

Pseudo-Satisfaction in the Digital Era: Unmasking Gratitude Bias and Intermediated Bureaucracy in Public Service Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the paradox of digital governance in West Bandung Regency, Indonesia, where a high Community Satisfaction Index (CSI) regarding a digital population administration application (SIDILAN) contradicts the low rate of independent digital adoption by citizens. Utilizing a Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory design with a focus on an Intrinsic Case Study in the qualitative phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document triangulation. Participants were purposively selected, involving regency-level regulators, village officials, and end-users in areas with limited connectivity (blank spots). The data analysis reveals that the high CSI score is fundamentally a “pseudo-satisfaction” driven by the phenomenon of gratitude bias. Citizens essentially give high ratings as an appreciation for the personal assistance provided by village officials, rather than the reliability of the application system. The main findings highlight the role of village officials as “Digital Navigators” who sacrifice their personal time and resources (invisible labor) through benevolent discretion to patch the failures of digital infrastructure. This research contributes to expanding the Digital Era Governance literature by asserting that digital adoption in developing countries is not linear; instead, it breeds the concept of Intermediated E-Government. Practically and in terms of policy, this study urges the government to abandon artificial evaluation metrics and immediately adopt a Hybrid Proactive Governance Model by institutionalizing the role of digital navigators at the village level. Future research is recommended to quantitatively test the gratitude bias variable in a comparative context between urban and rural communities.

Keywords: Digital Governance, Digital Navigator, E-Government, Gratitude Bias, Pseudo-Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Global public administration is currently undergoing a paradigm transition from New Public Management (NPM) to Digital Era Governance (DEG), which emphasizes the reintegration of government functions, holistic technology adoption, and digitalized services to generate responsive public value (1). Within the DEG framework, digitalization is fundamentally a socio-institutional transformation rather than a mere procurement of technological applications (2). However, in practice, public sector digital transformation frequently produces an anomaly known as the citizen satisfaction paradox. This paradox manifests when government agencies systematically publish near-critical or near-perfect Community Satisfaction Indices (CSI), while ground-level sociological realities reveal persistent structural frictions, such as physical queues, system downtimes, and service fragmentation. In developing countries like Indonesia, the implementation of the Electronic-Based Government System (SPBE) is frequently trapped within a “digital smoke screen,” where the proliferation of digital applications serves as a symbol of institutional prestige rather than substantial public value (3,4).

A clear empirical manifestation of this anomaly is observed in the population administration services of West Bandung Regency (WBR) through the Online Service Registration Information System (SIDILAN). Official local government reports consistently rate community satisfaction as “Excellent,” directly contradicting field



findings where citizens in remote areas report complex application workflows and high rates of system errors. These government evaluation metrics are strongly suspected of suffering from self-reporting bias, designed primarily to legitimize administrative program success rather than capture real user experience frictions (5). From a socio-cultural perspective, this phenomenon is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and the digital divide. In semi-urban and rural areas, digital service adoption is rarely an isolated individual act; high power distance and paternalistic cultures compel citizens with low digital literacy to rely on human intermediaries, such as village officials or relatives acting as “digital navigators.” Consequently, high quantitative satisfaction scores often reflect a “gratitude bias” toward the assistance provided by field apparatuses rather than genuine application reliability (6). This dynamic inadvertently gives birth to a shadow bureaucracy that lengthens the very service chains technology aims to streamline (7).

Despite these empirical realities, a significant literature gap persists in the evaluation of digital public services in Indonesia. The majority of existing studies evaluating e-government success rely heavily on linear quantitative models, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), assuming direct, unmediated digital interactions between the state and citizens (8). These conventional frameworks fail to capture grassroots negotiations, algorithmic frictions, and socio-cultural nuances. Furthermore, while international scholarship addresses algorithmic accountability and bureaucratic discretion (9,10), it often overlooks the realities of paternalistic societies where public service delivery remains stubbornly anchored in human touch.

