4.44	5	0.74
3. Belief that online media is useful when looking for social support.	4.42	5	0.70
4. Belief that online media is useful when looking for Filipino communities in Singapore.	4.36	5	0.72
5. Belief that online media can help me become informed of my legal and employment rights as an overseas Filipino worker.	4.71	5	3.44
6. Belief that online media can allow me to be informed about Filipino news and current events.	4.46	5	0.67
7. Belief that online media can allow me to connect with my left behind family at minimal or no cost.	4.64	5	0.49
8. Belief that online media is a useful tool when availing online government services.	4.32	4 ^a	0.72
9. Belief that access to online services can provide a great deal of convenience.	4.50	5	0.58
10. Willingness to spend time (during day off) and monetary resources (up to SGD 10) on training to become more knowledgeable about the uses of the online media.	4.03	4	0.95
a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.			

Majority of the respondents (n=89, 64.5%) owned smartphones (with data services), while 37% (n=51) owned regular mobile phones (without data services). Thirty-six (26.1%) had laptops, while only two (1.4%) were gadget-less.

Nearly all or 94.2% of the respondents reported everyday use of their owned gadgets. Almost a quarter (n=34) said they use their gadgets for three hours or more, while 18.8% (n=26) reported paying fees for Internet subscription. They pay around USD 11 (SGD 15) and below for daily or weekly Internet access. Majority (n=89, 64.5%) enjoyed free Internet access in their employer's residence, while 10.9% (n=15) were non-Internet users.

The FDWs' most common information need had to do with the *welfare of their left behind families* (n=126, 91.3%). Other information needs considered important by the majority (50% or more) include: *employment, social security, national Filipino news, means to become financially stable, health/hospitals, Filipino community groups, legal rights protection, and possible monetary investment*. Table 5 shows the FDWs' information needs by decreasing level of importance. *E-government services* were deemed important only by 61 (44.2%) of the respondents.

Table 5. FDWs' top information needs each with corresponding frequency and percentage

Information need	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Left behind families' welfare	126	91.3%
Employment/job postings	100	72.5%
Social security	89	64.5%
National Filipino news	89	64.5%
Means to become financially stable	72	52.2%
Health/hospitals/medical treatment	71	51.4%
Filipino community groups (e.g. Filipino Churches, <i>Bayanihan</i> Society, etc.)	71	51.4%
Legal rights protection (e.g. minimum wage rate, maximum work hrs, legal placement offices, payment scheme for placement fee, etc.)	70	50.7%
Possible monetary investment	69	50.0%
Local Filipino news (news from hometown)	64	46.4%
E-government services (e.g. passport application/renewal, OEC appointment, visa and consular documents processing, etc.)	61	44.2%
Singapore dollar – Philippine peso exchange rate	61	44.2%
Remittance centres	57	41.3%
Travel fare	54	39.1%
Entertainment/leisure	44	31.9%
Travel fare discounts	42	30.4%
Others	20	14.4%

Those who used the Internet for information seeking reported that they acquired their skills on Internet use from *formal school education* (n=66; 47.8%). This was followed by *knowledge about*

Internet from other media (n=53; 38.4%), while a little over a quarter (n=36) said that they were *encouraged by their families* to use the Internet.

Table 6 shows the preferred online information sources that FDWs consult to meet their information needs.

Table 6. FDWs' online information sources

Online information sources	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Social media	108	78.3%
Filipino news portals	56	40.6%
Filipino government websites	46	33.3%
Others	3	2.2%

Despite the common Internet access and use, the FDWs identified challenges encountered during information seeking as shown in Table 7. More than 10% of the respondents reported *insufficient knowledge on Internet use, social media, and inability to operate a computer*. This could have been due to the fact that majority have online access only through smartphones, whereas laptop ownership remained uncommon. They may have been used to scrolling just social media websites instead of browsing the Internet for purposeful information.

Table 7. Problems related to poor usage of the Internet as an information source

Problems	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Insufficient knowledge on Internet use	17	12.3%
Insufficient knowledge on social media	15	10.9%
Inability to operate a computer	14	10.1%
Insufficient funding to avail digital services	11	8.0%
Others	6	4.3%

Insufficient funding to subscribe to Internet access	5	3.6%
Have nothing to do with the Internet	3	2.2%
Low English proficiency	2	1.4%

Further, the use of e-government portal was popular among the FDWs (n=96; 69.9%). The most commonly availed services were *online transactions with government agencies (e.g. passport renewal, document processing, online queuing, etcetera)*, as reported by 59.4% (n=82). And yet, despite the well-diffused usage of e-government services, more than 20% of the respondents reported problems when using the same as shown in Table 8. Table 9, meanwhile, summarises the unfavourable responses about the non-usage of e-government services as indicated by more than half of the respondents.

