QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE ADMINISTRATIVE PUBLIC SERVICES PROVIDED BY MUNICIPALITIES

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Abstract:
Nowadays online public services are an essential component of government operations influencing significantly citizens perception and satisfaction. The research aims to assess the quality of online administrative services provided by local public administration, by exploring suitable methods and tools for evaluating the quality of public services in an online environment.
The paper is structured into four sections, focusing on topics such as public services, the evaluation of online services and the situation in Romania. In this respect a mixed methods approach is used to present the case study of Suceava City Hall. Findings indicate that the online services provided by Suceava City Hall largely align with citizen expectations, highlighting trust, security, and usefulness as key quality factors. However, the overall satisfaction level remains at a moderate level. The conclusions and final recommendations emphasize the importance of orienting online services towards solving citizens' problems.

INTRODUCTION

Online public services are a key component of public administration responsibilities, delivered through electronic means. Their quality is determined by the level of satisfaction among service recipients—namely, citizens. Moreover, the quality of these services influences the development and improvement of e-governance services as well as performance management in public institutions (Anghel & Neagoe, 2015). The aim of this paper is to analyze the quality of online services provided to citizens by local public administration. The study identifies appropriate methods and tools for assessing the quality of public services in an online environment using various measurement instruments or specific approaches.

The paper is structured into four sections. The first sections focuses on analyzing relevant scientific literature, highlighting crucial aspects such as public services as a response to citizens' needs, policy measures to address the main challenges faced by public administration at European level, issues related to the evaluation of online public services, their typologies and characteristics, and strategies for their development and assessment. The core of the research consists of the case study on the quality of online public services offered by Suceava City Hall. It presents the main findings from both the quantitative and qualitative research and interpretation of results, outlining the study's most relevant conclusions. The quantitative analysis revealed that the online services provided by Suceava City Hall largely meet citizens' expectations and address their needs for information and problem-solving. Key quality factors identified by respondents include trust in the accuracy of the services and a sense of security. Additionally, respondents appreciated features

related to utility and efficiency, such as information accuracy, problem resolution, and reduced time requirements. Over 50% of respondents reported a moderate level of satisfaction with online public services.

Qualitative research highlighted that these services are designed to address citizens' needs effectively, as most respondents perceive. They are aligned with legal requirements and adhere to the institution's responsibilities, thereby ensuring their adaptability to citizens' needs.
The paper concludes with findings and recommendations, while also acknowledging the limitations of the research.

1. THEORETICAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE PUBLIC SERVICES

Online public services represent a dynamic component of modern public administrations, attracting significant interest in terms of performance management within the public sector. The quality of online public services is a priority in all initiatives aimed at improving or developing e-governance services, serving as a key performance criterion for public administration management (Mina-Raiu & Melenciuc, 2022). Essentially, online public services refer to public services delivered by public administrations through electronic means and online platforms, targeting audiences such as citizens or the business community. Future developments in municipalities will increasingly rely on virtual networks, advanced technologies, reduced bureaucracy, and shortened working hours in favor of increased leisure time (Roșca et al., 2006).

The focus on online services and their quality stems from the digital reform within public administrations, which emphasizes the need to improve online service delivery (Profiroiu & Brișcariu, 2021). Evaluating their quality can yield valuable insights for enhancing their efficiency (Sabie, Bunea, Popescu, 2024). Moreover, strategic management in public administration incorporates a results-oriented approach, where the quality of provided services and customer needs are central concerns (Mina-Raiu, Raiu & Comăniciu, 2024).

Digitalization of online public services has significantly improved the relationship between citizens and public administration, offering various benefits, including the ability to perform operations that do not require users physical presence, which increases fiscal activity and voluntary compliance with payments (Haas & Zolde, 2020).

Online services differ from traditional services due to their intrinsic characteristics and delivery mechanisms, providing distinct benefits to the administrative system. E-services are delivered through the interaction between the user and the provider's website, ensuring that service production and consumption occur simultaneously. Across the European Union, there is a strong commitment to accessible and efficient public services and administration, bringing them closer to citizens. Since public administrations aim to provide high-quality services, measuring the quality of e-governance services is of capital importance (Anghel & Neagoe, 2015). Online public services form a crucial component of e-governance, serving as a framework for developing user-centric public services with greater efficiency.

Assessing the quality of online public services offered by public actors aims to improve these services, aligning them with the needs and expectations of the target audience. This alignment enhances overall performance at public administration level. Understanding the determinants of online public service quality, as perceived by users, is vital as it enables the promotion of positive factors and the mitigation of negative influences. Moreover, evaluating user satisfaction with service quality helps identify aspects that enhance satisfaction, allowing them to be promoted, as well as those causing dissatisfaction, so they can be addressed.