To rigorously dissect this complexity, this study synthesizes three foundational perspectives: the Digital Era Governance (DEG) paradigm, George C. Edwards III’s policy implementation theory, and Michael Lipsky’s concept of street-level bureaucracy. Edwards’s (1980) classic determinants of implementation communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure experience profound semantic shifts in the digital age: (1) Communication transcends verbal instructions to counter “digital noise” caused by misaligned application language; (2) Resources extend beyond hardware to include the digital proficiency of frontline personnel (11); (4) Disposition shifts toward “performative digitalization” or pseudo-compliance, where officials prioritize data entry for CSI targets over user experience (12); and (13) Bureaucratic Structure collides with rigid centralized algorithmic accountability, leaving minimal room for local discretion. To navigate this friction, Lipsky’s framework helps elucidate how frontline officials exercise discretion. Rather than classifying all intermediaries as illegal brokers engaged in rent-seeking, this study distinguishes them as *Digital Navigators* legitimate, benevolent facilitators bridging the digital literacy gap.

Grounded in this theoretical synthesis, this study aims to unmask the paradox of citizen satisfaction evaluation through a case study of the SIDILAN application in West Bandung Regency. Specifically, this research investigates how the digital divide and intermediated bureaucracy obscure true application effectiveness while untangling the contradiction between quantitative metrics and phenomenological experiences. This study offers dual contributions: theoretically, it expands DEG literature by introducing “intermediated e-government” and “gratitude bias” as critiques of Western rational adoption models; practically, it proposes a novel Hybrid Proactive Governance Model a collaborative framework repositioning local officials as official digital navigators to foster an authentic, transparent, and inclusive electronic-based government system.

METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a Mixed-Methods approach with a Sequential Explanatory design (14,15). This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to first identify anomalies or statistical trends in quantitative data, to then be explained in depth (explanatory) through qualitative data collection. In the first phase (quantitative), the researcher analyzed secondary data in the form of the Community Satisfaction Index (CSI) and application activity logs of SIDILAN to map the gap between high citizen satisfaction and low independent usage.

In the second phase (dominant qualitative), this study utilized an Intrinsic Case Study approach. The case study was selected because the phenomenon of “pseudo-satisfaction” and the emergence of the Digital Navigator role



in rural areas are contemporary events tightly bound to the local administrative and socio-cultural context, where the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not clearly evident.

Location and Time of Research

The research was conducted in West Bandung Regency (WBR), focusing on the Department of Population and Civil Registration (Disdukcapil) as the system regulator, as well as three sample villages representing the typologies of semi-urban areas and remote areas with telecommunication infrastructure constraints (blank spots). Field data collection was carried out from February to May 2026, coinciding with the transition period of the Digital Population Identity (IKD) evaluation by the central government.

Subjects, Participants, and Sampling Techniques

Techniques The selection of informants for the qualitative phase was conducted using a matrix-based Purposive Sampling technique (16). A total of 40 key informants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, divided into three distinct clusters:

1. Regulator Cluster (n=3): WBR Disdukcapil officials who directly handle the server, regulation, and evaluation of SIDILAN.
2. Digital Navigator Cluster (n=12): Village officials and operators across the three sample villages who actively assist citizens in using the application (having processed >50 citizen documents via their accounts).
3. User Cluster (n=25): Village citizens recorded as giving high CSI scores but whose application process was represented or assisted by village officials. To broaden the search for informal actors who might not be recorded in the village (such as RT/RW volunteers), Snowball Sampling was used as a secondary method if initial informants recommended other crucial actors in the service chain.

Data Collection Techniques

Primary and secondary data collection was carried out through three main instruments to ensure thick description: Semi-Structured Interviews: Utilizing Appreciative Inquiry and Projective Questioning techniques to lower bureaucratic defense mechanisms, allowing village officials to recount their hidden workloads (invisible labor) without feeling accused of maladministration or illegal levies. Limited Participant Observation: The researcher directly observed daily service interactions at the village office (field SOPs), noted the process duration from the citizen's arrival to document upload by the official, and mapped the technical application hindrances (UI/UX) experienced. Documentation Study: Included a review of CSI Reports, digital complaints through social media crawling (Digital Methods), and relevant Disdukcapil regulations.

