

Conceptions of Political Issues Among Netizens: A Phenomenographic Approach of Online Political Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of political discourse on social media is now an important domain through which people make sense of political issues. Nevertheless, there is little scholarly attention paid to studying the unique qualities of how political narratives get constructed by individual citizens. This study explores how Filipinos on Facebook make sense of political issues through narratives about flood control. The study adopts a qualitative method known as phenomenography. Twenty Facebook posts from August to November 2025 that were publicly available on Facebook have been purposively sampled and analyzed using thematic analysis and phenomenographic analysis techniques. Five conceptions have been developed: (1) Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility; (2) Institutions as Sites

of Legitimacy Crisis; (3) Flood Control Discourse as an Arena of Political Struggle; (4) Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity; and (5) Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction. The five conceptions represent the evolution from assessments of individual leaders to more structural assessments of institutions and governance and corruption in society. This paper highlights how Filipino netizens construct their political narratives through different perspectives that are interconnected and are influenced by lived experiences and digital discourse. Through the mapping of such variances into an outcome space, the study contributes to phenomenography, digital politics, and media literacy.

Keywords: *Flood Control, Netizens, Outcome Space, Phenomenography, Political Narratives*

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of new technologies has brought about considerable change in the process of political communication transforming it into the communicative activity involving more citizens as participants. Through the usage of social media, people can access the information, interpret the political discourse, and participate in political communication. Therefore, social media does not function as simple channels for the information exchange but becomes a platform for the continuous negotiation of the political meaning through discourse, social interaction, and civic engagement (Ruess et al., 2023).

Facebook is one of the popular social media platforms, which has become the space for the public discussion of politics in the Philippines. Being easily accessible, Facebook has encouraged the people to express their opinions, discuss governmental performance, and discuss the issues related to the life in their community. The governance issues such as infrastructure development and flood control often become the topics of discussions because of the close connection with the governmental services. Hence, the narratives about the flood control

reflect not only technical issues but also the perceptions of the people of the governance (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Mendoza et al., 2023).

In this regard, numerous studies have been devoted to such issues as online political participation, digital citizenship, civic engagement, and digital political communication (Dayrit et al., 2022; Ruess et al., 2023; Yue et al., 2019). Nevertheless, these studies have mostly focused on communication processes and participation, whereas the qualitatively different ways of interpreting the narratives about the governance received rather little attention in spite of the importance of such issue.

This knowledge is essential since citizens perceive the political issues differently based on their experience, beliefs, and social interaction in the online environment. Thus, investigation of different ways of understanding provides a better understanding of how the political meaning is constructed in the online discourse. This knowledge can be helpful for the promotion of critical media literacy, civic engagement, and democratic participation in digital spaces.

Therefore, the present study used the qualitative phenomenographic approach to identify qualitatively different ways in which Filipino netizens perceive and interpret the political issues expressed in the Facebook narratives on flood control. Since the phenomenographic approach allows identifying categories of description and structural relations between them in order to understand the ways in which the people perceive the shared phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2024), it is appropriate for investigating the problem.

METHODS

Research Design

The study utilized the qualitative research design known as phenomenography in order to determine the qualitatively different ways in which Filipino netizens perceive and interpret political issues portrayed through Facebook stories on flood management. Phenomenography is the right type of research methodology for those who wish to describe the different conceptions of people with respect to a certain phenomenon from the second order perspective. It deals with the way people perceive the phenomenon and not the phenomenon itself.

Data Sampling

For the study, twenty (20) publicly available Facebook narratives on flood control in the Philippines were used. The sampling approach utilized was purposeful sampling where selected samples had relevance to the aims of the study and were able to capture different views on political issues.

In order to establish the appropriate time frame of when to conduct the collection of data, Google Trends was initially used to ascertain times of high public interest in flood control and political issues related to this topic. According to the patterns seen, Facebook narratives that were created from August to November 2025 were selected. Publicly posted narratives that featured substantial textual narratives, involved political issues relating to flood control, and showed significant public engagement were used. Those that only consisted of pictures, emojis, hyperlinks or few texts were not considered.

Sampling Technique

Analysis of the data used a phenomenographic method of research. Thematic analysis acted as the first means of organizing the data collected. The researcher had to read through the narratives for the purpose of attaining a deeper understanding of the data. Preliminary coding of the data was done for the purpose of organizing recurrent themes within the narratives.