Table 8. Problems related to the usage of e-government services

Problems	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of security when entering personal information online	41	29.7%
Outdated information in government websites	12	8.7%
Unfriendly functions in government websites	11	8.0%
Slow correspondence with Filipino authorities	10	7.2%
Others	4	2.9%

Table 9. Problems related to the non-usage of e-government services

Problems	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of knowledge on e-government services	48	34.8%
Prefer face-to-face transactions over online transactions	28	20.3%
Others	7	5.1%
Unnecessary to browse government services	4	2.9%
Don't care about government affairs	4	2.9%
Other non-government websites provide more information	4	2.9%
Lack of trust in e-government services	2	1.4%
Filipino government websites have dull and unfriendly functions	1	0.7%

As part of further analysis, we carried out a series of bivariate analyses on the data. Using the nonparametric measure Spearman rho (2-tailed test), it was found that there was no correlation between the FDWs' length of stay in Singapore ($p = 0.405$, $\rho = 0.072$), age group ($p = 0.544$; $\rho = 0.052$), and educational attainment ($p = 0.703$; $\rho = 0.034$) with their perceptions on online media as an *information source*.

Further, of the demographic variables, only age group was found to be positively correlated with the *willingness to spend resources on technical training*, where $p = 0.033$; $\rho = 0.185$.

Results also indicated that hours devoted to everyday gadget use was significantly correlated with the FDWs' length of stay in Singapore and age group. The Spearman rho (2-tailed test) indicated $p = 0.006$, $\rho = 0.234^{**}$ when years of stay in Singapore was tested with the attribute *less than half an hour* for gadget use; and $p = 0.003$, $\rho = 0.251^{**}$ when age group was tested with the same (** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level).

Using a Chi-square test for independence (Fisher's exact probability test), only age group was found to be significantly associated with the *use of Internet as an information source*, χ^2 (6, $n=136$), $p = 0.005$, $\phi = 0.371$. Age group was also found to be significantly associated with the *use of e-government services*, χ^2 (6, $n=136$), $p = 0.019$, $\phi = 0.334$.

There was a significant association between educational attainment and *inability to use a computer*, χ^2 (6, $n= 132$), $p = 0.017$, $\phi = 0.342$. There was also an indication of educational attainment being significantly associated with *lack of knowledge on e-government services*, χ^2 (6, $n= 132$), $p = 0.004$, $\phi = 0.378$; and *prefer[ence for] face-to-face transactions over online transactions*, χ^2 (6, $n= 132$), $p = 0.012$, $\phi = 0.351$.

Informal ethnographies

The corresponding author took partial membership in the FDWs' communities while doing informal on-ground ethnographies to develop a sense of intimacy with members of the social group under study. Since the empirical data provided in the quantitative study may insufficiently explain various online and offline activities of the FDWs, their collectivistic and individualistic actions derived from off-work context provide a multi-faceted perspective on their digital and information literacy (or lack of it). The author learned of the FDWs' group formation and composition, affinity and familiarity with common communication and information devices, and implied subscription to traditional top-down directives. These narratives, triangulated with quantitative data, offer an outsider a fuller view to more objectively assess the FDWs' capacity to evaluate their digital and informational consumption.

The FDW groups were reportedly formed either naturally or organically. Around eight people said they came from the same Philippine province. This was easily recognisable since they were overheard speaking Filipino regional dialects such as *Ilonggo* and *Pangasinense*. Their ethno-linguistic affinity naturally came off with fellow Filipinos from the same provincial background. Two FDWs said they met their co-FDWs informally online (through social networking sites), while four others met offline (through maid agencies). Further, majority of the FDW groups were homogeneously females. Though there were common sightings of FDWs with men of varying nationalities (mostly Indians and Bangladeshis, while some were fellow Filipinos). More than 40 FDWs sighted with men were believed to have formed romantic affiliations with the former. These heterogeneous groupings may provide the FDWs alternative, but less sound information sources.

Though majority of the FDWs were seen holding communication devices such as smartphones and tablets, there were still a few of them gadget-less. There were at least four interviewee-FDWs who admitted to having zero background on computer and Internet use. Two were in their 50s, while the other two were in their 30s. One fifty-something FDW commented, “*Hindi talaga ako marunong magpindot-pindot d’yan*” (I really don’t know which items to press there), in reference to buttons and icons used when net surfing. These responses highlight the pedagogical needs of the low-paid migrants who remain deprived of basic Internet and information access.

