



Digital Communication Feedback in Customer Complaint Service (Study at Perumda AM Way Rilau Via Whatsapp Messages)

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the form of digital communication feedback via WhatsApp used in customer complaint services at Perumda AM Way Rilau. The background of this study is based on the importance of maintaining the quality of public services and customer satisfaction, especially in the clean water provider sector. In today's digital era, WhatsApp is one of the most effective media in bridging two-way communication between companies and customers. This study uses a qualitative approach with participatory observation methods, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Informants in the study consisted of complaint service staff and customers who had submitted complaints via WhatsApp. The results of the study show that the forms of feedback used include positive, negative, and neutral feedback. WhatsApp is used as the main media, supported by an internal system called Pass System which helps the process of distributing and resolving complaints more efficiently and quickly. The communication applied reflects responsiveness, clarity of information, and empathy for customers.

Keywords: Feedback, Digital Communication, WhatsApp, Customer Complaints, Regional Drinking Water Company.

Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, public service organizations are increasingly required to improve the quality of communication with citizens, particularly in responding to customer complaints. As communication technologies evolve, utility providers must adapt their service approaches to meet customers' expectations of fast, responsive, and transparent complaint handling (Hamanda, 2023). The regional water utility, *Perusahaan Umum Daerah Air Minum* (Perumda AM) Way Rilau in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, exemplifies this transition by integrating digital platforms primarily WhatsApp into its customer service system.

WhatsApp has become one of the most accessible and widely used communication tools in Indonesia, offering real-time, two-way interaction that bridges spatial and temporal barriers. For service-based institutions like Perumda AM Way Rilau, WhatsApp enables customers to report issues ranging from service disruptions and pipe leaks to billing problems in a simple and immediate manner. Yet, despite the digital convenience, unresolved complaints and ineffective feedback responses continue to affect customer satisfaction (Indrayani, 2023); (Januarinaldi, 2020).

This research emerges from the observed fluctuation in customer complaint numbers over several months particularly concerning issues such as water outages, pipe bursts, and murky water. Although digitalization is intended to enhance communication efficiency, the actual quality of feedback from the service provider remains inconsistent. Responses are sometimes late, impersonal, or lack clear resolutions, which can damage the institution's public image and undermine customer trust (McQuail, 2019).

Previous studies have addressed the general effectiveness of digital platforms in customer complaint management (Rusdi, 2022; Kusuma & Ekawati, 2021), yet they often lack a focused analysis on the nature and impact of feedback types whether positive, negative, or neutral delivered through digital media. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the internal organizational mechanisms and barriers that hinder effective complaint resolution, such as system transparency and the quality of empathetic communication.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the forms of digital communication feedback employed in handling customer complaints at Perumda AM Way Rilau, with a specific focus on WhatsApp interactions. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study explores how feedback is framed, delivered, and perceived by customers, as well as the operational challenges faced by service staff. In doing so, it seeks to understand whether the feedback processes in place contribute positively to customer satisfaction or exacerbate existing frustrations.

By analyzing this case, the study contributes to the field of communication studies by highlighting the intersection between digital communication tools and public service accountability. It also offers practical insights into how digital feedback mechanisms can be optimized to build trust, ensure clarity, and enhance the responsiveness of local government services in developing contexts. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the need for structured, empathetic, and real-time communication strategies in public utility services.

Methodology

Type of Research

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at understanding and describing the feedback communication process in digital-based customer complaint services, particularly through WhatsApp, at Perumda AM Way Rilau. A qualitative design was chosen to explore the perspectives, experiences, and communication patterns between the institution and its customers in natural settings. This approach is suitable for capturing the richness of interpersonal interactions in digital communication and for identifying contextual factors that shape communication effectiveness.

Research Location and Time

The study was conducted at Perumda AM Way Rilau, located on Jl. P. Emir Moh. Noer, Sumur Putri, Teluk Betung Utara, Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. Data collection took

place from November 2024 to May 2025, encompassing pre-fieldwork preparation, observation, interviews, documentation, and data analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Three primary data collection methods were used:

- **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including customer service staff and customers who had previously submitted complaints via WhatsApp. Interviews allowed for deep exploration of personal experiences and communication processes.
- **Participant Observation:** The researcher engaged in direct observation of communication practices between customers and complaint service staff, both online and offline, to identify behavioral patterns and responsiveness.
- **Document Analysis:** Internal documents, digital complaint logs, screenshots, and official communication records were reviewed to verify and supplement interview and observation data.

Informants

Purposive sampling was used to select informants across three categories:

- **Key Informant:** Senior staff member with more than 15 years of experience (e.g., Head of Customer Service Division).
- **Main Informants:** Active customer service representatives involved in digital complaint handling.
- **Supporting Informants:** Customers who have submitted digital complaints via WhatsApp.

Types of Data

- **Primary Data:** Gathered directly through interviews and observations, focusing on message clarity, response time, empathy, and types of feedback.
- **Secondary Data:** Derived from organizational records, customer reports, and related literature.

