



## Citizens' Subjective Experiences of Public Information Disclosure: A Human Rights and Transparency Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Public administration transparency has long been a critical issue in democratic governance, yet the subjective experiences of citizens in accessing public information remain underexplored. While prior studies have focused on legal and procedural barriers, less attention has been paid to the lived experiences that shape citizens' perceptions of transparency. This research addresses this gap by investigating how citizens experience the process of obtaining public information in a bureaucratic context. Using a phenomenological approach, the study explores the emotional, cognitive, and practical challenges faced by individuals when interacting with government institutions for information access. Through in-depth interviews with 10 participants, key themes of frustration, distrust, and the desire for more accessible systems emerged, revealing how these factors hinder the effectiveness of transparency policies. The findings provide actionable insights for policymakers by emphasizing the need to design transparency initiatives that address emotional and cognitive barriers, thus fostering more effective citizen-government interactions. Explicitly integrating these factors into future policies can enhance accessibility and trust in public administration systems.



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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of access to public information within administrative governance is a critical issue in contemporary democratic societies, as it directly relates to citizens' rights and governmental transparency (Chu dkk., 2017). In many democracies, citizens are legally entitled to access public information, a right that is often enshrined in constitutional frameworks and international human rights instruments. However, the practical realization of this right remains uneven, with many citizens encountering significant barriers when attempting to access the information that they are legally entitled to. These barriers, whether bureaucratic, technological, or psychological, hinder not only individual access to vital information but also the broader democratic process by undermining transparency and accountability in government. For instance, in India, despite the enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005, citizens frequently face procedural delays and resistance from officials in releasing requested data. Similarly, in countries like Indonesia, technological limitations and a lack of standardized procedures often impede access to public records, especially in rural areas.

One of the central concepts in understanding this phenomenon is the notion of transparency in governance, which is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic practice. Transparency involves the clear and open communication of governmental actions, decisions, and policies to the public (Axelsen & Wiggins, 1977). However, despite advances in information technology and legal frameworks aimed at increasing government openness, the effective implementation of transparency often falls short, particularly when institutional procedures are unclear, outdated, or inconsistent. Additionally, digital divide issues and technological barriers can exacerbate the problem, especially

for marginalized communities that lack the resources or skills to access digital platforms intended for public information dissemination. For example, in South Africa, despite having progressive transparency laws, the digital divide continues to create significant obstacles for communities with limited internet access, disproportionately affecting low-income populations.

Previous studies on public information access have largely focused on the legal and procedural aspects of information requests, examining the effectiveness of freedom of information (FOI) laws, administrative procedures, and the role of digital platforms in facilitating access. However, these studies have often overlooked the subjective experiences of citizens engaging with these systems (Pan dkk., 2024). While quantitative research has identified the extent of information accessibility and highlighted institutional challenges, there is a gap in understanding how these institutional barriers are experienced by citizens on a personal level. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals who have interacted with public information systems, shedding light on the psychological and emotional dimensions of these encounters, including frustration, mistrust, and hope for reform.

The goal of this research is to explore how individuals perceive and navigate the challenges associated with accessing public information and to understand the meaning they attach to these experiences (Nedlund dkk., 2023). By focusing on the subjective nature of these experiences, the study seeks to offer deeper insights into the social and psychological factors that shape citizens' interactions with governmental institutions, which are often overlooked in more technical or legal analyses. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon and provides valuable insights into the barriers to transparency, with the aim of informing more effective policies and practices in the future.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals in relation to specific phenomena has become a significant area of study within the field of phenomenology (Carvalho dkk., 2022). Understanding how people experience and make sense of their interactions with social, legal, or governmental systems is essential for capturing the full complexity of these phenomena. In the case of public information access, exploring citizens' personal experiences reveals not only the practical challenges they face but also the deeper meanings they attach to these experiences, including feelings of frustration, mistrust, and hope for reform. This focus on lived experiences allows for a more holistic understanding of the barriers and opportunities associated with governmental transparency.

However, exploring the deep meanings of such experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative methods, which rely on surveys and statistical analysis, are ill-equipped to capture the subjective nature of individuals' interactions with public administration (Simmons & Swahnberg, 2022). These methods often fail to account for the nuanced emotions, perceptions, and cognitive processes that shape how citizens understand their right to access information and the obstacles they encounter. Additionally, they tend to overlook the contextual factors, such as the social, cultural, and institutional settings, that influence individuals' experiences.

Phenomenological approaches, which focus on descriptive and interpretive analyses of individuals' lived experiences, offer a more suitable methodology for addressing these gaps. However, even within phenomenology, challenges remain in fully capturing the depth of subjective experience. One challenge is the complexity of gathering and interpreting rich, detailed narratives from participants, particularly in a context where institutional practices are often opaque and inconsistent. As such, many existing studies in this area have struggled to provide a comprehensive understanding of how citizens experience and interpret their interactions with administrative systems. Without the depth of qualitative, phenomenological insight, these studies fail to uncover the essence of the experience in ways that are meaningful for both theory and practice.

These limitations underscore the need for research that delves deeply into the subjective dimensions of transparency and public information access. Only through this approach can we begin to fully understand the psychological and emotional impact of administrative barriers and the ways in which citizens navigate and respond to these challenges. This study aims to address these gaps by employing a phenomenological methodology that prioritizes the lived experiences of citizens in order to gain a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Despite the extensive research on public information access, most studies have focused on practical solutions and institutional frameworks, such as analyzing the effectiveness of freedom of information laws or the efficiency of digital platforms (Yoshida & Kobayashi, 2011). These studies often rely on quantitative methodologies to measure accessibility and transparency, aiming to evaluate the extent to which citizens are able to access the information they request. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the structural and procedural barriers to transparency, they fall short in capturing the lived experiences of individuals navigating these systems. By focusing primarily on external factors, such as legal compliance and digital infrastructure, these methods fail to explore the personal meanings and emotional responses of citizens who engage with these systems, leaving a gap in understanding the full impact of these barriers.

