

Public Communication at the Service of Moroccan Citizens in the Era of Public Services Digitalization: the Case of the Service “watiqa.ma”

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Abstract: *This paper aims to demonstrate the place of public communication among a population of citizens using digitalized public services. It also aims to enrich the exceptional studies on digitalized public services in Morocco. Using a qualitative approach through the method of netnography, this article demonstrates the main variables that explain the poor use of digitalized public services and that require public communication. The study confirms research results showing that perceived uncertainty, perceived security, perception of service responses, perceived functional benefit, and perceived quality of information are the main determinants of the need for public communication in Morocco.*

Keywords: Public communication, Digitalized public services, Citizens, Netnography

I. INTRODUCTION

As the virtual world continues to shrink the gap between public administrations and citizens, the provision of digitalized public services has become an indispensable condition for a country's technological development. According to Hervier (2014), the utilization of digital technology is necessary to modernize communities, facilitate better internal management, and simplify communication with citizens. ICT, the Internet, and the information society have permeated our daily lives and surpassed the boundaries of information and communication technologies. However, despite political discourse and media coverage, public services face a tarnished image and heightened criticism from citizens, professional groups, and companies alike. The public demands prompt and customized service, disapproving of wastage or delays in response (Cortés-Cediel et al., 2017).

Governments of developing countries have responded to this demand by enhancing the information infrastructure of electronic services, especially in the administrative field, to promote the development and use of ICTs and facilitate interaction between citizens and public services (Jeddou, S. 2015). This approach is driven by the needs and preferences of citizens, with the aim of ensuring that they appreciate the actions of the administration for their own benefit (Burlacu et al., 2021).

Despite having these provisions in place, Morocco is still grappling with issues related to communication, governance, and cost control in its public administration. The country's new constitution, which was adopted in 2011, emphasizes the need for public services to be more accessible to citizens, increase transparency, and respect human rights. In line with these goals, the public administration must implement new digital platforms that promote reliable and efficient public communication. The aim is to enhance governance by leveraging human resources, upgrading skills, and adopting new tools to improve service quality through sustainable performance measurement.

The fast-paced changes in the public space have compelled public administrations to establish a digital presence, particularly on social media platforms, to understand people's views through feedback and respond more effectively (Burger et al., 2017). This necessitates the monitoring of communication on these digital platforms and the modernization of external communication tools with various partners, including citizens, private companies, and civil society. The public administration has taken steps to improve its image by embracing an entrepreneurial spirit and

supporting human skills through training and coaching to enhance the efficiency of the services provided (Idrissi & Elamraoui, 2018).

In this configuration, we position the following problem: the place of public communication in Morocco in the era of digitalization of public services. Throughout this article, we attempt to answer several sub-questions:

- How are new technologies spreading in the Moroccan administration?
- How will netnography allow the contextualization of virtual community influence mechanisms found in the literature?
- What is the place of communication in the Moroccan administration?

To tackle this issue, we first establish a theoretical framework (Grossmann & Rinck 2004) to define and outline the concept of public communication in the context of the digitalization of public services. We then emphasize the significance of public communication in shaping the public administration's image. Lastly, we present our methodological approach and the findings of our qualitative study, which was conducted using the netnography method. This research approach is based on analyzing the behavior of virtual communities in digital environments (Bernard.Y, 2004; Muniz J.A. et Schau H.J., 2005; Nelson M.R, 2005).

II. A REFERENCE FRAMEWORK ON PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Our theoretical approach draws on the field of organizational communication, incorporating insights from Isabelle Paillart, Valérie Lépine, Bernard Miège, Adrian Staï, Fabienne M. Juchat, Alex Mucchielli, Armand Mattelart, Pierre Musso, Lucien Sfez, and others. This approach utilizes a range of disciplines, including communication sciences, usage sociology, management sciences, and cognitive sciences, to identify specific categories of traces related to the appropriation process and to understand the factors and variables that influence change processes. As André Akoun notes, understanding communication and its modalities requires considering the cultural context in which it operates, and effective communication remains a critical factor in successfully implementing organizational change.

In the view of Manuel Castells, the Internet has become a transformative force, enabling the transition to a new type of society, the network society, and a new economy. The Internet allows for communication with large numbers of people, at any time and from anywhere in the world and as Castells writes in "The Internet Galaxy," it has become a new communication environment that permeates all areas of social life and transforms them.

