G2C Communication Through Government Service Portals: An Assessment of Kenya's e-Citizen and eFNS Portals

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Abstract

The automation of government services as exemplified through service portals has increased in a post-COVID-19 world that yearns for social and physical interaction. Although governments have benefitted from an arm's length service delivery model, consumers of these services expect continuous communication from their governments. Government-to-consumer (G2C) communication is hinged on the fact that consumer (citizens and foreign nationals) engagement has a significant place in the provision of government services and government communication literature posits the place of strategic communication with consumers. While preliminary research suggests the popular usage of government service portals to enhance G2C communication, little is known about the effectiveness and interactivity of G2C communication between the government and consumers of government services. Questions thus abound on the kind of perceptions that consumers have regarding the comprehensiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of G2C communication through government service portals. In Kenya, the automation of immigration services encapsulated in the e-citizen and e-foreign nationals service (eFNS) portals, offers prudential lessons to concretize and improve G2C communication in a post-pandemic world. This study focuses on communication through the portals between the government and citizens (applying for passports) and foreign nationals (applying for visas, permits, passes, and long-term residences). The study adopted secondary research analysis coupled with interviews carried out with 16 participants: 10 citizens and foreigners; and 6 Ministry of Interior officials. Thematic analysis revealed that automation orients government officials to a generic messaging model that bespeaks incommunicado and frustrates the attainment of effective G2C communication. Additionally, the study established that whereas government officials were endeared to generic communicative incentives of the portals, consumers craved more information and communication from the government through the portals. From the findings, it is indicative that there is an urgent need to re-engineer the portals and institute a communication avenue. There is a need for the avenue to be run by a competent team of communication practitioners that will engage consumers in two-way symmetrical communication if the government is to make use of service portals in an automated post-pandemic world.

Keywords: Automation; Government messaging; Government Service portals; G2C Communication; and Government services

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the quest by many governments to automate their services to citizens to keep minimal physical contact with consumers seeking government service. Previously, automation of services had been associated with transparency of processes undertaken in the determinations made by governmental authorities. The portals used to process different immigration applications carry an option for government messaging where the government dispatches messages that can be accessed when the applicant logs into the system.

The Department of Immigration draws its historical underpinnings in the pre-colonial controls soon after the scramble and partitioning of Africa (Mwakikagile, 1979). According to Ochieng (1974), the award of the Royal Charter by the Imperial British East African Company (IBEA) led to the 1895 declaration of Kenya as a British protectorate.

Immigration is birthed in the quest to ensure an economic self-reliant policy in the region. In 1906, The Immigration Restriction Ordinance sought to control the influx of foreigners seeking to enter Kenya (Anderson, 2005). Other legal frameworks that tend to impose immigration and emigration processes included the Native Authority Ordinance of 1912 and the Native Registration Act of 1915. The two laws sought to ensure that there was cheap labor and an assured supply of raw materials while restricting the movement of people through the national identification (Kipande) requirements (Anderson, 2005).

In post-independence Kenya, the Department of Immigration (DoI) has continued to serve the interests of the government in safeguarding Kenya's interests while balancing these interests by inviting foreign investors. To do this, the government has continuously offered services that allow foreign nationals to enter, transit, stay, reside, and exit the country. Immigration laws and policies then restrict how foreign nationals secure different immigration statuses.

For many years (1963-2002), immigration services have been processed and issued manually. The automation of permits and passes issuance, as was the case with automating the passport processes – all spoke to the commitment to service consumers. The development of e-citizen and eFNS (Kenya Foreign Nationals Service Portal) allowed the public to check the status of their applications away from immigration offices. Today, the government has been able to automate services such as the issuance of passports, visas, permits, passes, permanent residence, and citizenship.

The Government's efforts to go e-service include the operationalization of integrated personnel and payroll database (IPPD); the integrated financial management information system (iFMIS); the education management information system (EMIS); the integrated tax system (iTAX); e-Citizen; and eFNS portals. These portals are a direct response to the e-government agenda that the government set many years ago (Wamoto, 2015). The Government of Kenya conceptualized e-government within the framework of realizing national development goals and objectives for Wealth and Employment Creation. The idea

was to be mooted to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in the operations of government. The quest by the government to go electronic in its services also includes the delivery of information - all aimed at promoting productivity among public servants, encouraging participation of citizens in government, and empowering all Kenyans (Government of Kenya, 2004). To show its commitment to e-government, a directorate of e-government was formed to cause the development of a strategy, oversee the implementation of the strategy, and monitor and evaluate the implementation of the strategy.