Many of the surveyed FDWs assumed leadership roles that are location-dependent (i.e. churches). However, it should be noted that they still lack proper technical and analytical training. Professional Filipino counterparts from other church groups were assigned to man electric instruments and tools (i.e. projectors) on their behalf. Even administrative posts in their organisations were assumed by professional-counterparts, and they follow a structured hierarchy of directives cascaded from top-down – prompting them to extend their domesticised housekeeping chores to church-wide functions.

These off-work scenarios explain circumstantial factors that cannot be reduced to mere statistics. These help define the FDWs’ profile vis-à-vis their information intake from both online and offline networks.

Discussion

The FDWs’ profile and their perceptions and usage of the online media

This research found that the FDWs have modest access to and know-how on ICT use, albeit the inclusion of statistically insignificant few who had no background on computer and Internet use. This could have been prompted by the majority’s relatively younger age group and decent educational attainment. Their

online information seeking patterns and offline information exchanges were packaged to form their information ground. Fisher, Landry, and Naumer (2007) implicated that the information ground to which members of the social system belong may be representative of their social and informational capital. In the FDWs' case, such ground naturally develops given their often marginalised standing in a foreign country. This creates for them an environment to serendipitously trade information (Fisher and Naumer 2006). Their stature draws them together, although there were occasional interjections of non-FDWs in their social groupings, who make their off-work environment a little more heterogeneous.

These were readily observable on-ground. The FDWs use their easily accessible networks – made up mostly of co-FDWs (usually from similar provincial and work background). From here rises their social and information resources (Coleman 1989, Kundnani 1999), which feed both their cognitive and affective needs.

Results showed that acquaintance with gadget use is built through time. Logically, the older ones (despite tenure worth one decade or more) had lesser time devoted for gadget use, while the younger and newer hires had more time devoted for the same. Between the younger and the elderly, there may be convenience and connection issues, which may or may not be substantially bridged with the use of technologies.

Nevertheless, the experience abroad must have acquainted them with better opportunities, as reflected in their dense usage of communication and information devices. But such are reportedly still not enough to gauge the parameters of one's digital and information literacy. Grafstein (2002) noted that information literacy should be taught beyond library corners, and should instead extend to classroom setup. But this highly academic mindset may be devoid of on-ground *praxis*, and limits the merits of literacy only within the elitist academe circle.

The FDWs are among the most in need, yet the most deprived of useful information, but assumptions on their “vulnerability” as migrant workers in an information environment (Wang and Chen 2012, Srinivasan and Pyati 2007) may not be fully supported. This is because results showed that regardless of length of stay in Singapore, age group, and educational attainment, they have well diversified information sources to include both digital and physical networks. With the use and diffusion of online tools now becoming universal, the digital media as an information source could have substantially embraced even low-paid migrants. Assumptions in the previous section showed that regardless of tenure, age, and education background, many still perceived online information sources positively and favourably. All statements presented in Table 4 had a mode response of either 5 (strongly agree) or 4 (agree).

As per the cited correlation between age group and density of online use, the younger ones may be more technologically adept over their senior counterparts. The latter, however, were less vocal in their desire for better technical training. This goes to show that the younger an FDW is, the closer she is to the mindset of digital natives. Conversely, the older an FDW is, the lesser is her desire to move towards such digital zone – more so at the expense of time and monetary investments.

Moreover, their ICT usage may have been tied with their tenure in Singapore, spelling a contrast against their stay in the Philippines, a country known as lacking in technological robustness relative to other neighbouring Asian countries. While still in Singapore, the FDWs take advantage of the state’s dense online connectivity – as reflected with majority of the respondents (n=89, 64.5%) enjoying free Wifi access in their workplace.

Here lies the intercultural purpose of global workforce export. Even low-paid migrants relegated to household chores become more independent Internet navigators – complete with the requisites of gadgets and access, except for some still devoid of the mentioned privileges.

An assessment of the FDWs' digital and information literacy

But more astoundingly, does perpetual access to gadgets and Internet equate with digital and information literacy? What changes can be implemented on a national and global level, if there is a mismatch between the supposed users and online technologies?

There are truths and half-truths on low-skilled migrants 'sitting at the sidelines of information societies,' as implied by previous research (Fisher et al. 2004a, Caidi et al. 2010). They may either be bestowed with 'information abundance' or 'information poverty,' depending on the networks and platforms they use or interact with. In today's information age, it may be "normal" to have the online media as the *de facto* standard for information seeking, use, and dissemination, and the "normal skew" seems to have stretched to cover the economically underprivileged FDWs, albeit at varying levels of coverage.