Validity and Reliability of Data

Qualitative rigor in this research was maintained through three main mechanisms to minimize researcher bias and ensure analytical reliability:

1. Triangulation: Using Method Triangulation (comparing interview results, field observations, and statistical anomalies) and Source Triangulation (matching claims from Disdukcapil with the reality of village officials' experiences).
2. Member Checking and Peer Debriefing: Verbatim interview transcripts were reconfirmed with key informants to avoid researcher interpretation bias. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with two independent public administration scholars to review coding consistency, particularly regarding the conceptualization of "gratitude bias."
3. Audit Trail: Systematic documentation in the form of field notes, analytic memos, and data coding history in the analysis software was strictly maintained so that the flow of conclusions could be partially replicated by other reviewers.

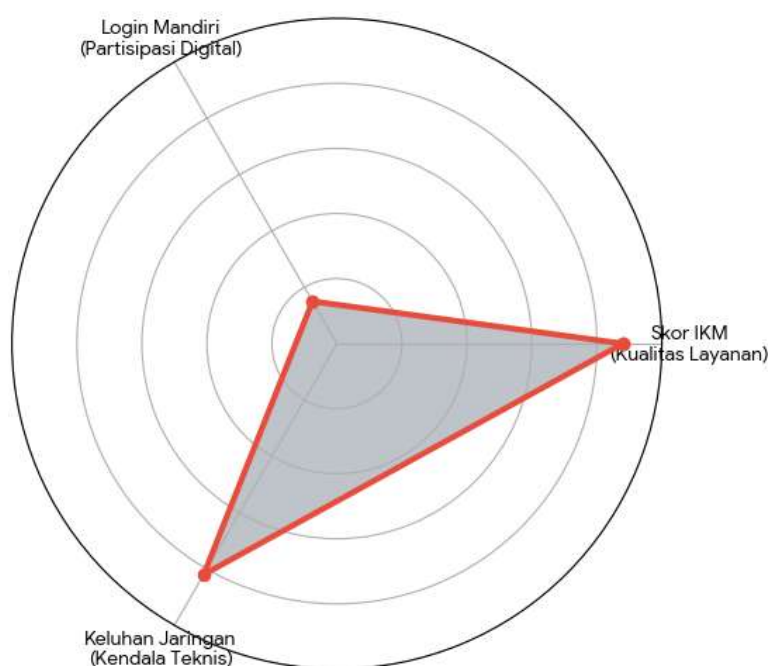
Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using an interactive analysis framework (data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing) reinforced by a procedural Thematic Analysis approach (17). This process was automated using NVivo software. The stages included: Open Coding: Interview transcripts were broken down into basic units of meaning (e.g., signal complaints, citizen reluctance, official initiative). Axial Coding: Grouping initial codes into major thematic categories based on the modification of Edward III's variables, such as Technical Resource Gap and Benevolent Discretion. Matrix Coding Query: Juxtaposing participants' demographic data categories with the expressed thematic sentiments, to observe the cause-and-effect relationships underlying the CSI anomaly.

RESULTS

The Contradictory Reality: The Illusion of Excellent Service and Gratitude Bias

The first phase of this research unmasked a statistical anomaly that has long been a blind spot in regional public service evaluation. Analysis of the WBR Disdukcapil's Community Satisfaction Index (CSI) documents showed an average satisfaction score for the SIDILAN application at 88% (Excellent Category). However, activity log analysis and observation data triangulation found that the rate of independent direct adoption by remote citizens was below 15%.