Government communication is the management of relationships between the governors and the governed. We can further define government communication as the constant exchanges of information and communication about policies, ideas and decisions between the governors and the governed (Canel & Sanders, 2013). At a basic level, government communication is the communication from government officials to citizens on government policies, procedures, safety, and efforts to ensure security (Fairbanks et al., 2007). In postulating the different models in public relations, Grunig & Hunt (1984) classified government communication under the informational model which is focused on persuasion and hardly receives feedback from the public. This postulation has been confirmed by Mbeke (2009) who debunked the posture taken by the Kenya Government that purports to be perfect in its communication. Mutere, (1988) argues that the informational model was the logical answer to the quest by the Kenya government to focus on development. The citizens needed developmental information hence the one-way communication model.

Kenya has gone through many developmental and technological disruptions. These disruptions created an environment that demanded two-way symmetrical communication from the government. The quest to have a two-way symmetrical communication model demands a focus on the needs, interests, and concerns of the public. Government communication is thus a complicated output that considers; i) the needs, interests, and concerns of the multifaceted audience; ii) the complex governmental structure that includes the ministries,

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departments, and agencies in the three arms of government; and iii) the mix of communication fields that play in the structure including risk, health, corporate, crisis, public, and corporate communication. The complexity of government communication demands the adoption of versatile strategies that ensure that the message is well received, and the desired action is taken. The government's communication policy is pegged on the understanding that Kenya has a knowledge-based population that requires their information needs satiated (Government of Kenya, 2015). This is a departure from the yesteryears when government communication was one-directional (Government of Kenya, 2014).

This paper looks at the messaging done through the portals and makes reflections that inform government messaging in a post-pandemic world. The portals have mechanisms that a consumer can track expiration, seek progress reports, take cognizance of notices for additional documentation, and secure notifications for the decisions arrived at by governmental authorities. This study therefore addressed 1) factors that drove the government to adopt the use of eFNS and the e-citizen portal, 2) the communication problems that are associated with the adoption of eFNS and e-citizen portals, and 3) identifiable G2C communication prospects when using eFNS and e-citizen portals.

Methodology

The study took a qualitative methodological approach. Secondary data generated from the eFNS and e-Citizen portals was analyzed and the findings juxtaposed with data generated from interviews carried out with 16 participants comprising 10 citizens and foreigners and 6 Ministry of Interior officials who had integrated with the eFNS and e-Citizen portals. Within the guidance of the constructivist research paradigm, the study was focused on the views, feelings, and opinions of the participants relative to the data available on the systems to pick gems on the G2G communication through the government portals. This was in line with Creswell (2013) that qualitative researchers are more concerned with complex views as opposed to narrowing meanings into categories. The participants were selected based on a set criterion, namely: that they must be adults who have interacted with one or both of the eFNS and e-Citizen portals. The interaction with the portals was one beyond acquaintance with, to a level that participants could make sense of the interaction as a communicative avenue with the government but significantly register their opinion to the said communication. Finally, the participants needed to be available for an interview lasting 30-45 minutes. Several ethical considerations formed the basis of our study. Confidentiality and anonymity were given priority including the assigning of pseudonyms to the participants. Participants' consent was sought before the interviews were carried out. Documents were effectively managed to avoid cases relating to privacy. Participants were selected purposively and we allowed a window for snowballing where some foreign national participants led us to other participants. Saturation was attained after the 14 participants, but we added the two participants as a confirmatory position that saturation had been attained. The data generated from interviews was analyzed thematically – an analysis that is reflected in the findings. Content analysis was used to make sense of the data generated from the portals. The distribution of the participants is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Summary demographics of participants over the study period

Variable	Description	n
Sex		
	Female	6
	Male	10
Nationality		
	Kenyan	10
	Non-Kenyan	6
County		
	Nairobi	6
	Machakos	2
	Nakuru	3
	Mombasa	2
	Embu	1
	Kisumu	2

Findings

As discussed in the sections below, the major findings of this study expose various shortcomings in government portals such as eFNS and e-Citizen. It unveils a spectrum of issues: Firstly, a dearth of communication channels within the portals leads to consumer frustration, prompting the need for expanded feedback options. Secondly, the lack of integration between these portals and service providers, alongside concerns about generic messages and data security was evidenced. Thirdly, instances of incorrect messaging causing confusion among users surface as a significant issue Overall, these findings collectively underscore the urgent requirement for enhanced communication avenues, improved integration, fortified data security measures, and greater accuracy within these government platforms.