In the realm of public communication, establishing a relationship and interaction with users is essential to building trust and dispelling mistrust. To this end, studies of Web usage suggest the importance of reputation management. However, before reputation can be effectively managed, it must first be monitored through 2.0 economic intelligence, and then acted upon through opinion leaders who have a greater resonance, such as those found on social networks.

In summary, public communication involves both public and private actors and shares similarities with traditional advertising, but differs in that it aims to achieve a general interest objective rather than a commercial one. Its goal is to raise awareness, provide information, or change individual beliefs or behaviors by addressing the population as a whole or a specific segment. To achieve this, public communication disseminates messages through various media, with mass media being the primary channel.

III. Methodology of Research

To conduct research on the Moroccan e-Gov system, we have developed a methodology that aligns with the suggestions of Heeks and Bailur (2007) for e-Gov research, as well as the theories of Campbell and Fiske (1959) and Bagozzi, Yi, and Philips (1991) for ensuring research reliability and validity. The survey will be targeted towards individuals who have experience using the Moroccan e-Gov system.

To achieve our research objectives, we have decided to use a qualitative approach with the netnography method (as shown in Figure 1). The method of netnography was first developed by Robert Kozinets in the 1990s, and it is a data collection technique that is rooted in ethnography. However, it is particularly well-suited for studying the behavior of

virtual communities in the digital environment, as it borrows ethnographic techniques from virtual communication exchanges (Mercanti-Guérin, 2009). Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this method for understanding user behavior and experiences in the context of e-Gov systems (Bernard, 2004; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Nelson, 2005).

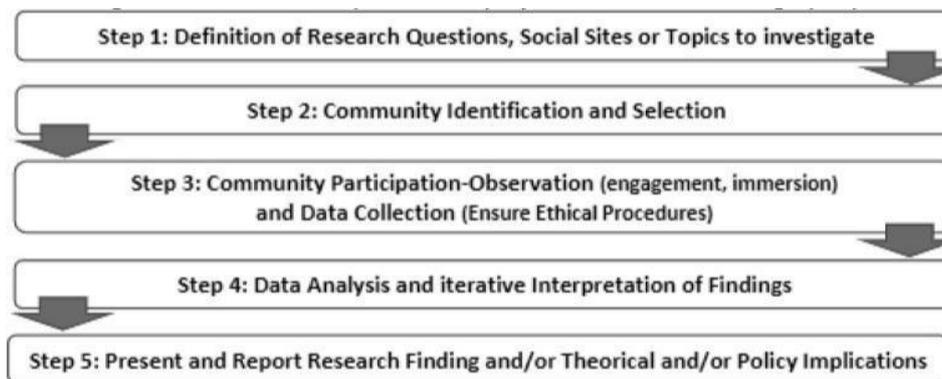


Figure (1): Simplified design of a netnographic research project

In this exploratory qualitative study, the primary goal is to conduct a close observation of the posts and comments within the selected virtual communities of public services being studied. The purpose of this observation is to identify any new information being shared by the members of these communities.

3.1. Morocco as a case

The Moroccan government has set the objective of providing its citizens with access to high-quality and cost-effective public services. The main measures have focused on modernizing and developing infrastructure, improving the coverage and quality of telephone networks, and enhancing access to the Internet. However, the communication deployed to promote these public services is still marked by an institutional logic, mainly top-down. It does not take into account the popularity of community networks (such as Facebook or YouTube) among Internet users, and the collaborative production modes on which they rely.

3.2. The choice of "Facebook" as a social network and "YouTube" as an interactive visual platform

In Morocco, the penetration strength of Facebook outstrips other social media such as Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn. Facebook's strength lies in the number of its users. On the other hand, YouTube stands out as the most used video platform in the world, with over a billion active users and the 3rd most visited site in the world. Our choice of case study focuses on a unique Moroccan public service, namely watiqa.ma.

3.3. The Characteristics of the virtual communities of the target public services studied

The most important criteria for selecting a virtual community that could serve as a basis for addressing our research problem were: Abundance of contributions generated by members, animated participation and high traffic, A large number of members, Sufficient variation among them in terms of participation and citizen characteristics.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis we will adopt in this section is qualitative contextual content analysis.

This analysis is based on the content shared in a given context.

In a study conducted by Ryu and Ho (2021), perceived quality of information, perceived security and perceived trust were identified as key factors influencing citizen satisfaction with digitalized public services. Similarly, the study by Bélanger and Carter (2008) found that perceived trust and computer self-efficacy were important determinants of user satisfaction with online public services.