Quality evaluation for online public services is typically conducted through opinion surveys or satisfaction studies. In this context, implementing a quality management model for online services

facilitates performance evaluation and comparative analysis of relevant indicators. Such a model also serves as a decision-support tool for improving service quality and enhancing customer satisfaction—key components of a smart city (Batagan & Pocovnicu, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of digital transformation, with examples from smart cities like China demonstrating enhanced citizen trust through responsive systems. Challenges in countries like Indonesia highlight gaps in standardization and participation. Digital transformation requires organizational and technological overhauls, fostering innovation and improving service quality. Smart city initiatives and social media as e-governance tools enable transparency, inclusivity, and engagement, paving the way for citizen-centric governance (Zhu et al., 2022; Târziu et al., 2017). At national level, challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that rapid strides could be made in adopting modern technologies in service delivery when there is sufficient will and consensus (Haas & Zolde, 2020). In Romania, digitalization of public administration is actively progressing, with limited but tangible results, such as the increased use of platforms like *ghişeul.ro*, SEAP, and other e-governance applications within central and local public administration. However, issues persist, including front-end and back-end data integration, digital literacy, increased adoption of e-governance tools, and corruption concerns (Rahe, Tzitzelkov, et al., 2016).

Quality in public services is vital for public sector performance, emphasizing the relevance and effectiveness of services in addressing societal needs. Key dimensions like punctuality, accessibility, safety, and responsiveness significantly impact citizen satisfaction. Approaches such as Total Quality Management (TQM) support consistent service delivery, addressing evolving user expectations and fostering trust and accountability (Matei, 2006; Raboca, 2012).

Online public services, integral to e-governance, provide efficiency and accessibility through electronic platforms for citizens and businesses. Unlike traditional services, e-services feature simultaneous production and consumption, are perishable, and can vary due to technical factors. The EU defines 20 standard services (12 for citizens, 8 for businesses) as benchmarks for adoption, with key differences from offline services in communication modes and quality metrics (Balog & Nicolaescu, 2008).

Evaluating online public services aligns them with user expectations, enhancing their efficiency and relevance. Models like SERVQUAL and eQUAL assess service quality through dimensions such as reliability and user interaction. Surveys gather insights into user satisfaction and accessibility, guiding improvements and highlighting areas for innovation (Parasuraman et al., 1998; Bădulescu, 2008).

Strategies for online service development focus on citizens' needs, ensuring accessibility, transparency, and simplified processes. Objectives include expanding service coverage and quality. Research into user behavior informs development, with examples like Cluj Napoca's citizen-centric digital strategy showcasing effective implementation (Busch et al., 2018; Haas & Zolde, 2020).

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Romania's e-governance, supported by EU initiatives like the Digital Agenda, has made progress with platforms like e-guvernare.ro. Challenges persist, including low digital literacy and system fragmentation. Future strategies should enhance interoperability, data security, and digital maturity to align with EU goals for digital transformation (Tsonev, 2016; Mărcuț, 2021).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the paper is to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of the quality of online services. This aim is grounded in the understanding that public administration authorities generally aim to deliver appropriatly a pleasant and efficient experience that meets the expectations of both citizens and the business community. These expectations are facilitated through platforms that facilitate the contact and communication between citizens and the public actors, fostering a permanent dialogue based on trust. However, the perception of service recipients, shaped by their needs, expectations and desires may differ significantly. At the same time, feedback from users serves to enhance the delivery system's efficiency, providing benefits and satisfaction to both parties (administration and citizens).

In order to achieve the aim of evaluating the quality of online services, several research objectives were formulated, such as: (a) Identifying the extent to which the services provided online meet the beneficiaries' expectations; (b) Determining the level of citizens' satisfaction regarding the quality of online public services; (c) Identifying the main factors that affect perception and influence the quality of online services, either positively or negatively, from the citizens' perspective (e.g., access and interaction; safety and trust; timeliness and utility); (d) Developing proposals for improving the online services provided by local public authorities.

In correlation with the research aim and objectives several research questions and four hypothesis emerged: (1) Citizens are generally satisfied with the services offered by Suceava City Hall, especially in terms of meeting their informational and problem-solving needs; (2) Citizens perceive online public services as providing a moderate level of satisfaction; (3) The most significant factors positively influencing the quality of Suceava City Hall's online services are access and interaction, safety and trust, and timeliness and utility; (4) Citizens' satisfaction with online services is inversely proportional to their age and level of education.