Unharnessed Communication Channels

Asked whether the information (and indeed the communication) on the portal was sufficiently meeting their needs, the consumer participants yearned for more than what was readily available. For the participants, the portals were an easy way to open communication channels that would allow for feedback from consumers while communicating information beyond the application in question. It emerged that participants wanted regular administrative and legal updates so that they could be brought to speed on the changes taking place. Like any

government department, immigration has many messages that could need to be relayed to the consumers. As participant GEE noted, *at times you visit immigration offices and there are notices all around you. How I wish that some of these messages can be pushed to consumers so that they can be better informed.* This view invites the thought of how the eFNS and e-Citizen can include a noticeboard section where public notices can be posted and avail an opportunity for the consumers to give some feedback. Having this option will reduce miscommunication, dis-information, and mal-information. An interesting perspective was captured by participant ZEE told me *when you seek information from an office and you are pointed to some noticeboard that will give you details, you realize that the very thing that could have made your process easy was not communicated through the platform that enabled one to apply for the service. More information needs to be given to the consumers.*

Similar concerns were captured from participants who used e-Citizen. Participant TEE spoke about the concerns she had with e-Citizen:

I saw a memo from the Directorate of Immigration being shared on social media networks that I belong to. The memo indicated that the deadline for processing Kenya's e-passport had been set for 30th November 2022. I was under the impression that the document was fake because that was an important piece of information that needed to be captured on e-Citizen – the portal where we apply for passports.

The views expressed by GEE and ZEE speak to the infinite possibilities that portals have to communicate to clients. The recent additional tabs on the eFNS and e-Citizen portals are a demonstration that a tab needs to be dedicated to communication with customers. A blackboard section needs to be activated so that notices, public announcements, circulars, and memos can all find a place on the portal for public consumption.

Integrated communication

Participants referred to how the government portals made communication easier by pushing messages to their phones through short message services (SMS) as well as through email. e-Citizen was singled out as a channel the government had used to relay short messages to the applicants. Participant SEE shared that he had applied for a passport and most of the milestones were shared on SMS. An example of the message he received read: "Your application has now been received and is being processed. Kind regards, Directorate of Immigration Services." SEE, however, wanted to see more integration. The e-Citizen does not connect us to the Postal Corporation of Kenya (*also referred to as* Posta), yet Posta is the official agent for the collection of passports. In his words, SEE:

*I have recently applied for the e-passport. I was happy that beyond the application details I entered on the e-Citizen, I was able to receive messages updating me on the progress. I noted that I was informed that the application had been received, then I was informed that the passport was issued. When I went to Nyayo House (*Immigration headquarters*), I was redirected to some portal to book collection at the Posta. Why can't this information be linked on e-Citizen? Accessing Nyayo house is a hassle, that time would have been used to collect the passport.*

Other participants cited the same trend. VEE argued that the messaging integration on e-Citizen is tagged at the start and the end of the process. No communication happens between the stages given that the process is manual. VEE's views were based on the police clearance application she had done on e-Citizen. As VEE, CEE applied for a trading license and only got two messages:

One to tell me I have filed the application, and the last one to say the application is approved and I should proceed and make payment.

Participants were concerned by the model taken on eFNS. The email system initially meant to prompt the customer on what was happening on the portal could have serious lapses causing the same message to be shared severally to the customer. Participant DEE wondered of eFNS:

You know I could go to my mailbox and receive over 100 emails – all telling me that an application had been received. I think there was a system failure. Nowadays, I do not receive any messages pushed to my emails from eFNS. The idea was good, but the modalities were not right. When the system stopped sending emails, I thought there was some back-office operation to amend this. Once I give my phone number and email address, I expect some communication through those channels. It is wrong for the government to assume that I will keep logging in the portal to check what is happening.

On her part, FEE saw the pushed messages as disrespectful as they did not have a personal touch. She averred:

Once a customer insisted that I should not put my agency's email on the application form and instead put her own email address. She ended up receiving over 300 emails on a subject she did not relate with. When eFNS would share a message indicating that the application is "in progress", one would ordinarily wonder which application is being referred to. Why can't the messages be personalized and indicate that we are making reference to the application that XYZ filed. Generic messages are not effective communication tools.