Further, the study opens the often unspoken topic on law literacy among low-waged migrants. Statement 5 in Part B of the survey questionnaire, which read "*I believe that online media can help me become informed of my legal and employment rights as an overseas Filipino worker,*" remarkably had a high standard deviation – which suggests that the FDWs have varying thoughts about the availability of legal information on the Web. This indirectly tells that the advocacy on popularising the law may not just rest on the shoulders of titled law practitioners. Nearly everyone, regardless of social and educational background, is in need of thorough legal education – and this is especially important among the FDWs – whose subservient nature leads them to be susceptible in openly accepting any legal information as is.

The psychological pressures (Hechanova et al 2011) of being 'placeless' or 'displaced' may be less alleviated by their online connectivity. This partly explains why *welfare of left behind family* and *family*

from home country remained the most common information need and information source, respectively, for majority of the FDWs.

Next to *family from home country*, the Internet comes as the second most common information source, with 85.5% of the respondents (n=118) consulting online sources. This underscores Eshet's (2004) study on digital literacy, which is supposed to go beyond mere access to and use of ICT tools. Accordingly, literacy on computer and online use necessitates the sophisticated components in one's ecosystem – spanning from social, economic, and analytic. This must be seriously considered for FDW-migrants – who are nonetheless active surfers of online platforms using mobile technologies. And they are reportedly more used to consulting social media over institutional information repositories such as the government portals and Filipino news websites (Table 6). This may create both advantages and barriers to finding or locating pertinent information in their everyday life. Most likely, they are most immersed in social networking sites (i.e. the most frequently mentioned during casual encounters was *Facebook*), making the same an indispensable component in their information habit. Harris and Dewdney (1994) termed this framework to suggest that there is a higher trust level among personal contacts over institutional information centres. Both information habit and information ground, as reflected from ethnographic observations, describe a participatory model through which the FDWs can potentially join the information trade. Since Web 2.0 tools have long been introduced to the global offline crowd, even the FDWs have actively created and maintained their respective online communities. This is reflected in the statistics supporting the immersion of the majority of the FDWs in social media platforms. Table 6 shows that 78.3% (n=108) have active social media accounts, while less than half of this figure consult the Philippine government-run websites.

Previous studies (Hull 2003, Ryan 2002) suggest that engagement in social networking sites augment previously suppressed voices in non-egalitarian societies. In the FDWs' case, their collective power is now constructed grassroots-up (instead of the structural-*ist* top-down direction). But still, questions on their progress in contributing critical portions online remain an important topic for academic and social discourse. The popular culture of using Web 2.0 tools is mature enough for socialisation and networking purposes, but the same is still in the struggling infancy phase of promoting analysis and information literacy (Carrington and Robinson 2009). In spite of very intuitive features and functionalities that draw users from nearly all backgrounds, there remain loose gaps to match social media platforms with social learning and literacy concepts (Livingstone 2004).

This underlines the need for a more solid theoretical backbone to further develop digital and information literacy when using social media spaces. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) tucked socio-cultural factors in modifying information acquisition and behaviour in digitally networked communities. This is especially relevant in e-diasporic environments, where majority of the Filipino e-members are socially and economically second-rated citizens based on unspoken and unwritten migration policies.

But does their information ground formed online and offline provide enough economical and informational support to FDW-migrants? Are there incentives beset in the natural order to prompt their curiosity and extend their search process to information validation and verification? Are the FDWs equipped with adequate training to have a second look at the information presented in their immediate environment? Are they not taking information at face value? Or do they wrestle with or analyse information before acceptance?

The answers to these questions may unfortunately border on the negative. From the information sources they habitually used, it can be surmised that they still lack the aforementioned requisites for

digital and information literacy. First, though they may be relatively more technologically adept compared to economically underprivileged Philippine-based Filipinos (without global exposure), they maintain typical information sources with measly validation provisions. In the simplest of terms, they just exchange information amongst themselves. And although they claim to have online digital exposure through periodic use of social media, it can be deduced that their digital networks are no different from the physical. This was an obvious observation on-ground, where they maintain highly homogeneous bonds with people equal to their status.

Second, there was hardly any critical response in the open-ended question of the survey questionnaire. Around 15 answers were mere critiques of the alleged inefficiencies when transacting with the Philippine embassy, and no answer was fully substantiated.

Third, common problems about poor usage of the computer or Internet arose in the survey. This is ironic since over 85% of the respondents claimed to use the online media as an information source, and around 48% reported acquisition of online search skills through formal education. Statistically insignificant few are still lacking technological know-how and economic capacity to sustainably connect online. This was further supported by observations from ethnographies in reference to FDWs with zero background on technology use. Their offline membership to Filipino organisations (e.g. churches) neither proved helpful in upgrading their technical and analytical competence. Just the same, they extend their domesticated chores beyond their respective workplaces to church-wide functions.