Semi-structured interviews were designed to address the following research questions, which explore the perspectives of those responsible for delivering online public services: What are the internal procedures for delivering online services?; To what extent has digitalization simplified internal administrative procedures and reduced bureaucracy?; Are services oriented toward achieving results, or are they primarily focused on adhering to internal procedural requirements?; How is the monitoring of online services conducted?; Are the needs and expectations of online service users known, and have the services been adapted to meet those needs?; Are user satisfaction evaluations conducted, and how are the results utilized?; What are the technical infrastructure and human resources required for organizing and delivering online services?; What are the strengths and weaknesses of the online services provided by local governments?; What challenges do local public actors face that may not be evident to citizens?

2.1 Research Methods and Tools

The research methodology mixes the qualitative and quantitative approach in an exploratory case study that focuses on the quality of online public services provided by Suceava City Hall.

The study uses the **e-Servqual model** to assess the quality of electronic services. According to Bădulescu (2008), this model evaluates quality across several dimensions, including access, ease of navigation, efficiency, flexibility, reliability, personalization, security/protection, responsiveness, trustworthiness/credibility, and the visual design of the website.

The enhanced version of the **e-Servqual model** focuses on three dimensions of quality:
- **Information quality:** Evaluates the website's content in terms of quality and relevance to the user's goals.
- **Interaction quality:** Examines trust and the active support provided to each client using the website.

- **Ease of use:** Assesses the design and user-friendliness of the platform.

The research was carried out in two phases. In the exploratory phase, qualitative research was conducted using semi-structured interviews to gather information about the delivery of digital services from the City Hall's perspective. Interviews were conducted with employees of the Automated Data Processing Service. The insights gained from these interviews informed the design of the quantitative research phase, which employed an online survey.

2.2 Sampling

Municipalities have several stakeholders, but the main one that we address in this papers are: citizens (residents of Suceava, both as taxpayers and beneficiaries of public services, as well as individuals involved in decision-making processes that affect them), business and institutional community (legal entities, companies, institutions, non-governmental organizations, and professional associations), media: Represented by local press outlets, both offline and online.

These groups require information and services tailored to their specific needs and expectations. The target group for the quantitative research consists of users of Suceava City Hall's online public services. A non-probabilistic snowball sampling method was chosen, as it is particularly well-suited to identifying potential respondents in this context. The final sample comprises 101 users of the City Hall's online services, who were invited to complete an online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms.

For the qualitative research, the experts involved were employees of the City Hall responsible for organizing online services and public communication. These include the Head of the Automated Data Processing Service, Advisors within the same service, and the Principal Advisor in the Automated Data Processing Service of the Budget, Accounting, and Taxation Directorate.

3. CASE STUDY: ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY OF ONLINE PUBLIC SERVICES PROVIDED BY SUCEAVA CITY HALL

3.1 Case study selection

We limited our case selection to Suceava City Hall because it is one of the most proactive and dynamic public organizations from the North-East region of the country in terms of digital transformation initiatives, as increasing the level of e-services is a key component of its digitalization strategy. Moreover, the mission of Suceava City Hall is to provide high-quality public services in the field of local public administration. Its vision emphasizes the continuous and consistent satisfaction of both citizens—individuals and legal entities—and its employees. The overarching objective of the institution is to strengthen Suceava Municipality's capacity to deliver excellent services while implementing programs that promote sustainable development and improve the standard of living for the population. (SCH, 2024).

3.2 Main findings of the interviews with Suceava City Hall employees

In the initial phase of the research, in order to gain more in-depth understanding semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts from Suceava City Hall. The goal was to reveal their perspectives on evaluating the quality of public services offered by the institution and the role of digitalization within public administration. The interview guide consisted of 12 open-ended questions addressed to City Hall employees coming from various functional areas of the institutions, such as Data Processing Service, Budget, Accounting, Taxation Department.

The synthesized results of the interviews revealed the following key insights:
- The digitalization process began in 2003 and is an on-going process in Suceava City Hall.