At this point, the researcher focused on the similarities and differences in how the Filipino netizens viewed political issues about flood control. Narratives that depicted similarities in conception were then grouped together in descriptions. This was done through continuous comparisons until it was possible to come up with categories of descriptions. The last step involved developing an outcome space which showed the logic of the relationship between the categories of description.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical approval for the study was received from the Research Ethics Committee of Sacred Heart College of Lucena City, Inc. before the data collection stage. Ethical issues in this study include conducting research through the internet and analyzing only Facebook posts available on the public domain, hence following ethical standards that should be observed when doing research using the internet and in line with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

In all the selected stories, any identifiers such as names, profile pictures, usernames, places, and date stamps were removed. None of the personal identifiers were used during the analysis process to make sure that results reflect the qualitatively different perceptions of Filipino netizens on political issues in flood control discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Netizens' Understanding and Interpretation of Political Issues as Depicted in Their Political Narratives on Social Media

Table 1: *Netizens' Understanding and Interpretation of Political Issues as Depicted in Their Political Narratives on Social Media*

Themes	Definition	Codes	Exemplar
Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility	Political issues are understood as failures of leadership, particularly in moral responsibility and ethical conduct. Flood control problems are linked to corruption, lack of integrity, and leaders' failure to prioritize public welfare, framing accountability as a personal moral obligation of those in power.	Moral Failure of Leadership, Betrayal of Public Trust, Neglect of Public Welfare, Abuse of Power, Demand for Accountability, Moral Evaluation of Governance	Exemplar 1: "He was offered a P3.1M bribe to stay quiet about irregular flood control projects. Instead of taking it, he exposed it publicly and helped entrap the official behind it." (N04) Exemplar 2: "What we need are leaders who know how to sacrifice for the nation, not thieves who serve themselves. We need leaders, not looters." (N13)
Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis	Political issues are interpreted as reflecting a breakdown of institutional trust, with governance systems such as the judiciary and legislature viewed as inconsistent, biased, or politically influenced. Concerns about fairness, due process, and credibility shape how these issues are understood.	Erosion of Institutional Trust, Selection Justice of Impunity, Institutional Ineffectiveness, Politization of Government Processes, Perceived Lack of Accountability Mechanism, Discrepancy between Law and Practice	Exemplar 3: "Everyone, one by one, was set free... The one still imprisoned is [PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL A], the fall girl for all the congressmen and senators who funneled their pork barrel funds to her fake NGO and ghost beneficiaries." (N02) Exemplar 4: "Everyone wants due process, until it's granted to someone they dislike." (N14)
Flood Control Discourse as Arena of Political Struggle	Political issues are viewed as an ongoing struggle between citizens and those in power, with flood control discourse serving as a space for expressing anger, frustration, and calls for accountability. These narratives reflect active civic engagement, including collective resistance and demands for change.	Collective Public Anger, Civic Mobilization and Resistance, Political Polarization of Conflict, Public Discourse as Arena of Contestation, Moral Urgency for Change, Escalation toward Political Crisis	Exemplar 5: "Rage, once ignored, becomes revolution. You cannot escape the anger of the people." (N07) Exemplar 6: "The anger of the Filipino people is bursting... It's called '[CURRENT PRESIDENT] Resign' tsunami." (N18)
Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity	Political issues are understood as outcomes of entrenched elite dominance, where power is concentrated within political families and networks that sustain influence across generations, reinforcing inequality and limiting meaningful political reform.	Political Dynasties and Nepotism, Elite Control of Resources, Reproduction of Political Power, Normalization of Inequality, Public Perception of Elite Privilege	Exemplar 7: "These nepo kids flaunt their excesses like there's no tomorrow... corruption has become too entrenched and too normal in their world that they already feel entitled to wealth." (N03) Exemplar 8: "In politics, families are never just families... they form a network of power and privilege that moves money, influence, and public perception." (N05)
Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction	Political issues are interpreted as manifestations of systemic corruption, where flood control governance is seen as a coordinated mechanism for resource extraction by interconnected political and economic actors. Corruption is thus viewed as embedded within the system rather than as isolated incidents.	Institutional Corruption Mechanisms, Political-Economic Collusion Networks, End-to-End Corruption Processes, Self-Perpetuating Corruption System, Commodification of Governance, Systemic Resource Extraction	Exemplar 9: "They call it 'pie-sharing.' In every P100 million project, nearly 60% immediately goes to kickbacks... This is no longer simple—it's a syndicate. Well-organized." (N01) Exemplar 10: "The insidious genius of corruption is that it is a game of reward or punishment... a corrupt system bent on perpetuating itself." (N06)

Table 1 highlights the five different categories of descriptions arising from the phenomenographic analysis of the study participants' understanding and interpretation of the political issues represented in Facebook stories on flood management. The identified five categories correspond to different ways of thinking about politics within online discussion forums, as expected in phenomenographic research (Åkerlind, 2024). They constitute the outcome space of the study since they show increasingly broad understandings of governance-related political problems.

