

Face-to-Face Service Communication and WhatsApp Media for Customer Complaints at Perumda Tirta Albantani

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ABSTRACT : Public service delivery in the clean water sector requires a communication system that is effective, transparent, responsive, and accountable, particularly in handling customer complaints. This study analyzes face-to-face service communication and WhatsApp-mediated communication in the management of customer complaints at Perumda Tirta Albantani, Serang Regency. The study employed an interpretive qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the president director, service unit officers, the WhatsApp administrator, customers, the Customer Communication Forum, and a member of the Regional House of Representatives of Serang Regency. These data were supported by field observations and documentation. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while the validity of the findings was strengthened through triangulation. The findings indicate that face-to-face communication is more effective in building empathy, trust, and service legitimacy because it enables direct clarification, interpersonal engagement, and nonverbal interaction. Meanwhile, communication through WhatsApp offers greater advantages in terms of speed, flexibility, accessibility, and complaint documentation. However, both communication channels still encounter structural, technical, and psychological barriers, including weak internal coordination, inconsistent follow-up information, limited monitoring mechanisms, and the absence of an integrated complaint management system. This study concludes that the development of an integrated one-stop digital complaint service is a strategic necessity for improving responsiveness, transparency, and accountability in public service communication within the clean water sector.

KEYWORDS : *Customer Complaint, Face-to-Face Communication, Public Service Communication, Perumda Tirta Albantani, WhatsApp*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of communication technology has transformed the relationship between public service institutions and citizens. Public organizations are no longer evaluated solely on their ability to provide technical services, but also on their capacity to communicate information clearly, respond to complaints promptly, and build public trust through transparent and accountable interaction (Madjid et al., 2024). In the context of public utilities, communication plays a crucial role because service disruptions directly affect daily routines, public health, and social stability. Clean water services, therefore, require communication practices that are accessible, empathetic, responsive, and solution-oriented.

Digitalization has encouraged public service institutions to combine conventional face-to-face interaction with digital communication channels. WhatsApp, as one of the most widely used instant messaging platforms, has increasingly become an alternative medium for receiving complaints, clarifying problems, and documenting service reports (Ali et al., 2025; Nabila et al., 2025). However, the availability of a digital channel does not automatically ensure better service quality. A digital complaint service can function effectively only when it is supported by organizational readiness, clear operating procedures, adequate human resources, and a feedback mechanism that enables customers to monitor the status of their reports.

Perumda Tirta Albantani of Serang Regency is a regional public company responsible for providing clean water services to the community. The company serves more than 30,154 house connections across 21 districts and operates through several service areas (Business Plan Perumda Tirta Albantani, 2025). In handling customer complaints, Perumda Tirta Albantani mainly relies on two communication channels: direct face-to-face service at service units and digital service through WhatsApp. These channels are used to accommodate

various complaints, including muddy water, water supply interruptions, pipe leakage, abnormal billing, new connection requests, and other technical or administrative problems.

Both channels have distinct communication characteristics. Face-to-face service provides emotional closeness, immediate clarification, and stronger interpersonal trust. In contrast, WhatsApp offers speed, flexibility, accessibility, and digital documentation. In practice, however, the coexistence of these two channels also creates several challenges. Some customers appreciate the convenience and speed of WhatsApp, but criticize the lack of certainty after submitting a report. Others prefer face-to-face communication because it gives them a stronger sense that their complaints are being heard and taken seriously. This condition indicates that complaint communication cannot be understood merely through the availability of communication media. It must also be examined through the quality of response, continuity of follow-up, and effectiveness of organizational coordination.

Previous studies have examined public service digitalization, WhatsApp-based services, complaint handling, and interpersonal communication in customer service. Nevertheless, studies that specifically compare face-to-face service communication and WhatsApp-mediated communication in the context of regional clean water services remain limited. Therefore, this study focuses on three main questions: how face-to-face and WhatsApp communication are implemented in customer complaint handling; what barriers emerge in both communication channels; and how an integrated one-stop digital complaint service can be developed to strengthen public service communication at Perumda Tirta Albantani.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Service Communication and Face-to-Face Service Encounter

Public service communication refers to the process through which public institutions deliver information, respond to citizens, and develop mutual understanding regarding public rights, service procedures, and institutional responsibilities. In complaint handling, communication is not merely a channel for transmitting information. It also serves as a mechanism for restoring trust when customers experience service disruptions. The quality of communication determines whether customers feel respected, heard, and reassured by the service provider (Saleh, 2021).

Interpersonal communication offers an important theoretical perspective for understanding service encounters. DeVito explains that effective interpersonal communication is built on openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality (DeVito, 2011). In complaint services, these dimensions are reflected in the way officers listen carefully, explain procedures in clear and accessible language, show empathy toward customer frustration, and position customers as equal partners in problem solving. Face-to-face communication is particularly rich because it enables direct feedback, nonverbal cues, and immediate clarification during the interaction (Gruber et al., 2022).