- There are no specific internal procedures governing the provision of online services. The interviewees noted that these services are delivered according to specific regulations outlined in existing legislation. The only difference compared to traditional services lies in the mode of interaction: private virtual interaction versus physical presence at public service counters.
- Online services have brought significant benefits to citizens, primarily by saving time. Citizens are no longer required to visit the City Hall in person, and administrative documents can be obtained more quickly. Additionally, these services have fostered greater collaboration between citizens and local public administration, as well as direct involvement in community matters through initiatives such as participatory budgeting.
- The services are designed to address citizens' problems. Although various procedures and rules are applied, the primary focus remains on resolving citizens' requests.
- The monitoring of online services is carried out by tracking access accounts, the number of requests, and their frequency.
- Citizens' expectations, as identified by the interviewees, include reduced waiting times for obtaining documents, paying taxes, or receiving information; simplified access to online services; and faster delivery of information.
- The interviewees perceive the services offered online as tailored to beneficiaries' needs, given that they are designed specifically for local public administration purposes.
- It is believed that the services are adapted to beneficiaries' needs from the outset, as they meet specific requirements for resolving users' issues. Furthermore, these services can be extended or improved by adding new functionalities or offerings.
- Online service provision brings several advantages to the City Hall, including enhanced transparency in local public administration activities, expanded interactive communication using information and communication technologies, and improved accessibility for most citizens seeking information and communication solutions for their issues. Other benefits include better capacity to identify community needs and make decisions accordingly, increased relevance of local public administration in citizens' lives, alignment of public policies with citizens' expectations, and the establishment of priorities to improve the quality of life in Suceava.
- Technical infrastructure is maintained through service contracts, technical assistance, and support (helpdesk, email, and phone). However, challenges arise due to the diversity of technical requirements and a relatively small number of specialized staff.
- The strong points of the online services include their high level of accessibility, reduced problem-resolution times, the elimination of physical travel for taxpayers, and the increasing trend in service usage. On the other hand, the main weakness identified is the reliance on third-party services (internet infrastructure, national platforms).
- The pandemic led to a significant increase in the number of citizens interacting with the City Hall through electronic means such as email and service platforms. This shift had a positive impact, and the upward trend in digital interactions continues today.

3.3 Main findings of the survey results

As part of the quantitative research, an online questionnaire consisting of 19 questions was administered, with a total of 101 respondents participating. Among these, 83 individuals reported having accessed one or more of Suceava City Hall's services within the past 12 months. The survey revealed that 42% of respondents used the ghișeul.ro platform to pay local taxes and fees. Additionally, 32% of respondents accessed the platform solely for information purposes. Smaller proportions were noted for other services: 5% of respondents used the platform to submit online requests or to apply for commercial operating permits or authorizations. Minimal percentages were recorded for requests involving urban planning certificates, fiscal attestations, or the submission of online petitions (Figure 1).

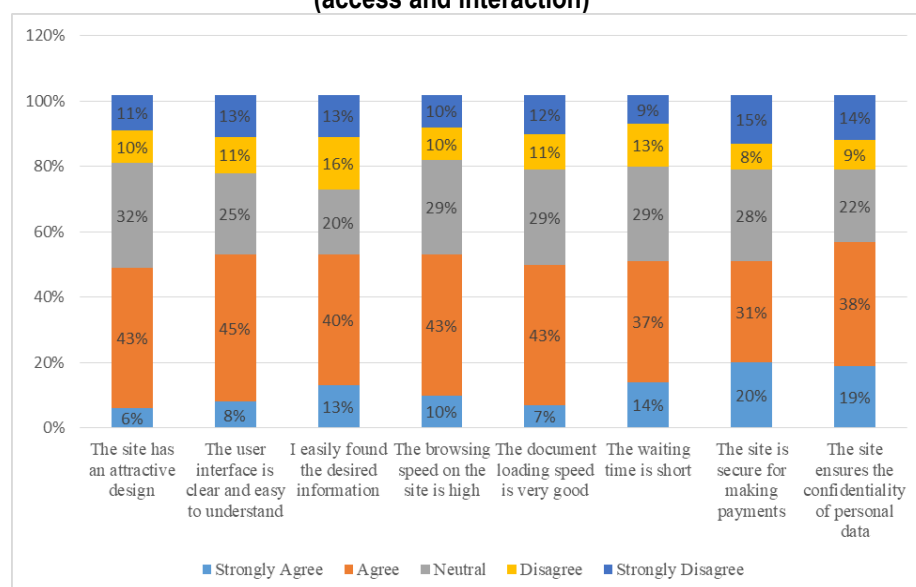**Figure 1. Online services used by respondents**
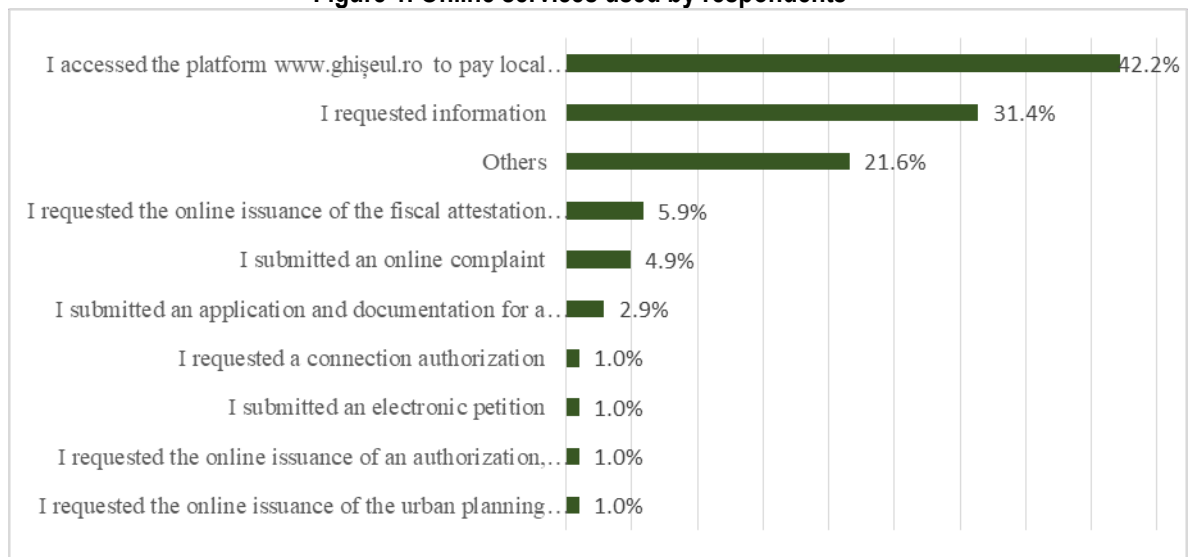
Source: survey results, 2022