The findings first point to Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility, which represents the participants' tendency to judge the performance of governance based on the moral duties of political leaders. In particular, leadership is conceptualized as a combination of accountability, integrity, and ethics which suggests that the evaluation of governance is based on public service expectations. It corresponds to current theoretical insights that suggest that people's evaluations of governance are strongly related to their perception of accountability and governmental responsiveness (Proszowska et al., 2022; Torcal & Christmann, 2021).

The second category, Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis, goes beyond the personal attributes and expands the judgment to public institutions. Thus, governance problems are viewed as a manifestation of the malfunction of those institutions which are characterized by selective justice, poor accountability, and inefficiencies in administration. These views are supported by existing research where responsiveness decline and corruption perceptions result in loss of trust in institutions (Torcal & Christmann, 2021).

The discussion further develops through Flood Control Discourse as an Arena of Political Struggle, portrays social media as a space where political meanings are negotiated through collective expression, emotional engagement, and civic participation. Rather than functioning merely as channels for information exchange, digital platforms become arenas in which governance issues are debated, contested, and collectively interpreted. This perspective reflects contemporary scholarship emphasizing the role of online political participation and digital communication in shaping political discourse and civic engagement (Ruess et al., 2023; Hellmueller et al., 2021).

The interpretation then extends to Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity, showing that governance concerns are viewed as part of persistent dynamics of elite rule and political succession rather than as discrete controversies. Participants explain political disputes in terms of broader structural frameworks characterized by the prevalence of dynastic politics and political inequality. This finding is aligned with the arguments presented by Mendoza et al. (2023) regarding the role played by political dynasties in governance and development in the Philippines.

The final category, Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction, provides the broadest understanding of political concerns through considering corruption as the persistent and self-reinforcing element of governance. Participants view the governance problems in terms of systematic efforts made by political, institutional, and economic agents rather than as the individual instances of misbehaving. This perception fits well with the definition provided by Jackson (2025) in his concept of systemic corruption as a permanent and organized tool for institutional exploitation and strategic gain.

As a whole, the five categories represent the difference in the perception of the political concerns on flood control by Filipino netizens. Each of these categories represents a unique view of the phenomenon that is determined using phenomenographic approach.

Figure 1. *Visual Representation of the Themes on Netizens' Conceptions of Political Narratives in Flood Control Discourse*



The analysis of the interpretation of political narratives on flood control within the Filipino social media community offers an insight into qualitative differences in understanding based on shared experiences online. Within the framework of phenomenography, the differences in understanding are based on the differences in the experience of the individuals who encounter the same phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2024). In that way, the perspectives presented below demonstrate how understanding of political meaning can differ in terms of scope and analytic depth.

The following figure presents five related categories of descriptions: Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility; Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis; Flood Control Discourse as an Arena of Political Struggle; Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity; and Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction. Those categories show how different perspectives on political narratives may be understood as distinct yet interconnected, from individual understanding to the institutional, structural and systemic understanding of the problem. Such structure of categories corresponds with the principles of phenomenographic research in that way that categories of description are considered as distinct but logically related ways of experiencing the same phenomenon (Hajar, 2021).

The presented concentric structure highlights the hierarchic and inclusive nature of relationships between these categories, typical for the phenomenographic outcome space. The categories do not exist as different interpretations, but they are organized in such a way to demonstrate more and more comprehensive understandings, starting from individual and going to more systemic and holistic ones. According to Åkerlind (2024), the outcome space is a structural presentation of categories of description and their relationship.

This suggests that participants' awareness of the phenomenon develops from narrower perspectives on individual judgments to broader perspectives, including those on the institutional level, structures, and systems. The described hierarchical order of understandings is in line with the phenomenographic approach, which states that the development of the higher-level understanding always involves building upon the lower ones (Stolz, 2020; Sims, 2024).