Picture 1. The Paradox Radar Chart

This anomaly was successfully explained through the qualitative phase. In-depth interviews revealed that the high CSI score does not represent the reliability of the application's interface (UI/UX) or server, but rather a manifestation of gratitude bias. Rural communities with limited digital literacy and telecommunication infrastructure tend to hand over the entire administrative process to village officials. When the satisfaction survey is conducted, citizens give a perfect score as a form of appreciation for the individual official who helped them, not for the system.

This is strongly reflected in the statement of one citizen (Informant W1, 52 years old):

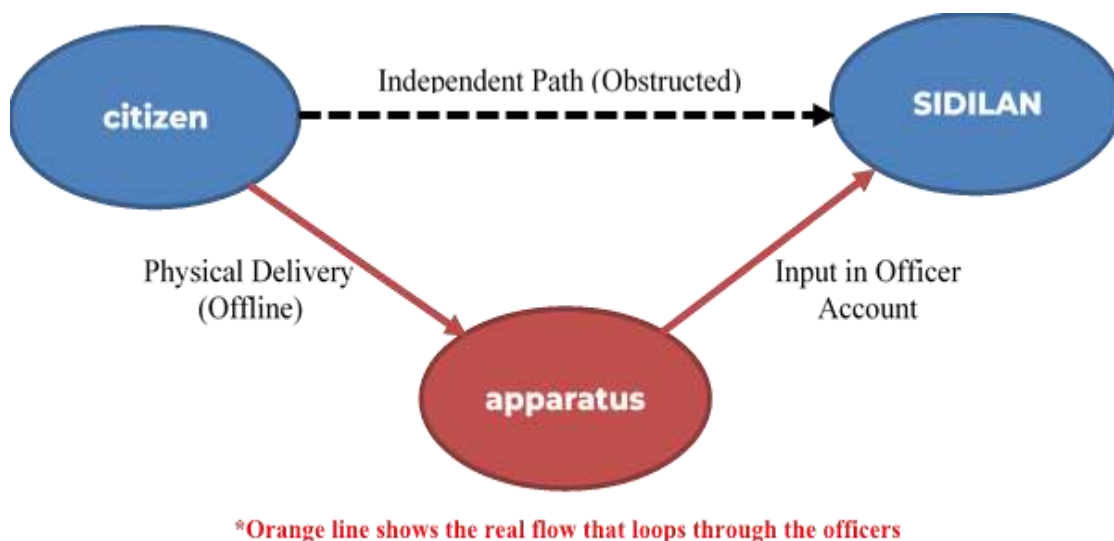
"Let alone understanding how to use the app, Sir. Even getting a signal at home is hard. Yesterday, when making a Birth Certificate for my grandchild, I just brought the paper files to the Hamlet Head (Kadus)."

He was the one who took pictures and entered them into his phone. So, I filled in 'very satisfied' when asked, because the Kadus was kind enough to take the trouble to handle mine."

This finding proves that sociological reality and the paternalistic culture of rural communities have created an "illusion of excellent service" within the government's formal evaluation metrics.

Invisible Labor: Village Officials as Digital Navigators

The failure of the application infrastructure to reach grassroots communities directly does not automatically halt services, thanks to interventions from village officials. Thematic analysis results found a central category of "Benevolent Discretion." Village officials de facto take on a dual role: as territorial apparatus and simultaneously as "Digital Navigators."



Picture 2. Infographic "The Hidden Intermediary"

This digital navigator role generates what is known as invisible labor. Village officials must use their personal internet quotas, personal mobile devices, and spend hours overcoming digital noise when the SIDILAN system experiences disruption. One village official (Informant A1, Village Operator) described this burden:

"According to the SOP rules, citizens are told to process it themselves via their respective phones. But in reality, 80% of citizens who come to the village hall end up asking for help to input it. Sometimes the server is down and keeps buffering, forcing me to take the files home, working overtime to input them at night using the village WiFi. If we don't help, it's a pity they won't have documents."

This quote confirms that village officials are not illegal brokers seeking rent (rent-seeking), but structured facilitators patching up the systematic failures of forced digitalization.