In clean water services, face-to-face interaction becomes especially important because many complaints are related to urgent daily needs and are often accompanied by emotional pressure. Customers who experience repeated service disruptions do not only expect technical repair. They also seek recognition, certainty, and institutional responsibility. Therefore, the ability of service officers to manage emotions, maintain politeness, and provide clear information becomes an integral part of service quality.

2.2 WhatsApp-Based Digital Complaint Communication

WhatsApp-based communication has become increasingly relevant in public services because the platform is familiar, affordable, and accessible to most citizens. It enables customers to submit complaints without visiting the service office, attach visual evidence, and maintain a documented record of communication. From an organizational perspective, this documentation can strengthen accountability because the institution is able to trace the time of complaint submission, the content of the message, and the follow-up communication provided to customers (Nabila et al., 2025).

Despite these advantages, WhatsApp also presents several limitations. Text-based interaction reduces the presence of nonverbal cues, which may increase the risk of misunderstanding, particularly when customers are emotionally affected by service disruptions. A high volume of incoming messages may also create information overload for administrators, resulting in delayed responses or inconsistent follow-up. Without a digital tracking system, customers may assume that their complaints have been received but not handled seriously.

Lasswell's communication model, formulated as "who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect," provides a useful framework for mapping the structure of complaint communication (Lasswell, 1948). In the context of Perumda Tirta Albantani, the communicators include front-office officers, WhatsApp administrators, technical units, and management. The messages consist of complaint reception, technical explanations, service updates, and confirmation of solutions. The channels include face-to-face interaction and WhatsApp, while the receivers are the customers. The expected effects are customer satisfaction, clarity of information, trust, and reduced complaint escalation. When one of these elements does not function properly, the overall communication effect becomes incomplete.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method with an interpretive case study approach. The interpretive paradigm was selected because the study aims to understand the meanings, experiences, and perceptions constructed by service officers and customers in the process of complaint handling. The case study approach was considered appropriate because the research focuses on a specific contemporary phenomenon within its real organizational context, namely the implementation of face-to-face and WhatsApp-based complaint communication at Perumda Tirta Albantani, Serang Regency (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The research was conducted at Perumda Tirta Albantani, Serang Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement and relevance to the complaint communication process. They consisted of the president director of Perumda Tirta Albantani, a face-to-face service officer from a service unit, a WhatsApp administrator, customers who had submitted complaints, the chairperson of the Customer Communication Forum, and a member of the Regional House of Representatives of Serang Regency who frequently received public complaints related to clean water services. Field observations were carried out in complaint service settings, including direct interactions at service units and public hearings involving customers. Documentation was also used to examine complaint procedures, service records, institutional documents, and other supporting materials related to complaint handling. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study applied source triangulation and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, field observations, and institutional documents.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Complementarity of Face-to-Face and WhatsApp Communication

The findings indicate that customer complaint communication at Perumda Tirta Albantani is carried out through two main channels: face-to-face service and WhatsApp-based communication. These two channels have different strengths and are used by customers according to the nature of the complaint, the urgency of the problem, the customer's location, and the level of certainty expected from the institution. Customers generally use WhatsApp for quick reporting and documentation, while face-to-face interaction is preferred when complaints are complex, recurring, or emotionally sensitive.

Face-to-face communication provides strong relational value in the complaint-handling process. Through direct interaction, customers are able to explain their problems in more detail, ask follow-up questions, and assess the responsiveness of service officers through tone of voice, eye contact, gestures, and other nonverbal cues. At the same time, officers have greater opportunity to express empathy, clarify the technical context of service disruptions, and reduce customer anxiety through direct explanation. Field findings show that customers often need to feel heard before they are able to accept technical explanations. This confirms that complaint handling is not merely an administrative procedure, but also an emotional and relational process.

WhatsApp communication offers a different set of advantages. It enables customers to submit complaints more quickly, send photos or videos of pipe leaks, muddy water, or other service problems, and communicate with the institution without visiting the service office. The platform also creates a written record of conversation that can support administrative documentation and complaint tracking. However, the effectiveness of WhatsApp depends heavily on how incoming messages are managed within the organization. A fast initial response does not necessarily indicate effective service when customers do not receive clear information regarding field follow-up, progress updates, and the final status of complaint resolution.