Over 40% of respondents agree that the website has an attractive design, the user interface is clear and easy to understand, and the navigation speed and document loading times are satisfactory. However, only a very small percentage (4–5%) express total agreement on these aspects.

Slightly lower levels of agreement (35–39%) are reported regarding the ease of finding desired information, waiting times, and the assurance of personal data confidentiality. Again, total agreement levels are relatively low (5–10%), except for data confidentiality, where nearly 20% of respondents express total agreement. Regarding the security of online payments, 20% of respondents strongly agree (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Respondents' opinions regarding the navigation experience on Eportal SV (access and interaction)
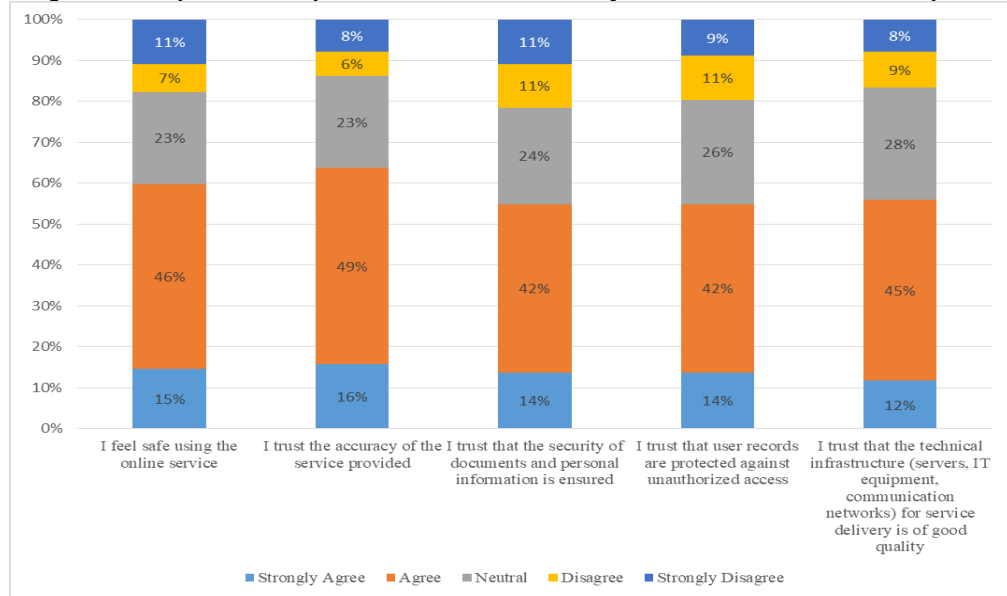

Source: survey results, 2022

More than 40% of respondents report feeling secure when using the online service and express confidence in the accuracy of the services provided, as well as in the quality of the technical infrastructure. However, the proportion of respondents expressing total agreement on these aspects is lower, ranging between 10% and 15%. Similarly, around 40% of respondents are confident that they are protected against unauthorized access and that their personal data is safeguarded. A

notable percentage of respondents (20-25%) maintain a neutral opinion regarding each of these aspects (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Respondents' opinions on service security and confidence in service provision