Structural Relationships and Variations in the Collective Experience of Political Narratives Among Netizens

Table 2: *Structural Relationships and Variations in the Collective Experience of Political Narratives Among Netizen*

Emerging Theme	Structural Level	Core Meaning of the Narrative	Structural Relationship	Variation in Collective Experience
Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility	Individual	Political leaders are perceived as morally accountable for governance failures such as corruption, neglect, and abuse of public trust.	Serves as the entry point of political interpretation where responsibility is personalized and attached to specific actors.	Some netizens frame the issue primarily as ethical failure of leaders.
Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis	Institutional	Public institutions are perceived as inconsistent, selective, or ineffective in delivering justice and accountability.	Emerges when distrust toward leaders expands into skepticism about governance institutions.	Interpretations shift from blaming individuals to questioning institutional fairness.
Flood Control Discourse as Arena of Political Struggle	Collective	Public discourse becomes emotionally charged, reflecting anger, resistance, and calls for accountability.	Institutional distrust transforms into collective political contestation and civic expression.	Narratives vary from passive criticism to calls for public mobilization and reform.
Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity	Structural	Political power is interpreted as concentrated within entrenched elite families and networks.	Broadens the narrative from immediate political controversy to historical patterns of power reproduction.	Some netizens situate current events within long-term cycles of dynastic dominance.
Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction	Systemic	Political corruption is understood as a coordinated system involving political actors, bureaucrats, and contractors.	Extends earlier interpretations by framing governance failures as outcomes of an embedded and self-sustaining system of corruption.	Some netizens interpret political issues as part of an entrenched system of corruption maintained through recurring practices.

The table presents the structural relationships and variations in Filipino netizens' interpretations of political narratives, illustrating how their understandings expand from individual to institutional, structural, and ultimately systemic perspectives. In phenomenography, these relationships are represented through an outcome space, which organizes the qualitatively different ways a phenomenon is understood into a logical and hierarchical structure (Åkerlind, 2024). Accordingly, the findings reveal an inclusive hierarchy in which each successive category represents a broader and more comprehensive way of understanding governance-related political issues.

At the foundational level, Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility frames political issues as moral failures of individual leaders. Participants primarily evaluate governance through ethical expectations of accountability, honesty, and integrity, reflecting an individual-centered understanding of political responsibility. This perspective suggests that governance is initially interpreted through the actions and conduct of political leaders, an interpretation consistent with contemporary discussions of political trust and governmental accountability (Proszowska et al., 2022; Torcal & Christmann, 2021).

This understanding expands into Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis, where attention shifts from individual political actors to the effectiveness and credibility of public institutions. Participants question the fairness, consistency, and accountability of governance systems, indicating a movement beyond personal blame toward institutional evaluation. Such interpretations reflect broader concerns regarding institutional legitimacy, particularly when citizens perceive governance as ineffective or unresponsive (Torcal & Christmann, 2021).

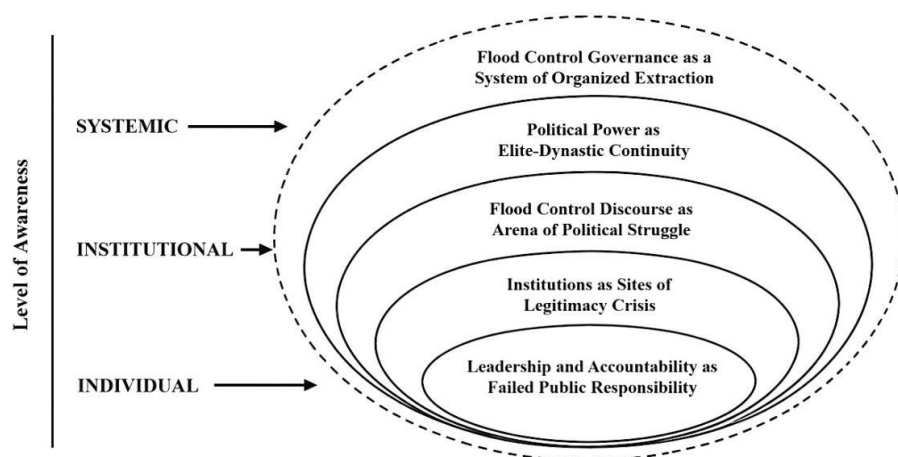
As distrust intensifies, participants' interpretations develop into Flood Control Discourse as an Arena of Political Struggle, where social media becomes a space for collective engagement, political contestation, and civic expression. Governance issues are no longer viewed solely as institutional shortcomings but as matters publicly negotiated through discourse and participation. This interpretation corresponds with contemporary scholarship emphasizing the role of digital platforms in facilitating political participation and shaping public discourse (Ruess et al., 2023; Hellmueller et al., 2021).