Table 1. Comparison of Face-to-Face and WhatsApp Complaint Communication

Aspect	Face-to-Face Communication	WhatsApp Communication
Interaction pattern	Synchronous, direct, dialogic, and supported by nonverbal cues.	Asynchronous or semi-synchronous, text based, and supported by multimedia evidence.
Main advantage	Builds empathy, trust, clarity, and customer confidence.	Offers speed, flexibility, accessibility, and automatic documentation.
Main limitation	Limited by office hours, distance, queue, and number of officers.	Vulnerable to delayed responses, misinterpretation, and unclear follow-up.
Typical use	Complex, repeated, and emotionally sensitive complaints.	Initial reports, routine updates, and submission of visual evidence.
Service implication	Requires interpersonal competence and direct problem clarification.	Requires integrated monitoring, response standards, and a tracking system.

4.2 Organizational, Technical, and Psychological Barriers

The first barrier is structural and organizational. Complaint handling at Perumda Tirta Albantani involves several internal units, including customer relations, public relations, technical operations, production, transmission and distribution, and logistics. The process becomes less effective when coordination among these units is fragmented. Field data show that service officers at the unit level often receive complaints directly from customers, but they do not always have the authority or resources to resolve them immediately. Certain technical complaints must be escalated to other divisions, which often causes customers to wait without clear information regarding the status of their reports.

The second barrier is technical. Although WhatsApp enables customers to submit complaints quickly, this channel has not yet been fully integrated into a real-time digital tracking system. Customers may send a report and receive an initial response, but they cannot independently monitor whether their complaint has been assigned, processed, delayed, or completed. This condition weakens transparency in complaint handling. From the perspective of Lasswell's communication model, the communication channel is already available, but the expected effect, namely clarity and customer trust, is not fully achieved because feedback remains discontinuous.

The third barrier is psychological. Customers who repeatedly report similar problems without receiving clear updates tend to feel ignored by the institution. This feeling becomes stronger in digital communication because WhatsApp interaction does not provide facial expressions, tone of voice, or direct emotional reassurance. As a result, several customers eventually choose to come directly to the service office or request a public hearing because face-to-face interaction is perceived as more serious and more certain. This finding indicates that digital complaint handling should not eliminate human sensitivity. Empathy, politeness, and certainty of information must remain present, even in written digital responses.

4.3 Toward an Integrated One-Stop Digital Complaint Service

This study also identifies a strong need for an integrated one-stop digital complaint service. This model is expected to connect existing communication channels, including WhatsApp, the website, social media, and service units, into a single complaint management system. Through this system, customers would be able to submit reports supported by photos or videos, officers would receive automatic notifications, management could monitor complaint progress through a centralized dashboard, and customers could check the status of their complaints in real time.

An integrated system would strengthen internal coordination because each complaint could be distributed to the relevant unit based on its type, location, and level of urgency. It would also provide management with important data on response time, completion time, recurring complaints, and service problems in specific areas. Such data would support institutional evaluation and evidence-based decision making. More importantly, customers would no longer need to rely solely on repeated personal follow-ups or multiple messages to obtain certainty regarding the progress of their complaints.

However, the one-stop digital model should not completely replace face-to-face communication. Direct interaction remains important for complex cases, elderly customers, customers with limited digital access, and public hearings that require negotiation, clarification, and institutional accountability. Therefore, the ideal model is a hybrid service communication system that combines the efficiency of digital technology with the empathy of interpersonal communication.

The practical implication of this study is that Perumda Tirta Albantani needs to strengthen response standards, internal coordination, digital tracking mechanisms, and humanistic communication training for service officers. Technology must be supported by a service culture that values clarity, empathy, and accountability. In this sense, public service communication is not merely a matter of selecting the most efficient channel. It is also a matter of building public trust through consistent, responsive, and transparent interaction.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that face-to-face service communication and WhatsApp-based communication function as complementary channels in handling customer complaints at Perumda Tirta Albantani. Face-to-face communication is more effective in building empathy, trust, and service legitimacy because it allows customers to explain their problems directly and obtain immediate clarification from service officers. In contrast, WhatsApp communication offers advantages in terms of speed, flexibility, accessibility, and documentation, as customers are able to submit complaints without visiting the service office and attach visual evidence to support their reports.

The main barriers in complaint communication are not limited to the characteristics of each medium. They are also rooted in weak internal coordination, limited monitoring mechanisms, discontinuous follow-up

information, and psychological dissatisfaction among customers who feel that their complaints are not handled transparently. These barriers shape customer perceptions of institutional reliability and service consistency, particularly when complaints are repeated or require cross-unit coordination.

Therefore, the development of an integrated one-stop digital complaint service becomes a strategic necessity. Such a system can support systematic complaint recording, real-time monitoring, clearer follow-up communication, and stronger institutional accountability. Theoretically, this study contributes to public service communication studies by emphasizing the integration of digital service encounters and interpersonal communication. Practically, the findings provide a recommendation for clean water service providers to develop a hybrid complaint communication model that is fast, transparent, empathetic, and oriented toward customer experience.

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