Data Validity

To ensure credibility and reliability, this study used triangulation:

- **Source Triangulation:** Comparing data from different types of informants (staff and customers).
- **Technique Triangulation:** Using interviews, observations, and documentation simultaneously.
- **Time Triangulation:** Conducting data collection across several time periods to reduce bias.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model:

- **Data Reduction:** Filtering out irrelevant information to focus on the core themes of digital feedback effectiveness.
- **Data Display:** Organizing data into narrative descriptions and thematic tables.
- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Identifying communication patterns, challenges, and implications for improving service responsiveness.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved human subjects and adhered to research ethics. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews. The research received approval from the Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Bandar Lampung. All data were anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Data and Material Availability

All interview guides, observational notes, and documentation logs used in this study are available upon reasonable request. No software or computer code was used in the analysis process. There are no restrictions on the availability of research data.

Result and Discussion

1. Forms and Effectiveness of Digital Feedback via WhatsApp

The analysis of feedback communication at Perumda AM Way Rilau indicates three main types of feedback used through WhatsApp: positive, negative, and neutral. Positive feedback, such as immediate responses and clear solutions, was typically applied to simple complaints (e.g., water discoloration), while more complex complaints (e.g., pipe leaks) often received either neutral or delayed responses.

Table 1. Forms of Feedback and Their Characteristics

Type of Feedback	Description	Customer Response
Positive	Fast, clear, with empathy	High satisfaction
Negative	Blame-shifting, vague responses	Customer frustration
Neutral	Automated acknowledgment without resolution	Perceived as impersonal

According to observations and interviews, feedback tended to lack emotional engagement and personalization. Customers, such as Mukmin, expressed dissatisfaction, stating, *"Disappointed, because there was no reply."*

2. Response Time and Responsiveness of Digital Communication

While WhatsApp was intended to provide timely communication, findings reveal inconsistencies in response time. Messages sent outside of office hours were often delayed to the next day. This contributed to customer dissatisfaction due to a perceived lack of urgency.

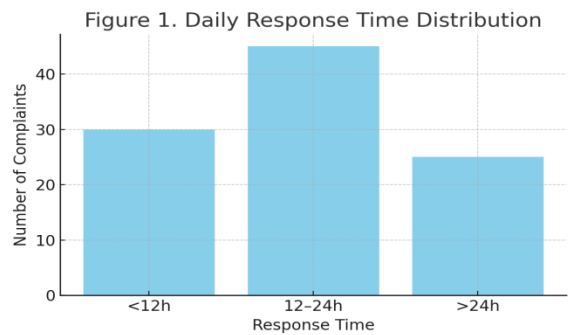


Figure 1. Daily Response Time Distribution

Most complaints received feedback after more than 12 hours, especially during weekends or off-peak hours. The staff stated that they process messages only during official working hours, leading to delayed response and case follow-up.

3. Complaint Workflow and System Weaknesses

Though the internal "Pass System" was introduced to streamline complaint distribution, many complaints were not tracked or resolved transparently. Customers received little to no follow-up after their complaints were forwarded.

Table 2. Observed Bottlenecks in the Complaint Workflow

Stage	Issue Identified	Consequence
Complaint reception	Lack of system automation	Delay in complaint forwarding
Complaint routing	No real-time confirmation	Confusion over who handles the case
Final feedback	No follow-up mechanism	Customer uncertainty

Staff member Apriansyah Gunawan admitted:

"We currently have no way to reconnect with customers after an initial response... We rely on customers to reach back."

4. Influence of Feedback on Customer Satisfaction

Customers who received empathetic and detailed responses showed greater satisfaction. However, uniform, robotic responses often led to confusion or even anger. Satisfaction was closely tied to clarity and personalization.

5. Internal and Technical Barriers

Technical issues and lack of trained staff were major hindrances. Staff members were not trained in digital communication etiquette or empathy, leading to formal, distant responses. Additionally, WhatsApp lacks features such as ticketing or status updates, making it difficult to track progress.

Table 3. Internal Barriers to Effective Feedback

Barrier	Description	Suggested Action
Human resources	Lack of trained CS agents	Digital communication training
System limitations	WhatsApp lacks tracking features	Integration with CRM software
Customer literacy	Some customers unfamiliar with WhatsApp features	Public education and guides

6. Comparative Analysis with Previous Studies

Compared to studies such as Rusdi (2020) which found WhatsApp highly effective as a medium for public complaints, this study shows effectiveness depends heavily on the quality of human response, not merely the platform itself. Unlike prior research that focused on delivery speed, this study emphasizes the importance of empathy and process transparency.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of digital feedback communication via WhatsApp in handling customer complaints at Perumda AM Way Rilau. The findings reveal that while WhatsApp serves as an effective two-way communication tool, its implementation remains inconsistent and lacks empathetic engagement. Three types of feedback – positive, negative, and neutral – were identified, with varying levels of customer satisfaction. The quality of feedback, particularly in terms of responsiveness and clarity, significantly influenced customer perception and trust.

Furthermore, the internal complaint handling workflow was found to be hindered by technical limitations, inadequate follow-up mechanisms, and insufficient staff training in digital communication. Despite the availability of the internal "Pass System", customers often experienced delays and lacked transparency in the resolution process.

Overall, while digital platforms like WhatsApp have the potential to improve public service delivery, their effectiveness depends on the integration of clear communication protocols, system responsiveness, and a humanized approach to customer interaction. To optimize digital complaint services, it is crucial for public service institutions to invest in communication training, system upgrades, and ongoing evaluation mechanisms.

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