A broader perspective emerges in Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity, where governance issues are linked to enduring political structures rather than isolated events. Participants recognize recurring patterns of elite dominance, unequal political representation, and the persistence of dynastic politics, reflecting a structural level of awareness. This interpretation resonates with Mendoza et al. (2023), who demonstrate how entrenched political dynasties continue to influence governance and development in the Philippine context.

The most comprehensive level is Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction, in which corruption is understood as systemic, coordinated, and deeply embedded within governance processes. Rather than attributing governance failures to individual misconduct or institutional weakness alone, participants perceive corruption as a self-sustaining system involving interconnected political, institutional, and economic actors. This interpretation aligns with Jackson's (2025) conceptualization of systemic corruption as an enduring mechanism through which institutional abuse and strategic gain are reproduced over time.

The structural relationships among the categories demonstrate that participants' understandings become progressively broader and more comprehensive as they move beyond individual evaluations toward institutional, structural, and systemic explanations of governance. This hierarchical progression reflects the phenomenographic principle that more comprehensive conceptions incorporate and extend less complex ways of understanding rather than replacing them (Åkerlind, 2024; Stolz, 2020). Collectively, these structural relationships illustrate how political meaning is progressively constructed through digital discourse, underscoring the value of critical media literacy and informed civic participation in fostering deeper understandings of governance issues.

Figure 3: *Visual Representation of the Structural Relationships and Variation Across Levels of Awareness in Netizens' Interpretations of Political Narratives*



The figure depicts structural relations and variations in the understanding by Filipino netizens of political narratives as presented in Facebook discourses about flood management. It shows that interpretations are structured according to increasingly broad levels of awareness, thus indicating the fundamentally different manner in which participants understand governance-related problems. This structuring is aligned with phenomenographic research as it aims to disclose variation in the manner in which people experience and understand a common phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2024).

The analysis yields a hierarchical and inclusive structure of awareness. On the individual level, interpretations are based on the issue of personal accountability and moral judgments. On the institutional level, emphasis is placed on the processes of governance, including their legitimacy, accountability, and trustworthiness. On the structural level, perceptions relate to the political dimension of flood control discourse and to the fact that elite-dynastic continuity remains prevalent in governance. Lastly, on the systemic level, political concerns are viewed in terms of organized corruption and complex interconnections in the governance system.

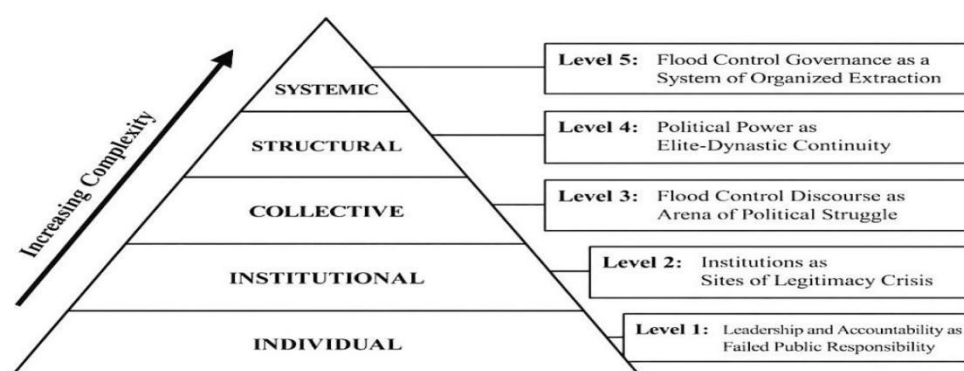
The levels are examples of how political meaning becomes broader and more insightful in its scope and explanation moving from personal to institutional, structural and systemic aspects of political matters. In this respect, the hierarchical nature of interpretations reflects the phenomenographic notion that broader conceptions emerge from and contain earlier understandings, hence disclosing increasingly comprehensive experience of the phenomenon (Stolz, 2020; Sims, 2024).

Within this hierarchy, Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity is positioned below Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction because the former provides a structural explanation centered on persistent political dominance, whereas the latter represents a broader conception of governance that encompasses interconnected political, institutional, and economic processes. This distinction is consistent with Mendoza et al. (2023), who examine the persistence of political dynasties in the Philippines and their implications for governance and development.