DISCUSSION

Dissecting the Anomaly through the Lens of Digital Era Governance and Policy Implementation

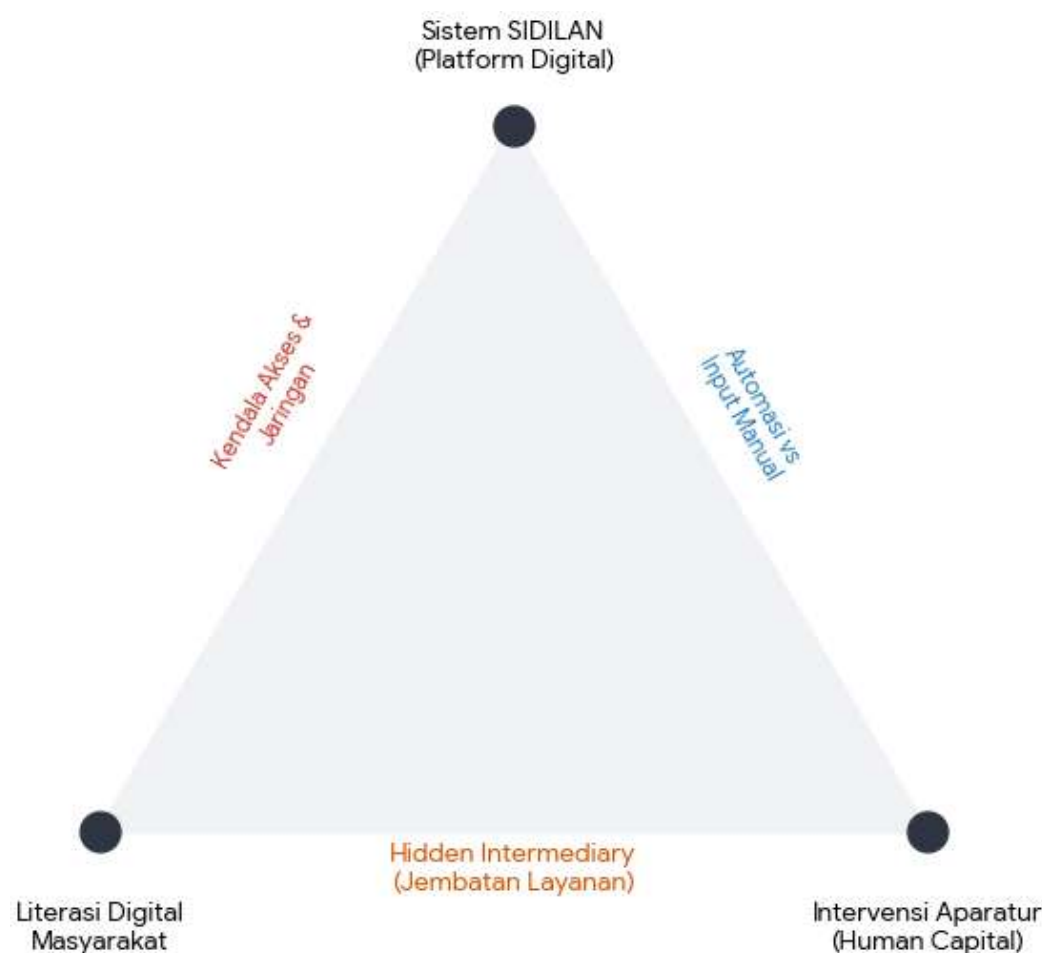
The above findings provide a critical reflection on the basic assumptions of Digital Era Governance (DEG). Previous literature (such as (2,18) often portrays e-government transformation linearly, where the availability of technology is assumed to be directly proportional to efficiency. However, the findings of this study contradict that assumption and actually align with Lipsky's critique of Street-Level Bureaucracy. Service automation through SIDILAN is proven to limit the formal discretion of field officials, yet simultaneously, it gives rise to new forms of informal discretion to save citizens from "algorithmic blindness."