This thematic reflection was explicated from a variety of responses where participants shared their frustration with the preferred mode of message categories. Largely, participants noted the lack of sufficient information dedicated to the negative messages. For eFNS, participants noted that messages touching on the deferral of applications or messages that communicated rejection of application made bore the scantiest of messages. Participant FEE told me:

Can you imagine the frustration when all I can tell my clients is that the application was not successful because the job can be done by a Kenyan? When I do communicate on such a case, it may make sense the first time, but what happens the nth time? Is this the only reason advanced for cases that do not merit? Why are there no accompanying details?

FEE was not alone, DEE wondered why immigration would defer her case and

only indicate that the immigration team would make a verification visit. In her opinion, a verification visit is not an investigative tour, and as such, more details are required including when the team from immigration would make the tour. In her words,

We cannot await in perpetuity for immigration based on a very unclear messaging model. Should I be under house arrest or confined to my workplace till immigration gets an opportunity to visit? By the way, if I run out of status when I am 'waiting' should I be penalized?

While generic messages seem to be an easier process that arises from the quest to manage clients' expectations, the reflection from the participants seemed to indicate that more details need to be given to the clients. Effective government messaging should not be informed by a mystified communication model that is shrouded in preconceived categories that bear limiting messages. While government communication has often been called out for not being prompt, a generic response approach is likely to depict government messaging as one adopting a lazy approach instead of advancing a personalized messaging model. An epileptic archetypal government messaging is more likely to decrease the levels of clarity which was one of the cardinal principles that e-government had espoused. A document review of the messages shared by the government revealed the presence of a generic messaging model. Some of the messages were shared over and over (Table 2). Table 2 shows a sample of some of the messages shared by the government through the eFNS.

Table 2. Generic message typologies dispatched to eFNS users or their agents (Initial stages)

Processing stage	Immigration service	Generic message pushed to the applicant or their agent
Lodgment of application	Permits or passes	▪ Your application has been received ▪ Upload correct application form 25 ▪ Furnish current immigration status
Registry, indexing and microfilming processes	Permits and passes	▪ Please upload your duly certified copies of academic and professional certificates. ▪ kindly update form 25, to indicate understudy, attach professional certificates of the understudy and current immigration status ▪ Provide valid company tax compliance certificate[1]
General indexing and profiling of the application	Permits and passes, permanent residency, and citizenship applications	▪ In progress
Recommendation stage/Secretarial committee stage	Permits, special, dependents, and internship passes	▪ You are requested to appear in person for an interview ▪ Provide valid company tax compliance certificate ▪ Furnish us with verified/authenticated certificates ▪ Explain your employers' activities ▪ Provide a clearance letter

Applications are considered by immigration officials to make decisions – largely to defer (await further reasons to decide), approve the application, or outright reject the application. Some of the generic messages are presented in Table 3.

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[1] Some of the messages are written in Caps. In business writing, this would amount to shouting.

Table 3. Generic message typologies dispatched to eFNS users or their agents (Post determination)

Processing stage	Immigration service	Generic message pushed to an applicant or their agent
Determination stage (deferrals, approvals, or rejections)	All applications	▪ Permit Approved for 2 Years ▪ Special pass approved ▪ Visitor's pass extended for two (2) months. Considering the requirement for social distancing, you will be notified when to come for endorsement. ▪ An invoice for issuance fee of KSH 45000 has been generated. Failure to pay within thirty (30) days from the date of notification will render the approval null and void under section 56 of the Immigration Regulations, 2012. Kindly print this notification and proceed with payments which should be done online ▪ An invoice for issuance fee of KSH 400000 has been generated. Provide financial security in sum of KSH 100,000 for a period of 3 years in the form of a Bank/Insurance Bond. Failure to pay within thirty (30) days from the date of notification will render the approval null and void under section 56 of the Immigration Regulations, 2012. Kindly print this notification and proceed with payments which should be done online. ▪ An invoice for issuance fee of KSH 5000 has been generated. Attach financial security in the sum of KSHS 100,000/= in the form of Bank / Insurance Bond. Print the payment receipt and present it to Nyayo house cashier counter. Failure to pay within thirty (30) days from the date of notification will render the approval null and void under section 56 of the Immigration Regulations, 2012. Kindly print this notification and proceed with payments which should be done online. ▪ No merit ▪ Job can be done by a Kenyan ▪ Application deferred for a site visit
Issuance		▪ Your e-Special pass has been issued through your eFNS portal. You are therefore advised to print it, book an online appointment for endorsement and present it together with your original passport to the Immigration Office. ▪ Your e-Permit has been issued through your eFNS Portal. You are therefore advised to print it. Additionally, an alien card application has been auto generated by the system with an invoice. Kindly make the necessary uploads and payment then proceed to book an online appointment for endorsement and present it together with your original passport to the Immigration Office ▪ Your Special pass has been issued. Go to my applications, download and print the autogenerated document.
Contestation (appeals stage)		▪ Your Appeal has been successful ▪ Appeal not Successful (Rejected)

From the data, government messaging on eFNS takes an informative or instructive typology.