The figure shows that Filipino netizens' analysis of governance problems expands to include wider perspectives of individual, institutional, structural, and finally systemic views. Such an expansion indicates the contribution of online political communication to the formation of a more complete perception of governance problems in terms of developing critical media literacy and civic engagement skills.

Outcome Space of Filipino Netizens' Interpretations of Political Issues in Flood Control Narrative

Figure 4: *Outcome Space of Filipino Netizens' Interpretations of Political Issues in Flood Control Narratives*



The current study describes an outcome space that reflects how Filipino netizens conceptualize political problems in the online discourse. Specifically, the outcome space reflects the hierarchical relationship between qualitatively different conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Åkerlind, 2024). As stated above, the outcome space refers to the structural relationships between different categories of description, revealing the variance in conceptions according to their scope, complexity, and inclusiveness (Åkerlind, 2024). Therefore, the presented outcome space illustrates how participants understand governance in increasingly broad terms.

The current study identified five interconnected categories of description. They include Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility, Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis, Flood Control Discourse as an Arena of Political Struggle, Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity, and Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction. It appears that the presented categories reveal how participants conceive the governance of the flood control discourse in increasingly broad terms. As noted above, the order reflects how qualitatively different conceptions relate to one another logically (Hajar, 2021).

At the individual level, Leadership and Accountability as Failed Public Responsibility interprets political issues in the framework of moral failure on the part of individual political leaders. It means that the focus of participants was made on the issues related to ethical accountability, corruption, and abuses of power. This conception is individualistic in character because it focuses on individual leaders rather than institutions (Proszowska et al., 2022; Torcal & Christmann, 2021).

Institutions as Sites of Legitimacy Crisis can be considered as the representation of the institutional level, where interpretations go beyond individual actors and refer to the performance and credibility of governance institutions. Political issues become signs of declining transparency, fairness, and institutional accountability and represent concerns about legitimacy and trust in governance institutions (Torcal & Christmann, 2021).

Political issues as a part of social and political structure are presented in Flood Control Discourse as an Arena of Political Struggle and Political Power as Elite-Dynastic Continuity. Political narratives become spaces of collective engagement and governance becomes perceived as processes influenced by the patterns of elite dominance, patronage, and dynastic politics. These interpretations correlate with the modern approaches to digital political participation (Ruess et al., 2023; Hellmueller et al., 2021) and studies proving the presence of political dynasties in the Philippines (Mendoza et al., 2023).

Flood Control Governance as a System of Organized Extraction provides the most comprehensive understanding of governance in the context of this study. Political issues are seen as a consequence of coordinated and deeply rooted systems of political, institutional, and economic actors rather than corruption cases. The conception correlates with the definition of systemic corruption provided by Jackson (2025), who calls it a self-propelled system that helps sustain institutional abuse and strategic gain.

The outcome space demonstrates a hierarchical progression in which earlier understandings are incorporated into increasingly broader and more comprehensive conceptions of governance. As is typical for phenomenographic research, the hierarchy does not imply that some conceptions are more correct or relevant than others. It shows the structural relations between different interpretations of the same phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2024; Stolz, 2020; Sims, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This paper employed a phenomenographic method to explore the qualitative differences of meanings of political realities as interpreted by Filipino netizens in terms of the flood control issues as presented in Facebook narratives. As seen from my results, the process of political meaning making involves not just evaluating individual political actors but also entails broader perspectives regarding legitimacy, participation, political elites' continuity, and governance. The results of the study demonstrate, through the identification of five categories of descriptions and arranging them within an outcome space that Filipino netizens make political meanings in various but logically connected ways depending on their experience, values, and interaction in digital space.

First, these findings confirm the appropriateness of using phenomenography in analyzing political discussions online because of the focus on variation of conceptions and not opinions or attitudes. Second, this study confirms the role of Facebook as the tool for not just political communication, but also negotiation of meanings in relation to governance and accountability. Third, through providing new insights into the phenomenon under consideration, this paper contributes to the development of the theories and practices in the fields of phenomenography, digital political communication, governance, and critical media literacy.

These findings may be useful for future research as well as in practical applications. For instance, it is possible to apply the same methodology in the context of various digital political discourses in other sociopolitical contexts, social media platforms, and governance problems. On the other hand, there are many areas where these findings might be applied in practice by the educators, media literacy advocates, policymakers, and government communication professionals.

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