When dissected using the recontextualization of George C. Edward III's implementation theory, the failure of independent SIDILAN adoption stems from the misalignment of two variables: Resources and Bureaucratic Structure. The regional government concentrated resources on application development at the central (regency) level but neglected to distribute resources (network infrastructure and training) to the lowest bureaucratic structure (villages). Consequently, village officials unilaterally absorb this structural burden without any clear legal umbrella or operational incentives.

This research fills the literature gap by offering a new perspective: that in developing countries with high power distance, government technology adoption cannot be measured through an individualistic Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The interaction between citizens and the state must be understood as a sociologically mediated process (intermediated e-government).

Implications and Future Research Agenda

The theoretical implication of this study is the need for a paradigm shift from Direct Digital Adoption to Intermediated E-Government in public administration studies. Practically, the results of this study urge regional governments to stop hiding behind “pseudo-satisfaction” figures. As a solution, this study proposes the concept of a Hybrid Proactive Governance Model



Picture 3. The KBB Digital Synergy Triangle

This hybrid governance model recommends the institutionalization of the “Digital Navigator” role. Instead of forcing citizens to use the application independently in blank spot areas, local governments must legalize special accounts for village officials (e.g., a “Collective Partner Account” feature in SIDILAN), provide special operational internet quotas, and make citizen assistance an official Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the village.

While this study successfully unmask the sociological mechanisms behind citizen digital satisfaction, it acknowledges several limitations. First, focusing exclusively on West Bandung Regency restricts the generalizability of the findings to other regions with varying administrative and cultural landscapes. Second, the qualitative nature of this research limits statistical extrapolation, particularly concerning urban populations that may possess higher digital literacy. Therefore, future research is strongly recommended to develop and validate formal quantitative measurement instruments specifically for the concepts of “gratitude bias” and “pseudo-satisfaction.” Furthermore, future studies should investigate other potential determinants influencing these variables, such as socio-economic status, age disparities, and varying levels of institutional trust across different demographic typologies. Testing the effectiveness of the Hybrid Proactive Governance model through quasi-experimental methods would also be a logical next step to solidify these findings.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the high level of community satisfaction (CSI) towards the SIDILAN application in West Bandung Regency is fundamentally a “pseudo-satisfaction” driven by gratitude bias. Instead of representing the successful independent adoption of digital services by citizens, the high evaluation scores actually mask the reality of invisible labor borne by village officials. Amidst gaps in infrastructure and digital literacy, these grassroots officials act de facto as “Digital Navigators” saving the delivery of public services through benevolent discretion.

Theoretically, these findings challenge the underlying assumptions of the Digital Era Governance (DEG) paradigm and linear technology acceptance models. This research contributes to expanding the public administration literature by formulating the concept of Intermediated E-Government, where interactions between citizens and the state in digital systems do not occur directly but must be sociologically mediated. Through the recontextualization of Edward III's implementation theory, this study proves that the void of technical resources and bureaucratic structure from local governments is ultimately absorbed unilaterally by street-level bureaucrats.

From practical and policy implications, this study urges regional governments to cease using potentially misleading formal evaluation metrics. The government must immediately adopt the Hybrid Proactive Governance Model by institutionalizing the role of Digital Navigators. This can be realized by providing a firm legal umbrella, an official “Partner/Facilitator Account” feature in the application system, and adequate operational support for village officials. This institutionalization is highly crucial to draw a firm boundary between legitimate administrative facilitation tasks and rent-seeking practices or brokerage-based extortion.

To deepen the understanding of this topic, future research is recommended to test the gratitude bias variable quantitatively across a broader demographic, including conducting comparative studies between urban and rural communities. Additionally, testing the effectiveness of the hybrid governance model through quasi-experimental methods would be highly beneficial to formulate digital public service standards that are truly inclusive and adaptive in developing countries.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Approval: This research involved human subjects (respondents). Ethical clearance and approval were obtained from the relevant academic and regional research boards prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent. **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. **Data Availability:** The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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