Source: survey results, 2022

When asked to assign levels of importance to various aspects of the quality of online services, a high importance (over 30%) was attributed to aspects such as reduced problem-resolution time, the accuracy of received information, the ability to resolve multiple issues on the same page, the degree to which problems are resolved, and the option to schedule appointments for other services. Lower importance was assigned to data security and protection, as well as the opportunity to be consulted on local decision-making processes (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Respondents' opinions on the importance of utility and opportunity in online services**
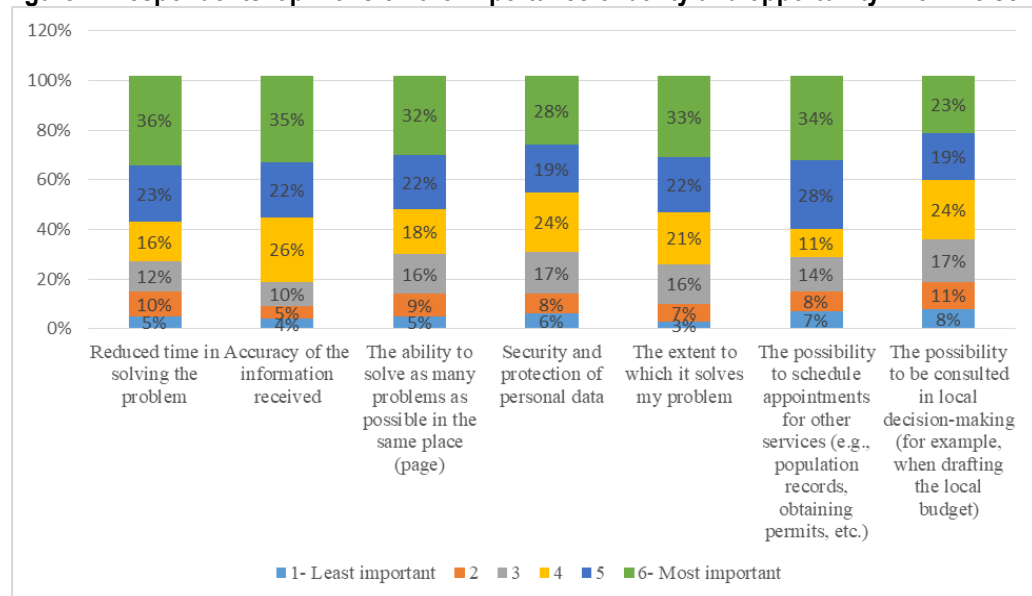
Source: survey results, 2022

Some of the online services provided by Suceava City Hall are either not well-known, not accessed, or not considered important by potential beneficiaries. For instance, 75% of respondents have not accessed the online marriage services. Similarly, the EcoRide application is unfamiliar to nearly 60% of respondents. On the other hand, the Suceava Transport and Suceava Parking applications

are used by more than 50% of respondents, with approximately 50% expressing satisfaction or high satisfaction with these services (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Beneficiaries' satisfaction levels with online services
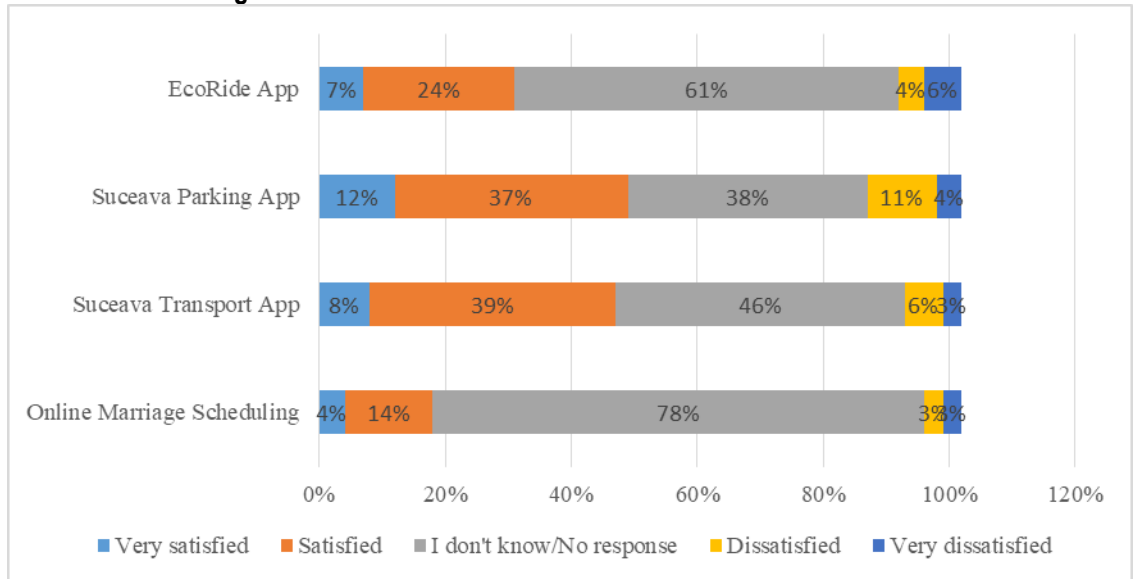
Source: survey results, 2022