An instructive typology is expected to achieve four objectives, namely: personalize the

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message (address a specific person); allow the reader to quickly get to the main idea; communicate with much-needed clarity; introduce no grammatical noise (no errors) and ask the audience to take a specific action. Instructive messages are communication to give the audience some guidance on how to take action (Krotel, 2021).

The theme of generic messaging sends mixed signals on what has been the journey of government communication. When XXX wrote about the four ways, government communication was thus hypothesized as dependent on the type of government formation. Democracy was pitched as the most communicative (Fairbanks et al., 2007; Canel & Sanders, 2013). By their very nature, democratic formations demand that governments are obligated to their promises and pledges – and this means communicating frequently and in a transparent manner. In Kenya, the promulgation of the 2010 constitution obligated government agencies to communicate with citizens and other nationals on the processes and decisions that government officials make (Government of Kenya, 2010). Everything that a democratic event, process, or decision carries a communicative element (Young, 2007). As a democratic formation, the citizenry expects a prompt, transparent, and agile communication approach from their government (Aswani, 2021).

Data security concerns
There has been a serious focus on data privacy and protection. Indeed, Kenya just promulgated the data protection laws. The data hosted on government portals is of national security concern. One would then assume that the eFNS and e-Citizen are safeguarded portals. Basic security protocols always communicate the security measures put in place to safeguard data. Participants JEE and NEE referred to simple measures such as promptings on password change and second-level confirmations that ensure that the portals are accessed by the right client. NEE's account speaks to the thematic concerns on data security. In reference to e-Citizen, NEE noted that:

I thought e-Citizen was safeguarded as we have seen other portals such as Kenya Revenue Authority's iTAX. On iTax, one is often prompted to change their password. Indeed, several layers of security are put in place, and I believe this happens

considering tax information is important. My experience with e-Citizen showed loopholes and communicated to me a government that has no grasp on the security of data given to it by customers. I once lost my driver's licence. The gentleman who picked it up worked in a cybercafé. The gentleman got access of my details and called me to come and collect my licence. Shocked at how he accessed my details, I went to him and inquisitively established that like many Kenyans, very few people have changed their default password. My national identity card number remained the default username and password. I had never navigated the e-Citizen portal to change password. After this shocking revelation, I changed my password. That incident showed me how inconsistent government is. Why would one portal be heavily fortified, yet the other be let open to access?

Incorrect messaging
Although the findings revealed a generic messaging plan, some participants noticed that incorrect messages were communicated. A portal-run messaging model needs to convey the correct messages for the customers to take appropriate action. Participant BEE narrated how government officials through the portal misinformed her.

I worked for a mining company. Our establishment had several drillers. At one time we received a deferral message on eFNS to the effect that we should seek a clearance letter from the regulator. What shocked me was the fact that we had to seek this letter from the Ministry of Water. Huh! I was shocked. Why not the Ministry of Mining which regulates our sector?

BEE's observation compares to what LEE also noted when he said that he had seen messages that give approval of four months for special passes when in fact it should be three months. The wrong invoicing leads to wrong payment decisions.

Conclusions
This study sheds light on the messaging strategies employed through the eFNS and e-Citizen portals. The portals present mechanisms that the Government of Kenya employs to communicate to its audiences. Findings of this indicate that, while the government's adoption of eFNS and e-Citizen portals was a step in the right direction for improving G2C communication, there are significant communication challenges that must be addressed. The Users seem dissatisfied

with the use of generic messaging and the lack of personalized communication. Additionally, there was a conclusive resolve among the citizenry that where the government takes a communicative form that is empty, citizens see an incrementally incommunicado approach from the government. On government communication through the eFNS portal, participants sneered at the use of prepopulated messages demanding more personalized messaging. To improve G2C communication prospects, the government should prioritize improving portal messaging models, ensuring data security, and implementing integration measures to effectively streamline communication with citizens. These steps will not only improve communication channels but will also contribute to transparent and timely governance, as is expected in a democratic structure.

Acknowledgment

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