Even with the maturity of information exchange and dissemination through digital technologies, the obvious lack of technology access and use, albeit statistically insignificant, posts significant social ramifications especially to the global Filipino community. This mirrors the digital divide between residents of developed and still developing countries. Luyt (2004) argued that among the beneficiaries of

such technological divide are the developing country governments, citing the Philippines as one of the strategic venues to outsource technical-related jobs in exchange for cheap labour. This led the Filipino government and businessmen to earn from taxes and revenues from the mentioned industry.

In contrast to these benefits derived from the digital divide, there is no international Filipino government policy enacted so far to address the same problem – specifically to heed the concerns of the FDWs. Despite the fact that the social ramifications of the Philippines' technological ineptitude rippled beyond its boundaries to disadvantage its least paid exported workers, no solid government strategies are underway.

Findings from this study showed that education can potentially address the bottlenecks of such digital divide. It remained the only demographic variable significantly associated with the poor usage of the computer, Internet, and e-government services (Tables 7, 8, and 9). This was despite the fact that majority of the surveyed respondents were reportedly college graduates. But this may lead to refurbishing the entire notion on education – which remains highly traditional across the fields of governance, business, economics, and even immigration. Such traditionalist thinking perpetuates the vertical relations between the educator and learner, and transmits learning materials in a top-down direction.

Further, profiling users based on their information needs and system preferences entails an elaborate process of considering pluralities (Gilmour 2001). This can subvert the traditional notion on education, which is ideally meant to be progressive – where learners share a horizontal relationship with one another. This dismisses the myth of structured societal power held by the higher ups, and could modestly move the distant image of the government closer to the publics it serves.

Conclusion

This research studied the online media access and use of the FDWs, and used such as the precursor to gauge their digital and information literacy. This study on the diasporic Filipino community provides another dimension on information vulnerable groups with very common, homogenous, and less complex information sources. In fact, this research saw that the information ground to which the FDWs belong had little to almost zero alternative sources.

This research learned that majority of the participant-FDWs are already digitally connected, but found the need to introduce the FDWs to a plurality of information sources – including the institutionalised and authoritative ones manned by the government. By habit, it was found that the Filipino government website would only rank third (next to social media and Filipino news websites) as an online consultation platform. FDWs would naturally consult co-FDWs within their immediate access for their information needs instead of asking or seeking assistance from the government.

Despite attempts by the government to streamline information dissemination processes, there are still transmission gaps – resulting to an information asymmetry between the government and its publics. This is due to a multiplicity of factors. First, there is much convenience in relaying and sharing information to and among one's immediate networks, and FDWs may not find the need to refer to secondary sources for confirmation or validation. Second, there seems to be a 'disconnect' between the government and the Filipino migrant populace – leading the latter to an information seeking process devoid of support from the former.

Since this research had minimal funding to cover a more representative sample and consider data from multi-angles, further studies on this topic can digitally know the FDWs more thoroughly through

conducting virtual ethnographies in their online spaces. It may be best to know the contents and comments they put online, and how their virtual profile can match with the online efforts exerted by the higher ups. From here, the government can design better digital interfaces and offline activities that may potentially generate massive engagement.

Also, there may be a need to systematically scrutinise the information-centric services offered by the government – with inputs coming from varied public perspectives. Each information need (e.g. public health, legal and employment rights, and more) of the transnational population merits thorough discussion, which this research cannot adequately cover. This study can hence conceive other research in the field of ‘diasporic’ law, education, and public governance.

Today’s era of Web 2.0 no longer regards power as structured and cascaded in a top-down approach. Instead, the collective habits of the FDWs (both online and offline) can impact the social projects of the government and NGOs alike. The anecdotal gauge on the FDWs’ digital and information literacy is in need of further statistical backing for the design and enactment of the most appropriate information-centric projects for the sojourning population.

Moreover, the government may have to allot more resources (time, funding, and manpower) for their online re-launch projects, and other programmes intended to enhance the digital and information literacy of its online information consumers. The reservations to channel means for digital and pedagogical upheaval need serious collective rethinking especially now that nearly all transactions migrate to online.

Further, the FDWs can be participants in periodic workshops or seminars on Internet and computer use, and be active members in online and offline organisations that liaise directly with the government and other institutionalised information sources. The call to enhance the information literacy of the FDWs

entails a shared commitment from the government, multi-sectors (private and public corporations), academe, civic-minded organisations, and the FDWs themselves.

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