Respondents identified the main strengths of online service delivery as follows: ease of access (58%), transaction speed for paying taxes and fees (43%), the availability of a helpline phone number (29%), ease of locating desired information (26%), ensuring data security and protection (24%), and the user-friendly interface (19%). Less appreciated aspects include the website's navigation speed and the technical infrastructure (Internet network) (Figure 6).
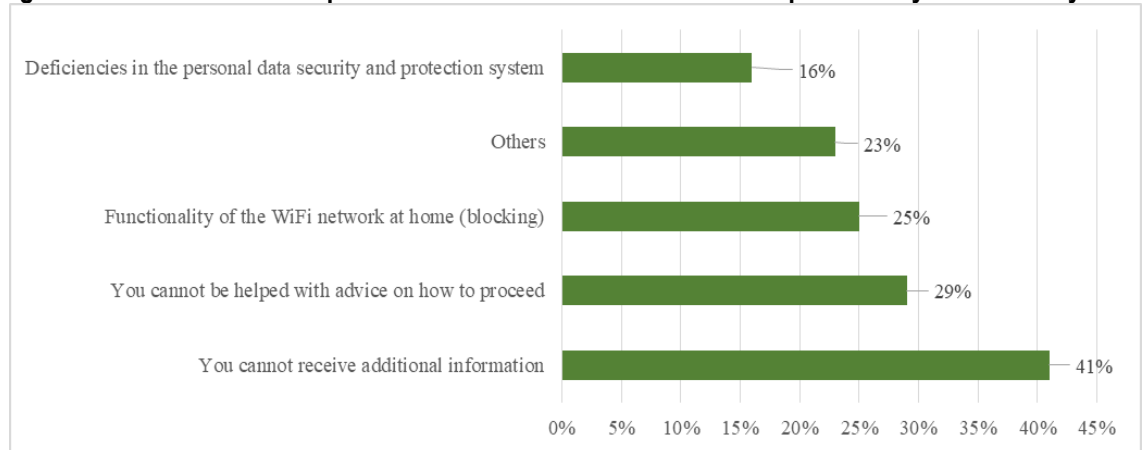
Figure 6. Strengths of the online services provided by Suceava City Hall
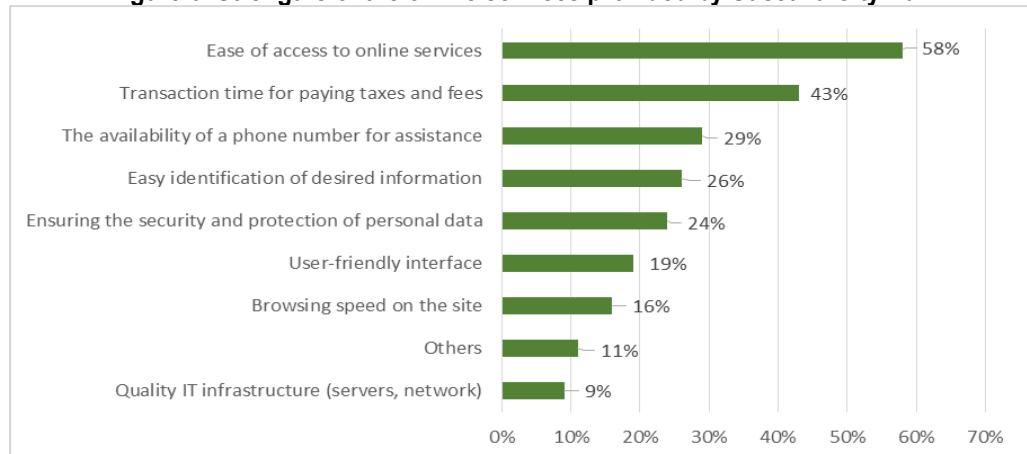
Source: questionnaire results, 2022

The main weaknesses identified by respondents relate to the inability to obtain additional information (41%).

Figure 7. Weaknesses in the provision and access of online services provided by Suceava City Hall

Source: questionnaire results, 2022

The largest demographic group among respondents consists of individuals aged 18–30, representing 43% of the total sample. The second most represented age group is those aged 45–55, followed by individuals aged 31–35, who account for 18% of respondents. The least represented category is individuals aged 55–65, comprising just 8%. Therefore, the study sample predominantly includes respondents aged 18–55, accounting for 92% of the total.

Moreover, given that the majority of respondents are young adults aged 18-30, the hypothesis that citizen satisfaction with online services is inversely proportional to age and educational level is confirmed. The results indicate that younger citizens are more satisfied with online services. This phenomenon can be attributed to higher levels of digital literacy among younger individuals compared to older groups, who may lack the necessary skills to effectively use online services.

4. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study aims to evaluate the quality of online services provided by Suceava City Hall from the users (citizens and businesses) perspective. The following conclusions were drawn:
The online services offered by Suceava City Hall are considered to meet users' expectations, with 52% of respondents holding this view and an average satisfaction score of 4.35 (out of 5).

These services are perceived as addressing users' needs for information and problem-solving by 54% of respondents, with an average score of 4.34, closely aligning with the satisfaction score for meeting expectations. This confirms the first hypothesis of the study, which states that citizens are generally satisfied with the services provided by Suceava City Hall in terms of addressing their informational and problem-solving needs.

The quality factors of online services received the following overall scores from respondents: "Access and Interaction" – 0.31 (out of 1), "Safety and Trust" – 0.48 (out of 1), and "Utility and Opportunity" – 4.24 (out of 5). The best-rated determinant, "Utility and Opportunity," includes factors such as reduced problem-solving time, accuracy of received information, the ability to resolve multiple issues on the same page, data security and protection, problem resolution success, scheduling options for additional services (e.g., population records or obtaining permits), and opportunities for public consultation in local decision-making (e.g., local budget planning). The second-best-rated factor, "Safety and Trust," encompasses users' sense of security, trust in the accuracy of the provided services, confidence in the protection of personal information and documents, assurance against unauthorized access, and trust in the quality of the technical infrastructure.

Respondents identified the main strengths of online services as ease of access, reduced transaction time for paying taxes and fees, availability of a helpline phone number, ease of locating desired

information, assurance of data security and protection, and a user-friendly interface. By contrast the primary weakness cited was the inability to obtain additional information.

The main suggestions from respondents include the need for broader awareness of the services, expansion of available services, creation of technical support for users less familiar with technology, increasing platform speed, and enabling user feedback.

Understanding the opinions of online public service users and gathering their feedback is critical to improving the efficiency of service delivery, which benefits both the administration and the citizens.

The interview-based research conducted with City Hall employees revealed the following insights:
- While there are no internal procedures specifically designed for online services, these services are developed in accordance with legal requirements, ensuring they address user needs.
- Employees expressed the view that these services can be expanded and improved by adding new services or functionalities.
- Key expectations from users include reduced waiting times for obtaining documents, paying taxes and fees, simplified access to online services, and faster access to information.
- Strengths identified include a high level of service accessibility, reduced problem-solving time, the elimination of physical travel for users, and the upward trend in service usage.
- A notable weakness is the reliance on third-party services (e.g., internet infrastructure and national platforms).
- The advantages of providing online public services for the City Hall include increased transparency of local public administration activities, expanded interactive communication through information and communication technologies (with online platforms being the most accessible form for most citizens seeking information or solutions to their problems), improved capacity to identify community needs and make decisions to meet them, enhanced importance of local public administration in citizens' lives, alignment of public policies with citizen expectations, prioritization of needs, and improvement in the quality of life in Suceava.
- The technical infrastructure is maintained through service contracts and technical support.

Based on the conclusions drawn from the research, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the online services provided by Suceava City Hall:
- Conducting periodic surveys to evaluate the extent to which online services meet the needs of potential beneficiaries. This could include studies to assess the needs of the City Hall's audience groups, identifying different types of needs, emerging demands, and ways to address these needs as suggested by the audience.
- Gathering citizen feedback on how the City Hall, through its digitized services, can better connect with citizens in all aspects.
- Analyzing online services to assess their alignment with Romania's Digitalization Strategy and the Strategy for Public Administration Digitalization in Romania.
- Carrying out periodic studies to explore ways to make online services more accessible and user-friendly for a broader range of citizens.
- Developing internal quality management procedures for online services to ensure consistent performance and user satisfaction.
- Identifying methods to encourage citizen participation in public decision-making through online services, such as participatory budgeting, urban projects, and public transportation initiatives.
- Organizing exchanges of best practices among local administrations (e.g., city halls) regarding the provision of online services.
- Incorporating user suggestions and proposals to expand and develop online services, ensuring that these reflect user needs and preferences.

The research encountered several limitations, notably regarding the representativeness of the sample. Specifically, the senior age group (60+) was not included in the sample structure. This limitation may stem from the fact that older individuals often lack internet access or digital skills to

use the Google Forms platform. To address this issue in future research, face-to-face interviews or telephone surveys could be employed to include older respondents and achieve a representative sample covering all age groups.

Additionally, the study focused solely on local public administration. A comprehensive assessment of the quality of online public services would also need to include central public administration. This limitation can, however, be addressed in subsequent research.

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