Other studies have also examined the importance of perceived compatibility, availability of resources and perceived quality of information in citizen satisfaction with digitalized public services (Li et al., 2019 Pham et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study by Chen and Chen (2021) showed that perceived privacy was a crucial factor in the satisfaction of users of online public services.

After observing the community of the "Watiqa.ma" page on Facebook and the comments about this service on YouTube, we will verify the existence of variables from the literature, namely: perceived awareness (PA), availability of resources (AR), computer self-efficacy (CSE), perceived compatibility (PC), perceived image (PI), perceived ease of use (PEU), perceived information quality (PIQ), multilingual option (MO), perceived functional benefit (PFB), perceived uncertainty (PU), perceived security (PS), perceived privacy (PP), perceived trust (PT), and perception of service response (PSR).

The next section will present the different publications addressed by the administrators with the members.

4.1. Analysis of posts and comments

On January 21, 2019, the administrator of the page posted the list of Moroccan cities and regions where the watiqa.ma service applies (Fig. 1). The post is in the form of a text in addition to a link that refers to the platform's website.

We can see that this post had 57 reactions, 214 comments, and 13 shares.



Figure (2): Publication announcing the cities where the service "watiqa.ma" applies

Image content analysis:

According to the comments of these five users, their opinions on this service are very mixed. Some users received their order after a wait of 10 days, but had issues with incomplete information and the inability to make online claims. Other users had a very negative experience with processing delays much longer than expected, a lack of regional

coverage, and the inability to make claims or obtain refunds. Some customers even reported waiting for 4 months without a response.

After analyzing the reactions and comments, we have collected the comments of the page members, represented in the following figure:



Figure (3) : Members reactions on Facebook

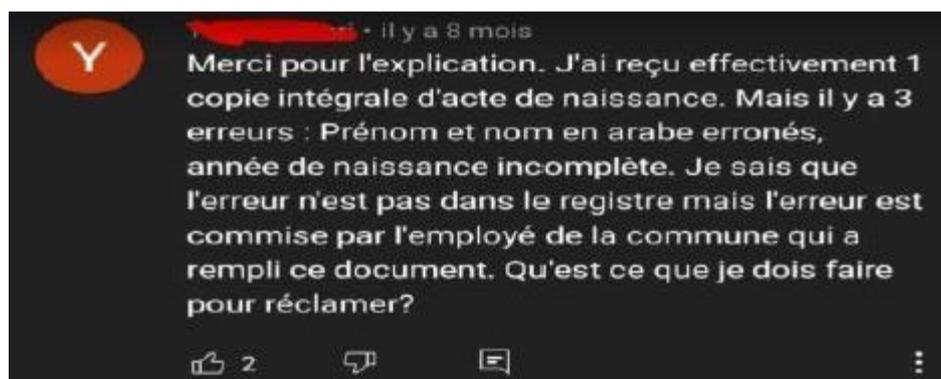


Figure (4) : Members reactions on YouTube

Image content analysis:

The comment expresses gratitude for receiving a full copy of a birth certificate but mentions three mistakes made by the town employee who filled out the document. The author is aware that the mistake is not in the registry and is asking for advice on how to make a claim.

In summary, most members are unhappy with this service, claiming that the service does not work, the non-existence of the service in other cities, delay in sending documents (4 months late as an example), false information provided (errors in family name), scam (citizens paid the shipping costs, but they did not receive the administrative documents), and the claims service remains non-responsive. However, we have a minority of positive comments on the platform, which explain the good responsiveness and speed of the service.

These results demonstrate the existence of research variables such as PI, MS, SRP and PPB.

4.2. Post on the process of complaints:

On July 9, 2016, the administrators published a post on the procedure of submitting complaints (Fig. 5). Thus, members will be able to send their complaints by mentioning the order number, the address, and the email.

We see that this post had 42 reactions, 179 comments, and 7 shares.



Figure (5): Post on the process of complaints

The sample comments for this publication are as follows:

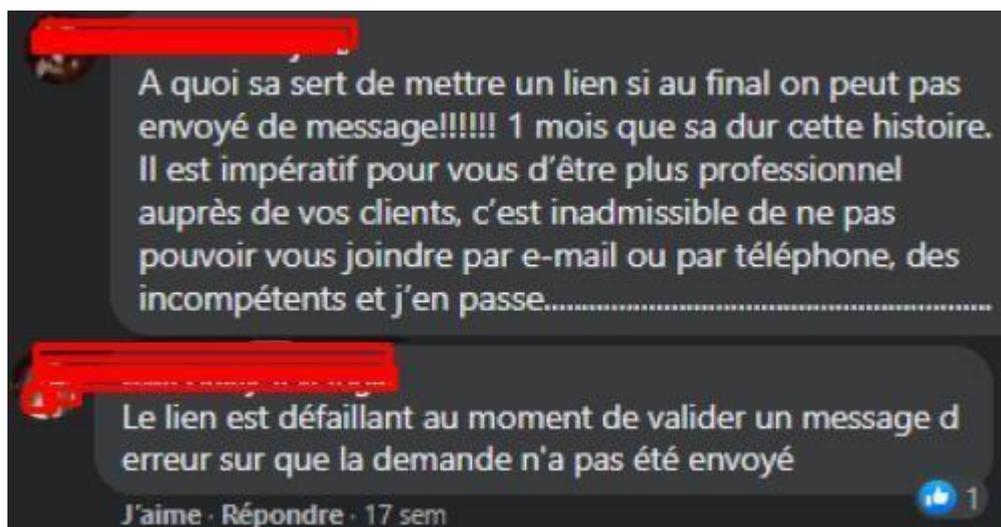


Figure (6): Reactions from members on Facebook *Image content analysis:*

Both comments express frustration about the inability to send messages through the provided link. The first comment emphasizes the importance of professionalism and the need for customer service to be more accessible by email or phone. The second comment reports that there is an error during message validation and the request was not sent.

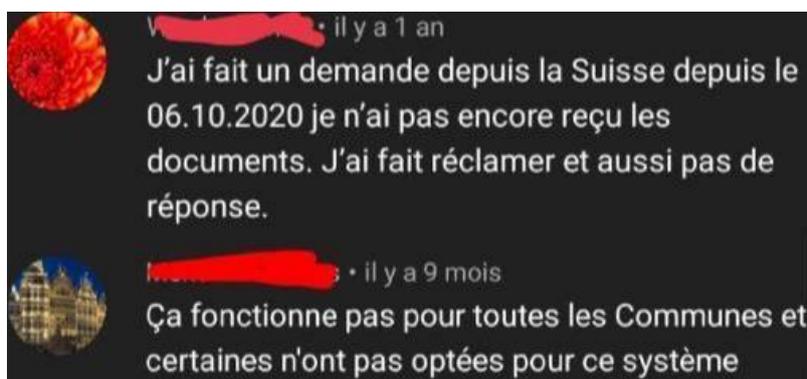


Figure (7): Reactions from members on YouTube *Image content analysis*:

The first comment expresses that a request was made from Switzerland since October 6, 2020, but the person still has not received the requested documents. They also tried to file a claim but did not receive a response. The second comment emphasizes that the system referred to in the first comment does not work for all municipalities, and some have not chosen to opt for this system.

Other variables are displayed after analyzing comments, such as QPI, CPU, and IP. Thus, according to the comments of the members, we notice a dissatisfaction with the use of the digital solutions as they remain unresponsive to the requests for complaints or display a failure of the system.

These results are supported by several previous studies which also found that citizens are not satisfied with the communication of digital public services. For example, a study by Chen and Xu (2017) found that the quality of communication was one of the main barriers to the adoption of digital public services. Similarly, a study by Grönlund and Horneij (2016) showed that citizens have high expectations when communicating with digital public services, but these expectations are often not met.

Effectively, based on the netnography results of the watiqa.ma service of the Ministry of the Interior, it can be concluded that the absence of online communication with citizens hinders the achievement of proximity goals and the provision of quality public service.

The online comments of users suggest that meeting their specific needs could improve the service's favorable perception through effective public communication. This could also help anticipate and prevent any social or political unrest, whether it is caused by genuine popular dissatisfaction (detectable through circles of grievances) or virtual discontent on social networks (El mahfoudi, 2015).

During the preparatory phase for hypothetico-deductive reasoning, the existing literature's variables were contextualized and assessed for their respective opportunities and significance. The content analysis of the studied service also provided insights into the role of member interaction in virtual communication.

V. CONCLUSION

Public communication plays a crucial role in shaping the public administration's image among citizens and all stakeholders. It helps generate positive energy around Morocco's societal project and the modernization of all public services, aligning with the

demands of an informed citizen who actively contributes to social peace and socioeconomic development. The objective is to leverage public communication as a driving force to establish a new mode of governance that aligns with a modernized Morocco.

In the future, we plan to conduct quantitative research to validate these findings using a research model that explores the adoption of online technologies such as UTAUT and GAM. The study will involve administering an online questionnaire to citizens who use the watiqa service.

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