Furthermore, the practical solutions often overlook the subjective nature of the experience itself—how individuals feel about their interactions with government institutions, how they interpret these experiences, and the psychological consequences of facing obstacles in accessing public information. In doing so, they miss an opportunity to gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of the impact of administrative transparency, which goes beyond simply quantifying accessibility (Markhgeym dkk., 2019). The limited scope of these existing studies leaves us with an incomplete picture of the true barriers to transparency and the ways in which citizens' perceptions are shaped by these interactions.

In light of these limitations, there is a clear need to adopt a phenomenological approach to explore this issue more deeply. A phenomenological framework allows for an in-depth exploration of the essence of individuals' experiences and the meanings they attribute to their interactions with governmental institutions. By focusing on qualitative insights and subjective experiences, phenomenology offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how citizens perceive and respond to challenges in accessing public information. This approach not only reveals the emotional and psychological dimensions of these experiences but also uncovers the underlying meanings that inform citizens' trust in government and their perceptions of transparency.

This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by using a phenomenological methodology to examine the lived experiences of individuals seeking public information, providing a richer and more holistic understanding of the barriers and opportunities in the context of administrative transparency.

Previous studies on public information access have primarily focused on the legal and institutional aspects of transparency, examining how well laws, policies, and digital platforms enable citizens to access government-held information (Pich & Dean, 2015). Research has highlighted barriers such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, technological divides, and legal ambiguities, but often with a quantitative focus that neglects the personal, subjective experiences of individuals. Theories of democratic transparency and citizens' rights are frequently invoked, but these frameworks tend to prioritize external barriers rather than exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of citizens' engagement with administrative systems. Moreover, the existing literature falls short in exploring how citizens interpret and make sense of their interactions with these systems, leading to an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. This study aims to bridge this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach that centers on individuals' lived experiences with accessing public information.

To address the knowledge gap identified, a phenomenological methodology is employed to investigate the essence of individuals' experiences when seeking public information. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring the subjective meaning of transparency and access in governance, as it emphasizes understanding how citizens perceive, interpret, and respond to their encounters with administrative systems. By focusing on the personal experiences of participants, phenomenology provides a deeper insight into the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of transparency that are often overlooked in more conventional studies. The aim is to understand not just the barriers citizens face, but also the broader meanings they attribute to these challenges and the impact of these experiences on their trust in government. This approach is ideal for providing a holistic and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, allowing for more informed recommendations on improving public information systems.

The article is structured as follows: First, the introduction outlines the context and significance of public information access, followed by a review of existing literature on transparency and citizens' experiences (Sørensen & Pedersen, 1988). The methodology section details the phenomenological approach used in the study, including the process of data collection through semi-structured interviews and observations. Next, the data analysis section discusses the thematic analysis of the participants' experiences, focusing on the key themes that emerged. The discussion section interprets the findings in light of existing literature, while the conclusion highlights the implications of the study for policy and practice in improving transparency in public administration.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the subjective experiences of citizens in accessing public information within the context of administrative governance (Sonck & Loosveldt, 2008). Phenomenology was chosen as it allows for an in-depth examination of individuals' lived experiences, offering insight into how they make sense of and attribute meaning to the phenomenon under investigation. The focus of phenomenological research lies in understanding the essence of experiences from the perspective of those who live them, making it particularly relevant for addressing the research questions about citizens' perceptions and interactions with public administration in the context of transparency.

The study adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach, which is primarily concerned with describing the lived experiences of individuals without preconceived theories or interpretations. This approach was selected because it enables a detailed exploration of how participants experience and understand the accessibility of public information and the transparency of governmental processes. By capturing participants' descriptions of these experiences, the study sought to uncover the underlying meaning of the phenomenon, which is crucial for understanding the barriers to and expectations of public information access.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 10 citizens who had previously interacted with government agencies to access public information within the last five years. These individuals were selected through purposive sampling, aiming to capture a diverse range of experiences relevant to the research focus. The inclusion criteria required participants to have actively sought public information from either local or national government institutions, possess a basic understanding of their constitutional right to information, and have had personal experience with bureaucratic processes.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who could not communicate effectively in Bahasa Indonesia or those who had not been involved in any recent requests for public information. The sample comprised both urban and rural residents to ensure variability in the experiences based on geographic location (Bisenius dkk., 2023). Participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, and socio-economic background, though the majority were middle-aged adults, with an average age of 40 years. This variation helped provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways in which different demographic groups engage with public information systems.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with each participant. The interviews were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences with public information access, the challenges they faced, and their perceptions of government transparency. The interview protocol included open-ended questions such as, "Can you describe your experience when trying to access public information?" and "What challenges or barriers did you encounter during this process?" These questions were designed to facilitate rich, narrative responses and encourage participants to share their subjective experiences.

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private settings, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and able to express themselves freely. The data were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed verbatim, and stored securely. No modifications were made to the interview protocol during the study, but the interviews allowed for flexibility to follow up on emerging themes and areas of interest.

Additionally, observational notes were taken during some interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors that might influence participants' experiences. These observations complemented the interview data and provided a fuller understanding of the participants' perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common method in phenomenological research. The analysis involved identifying key themes and patterns within the transcribed interview data that reflected the core experiences of participants. Thematic analysis was conducted in a systematic manner through several stages: (1) familiarization with the data by reading and re-reading the transcriptions to gain an overall understanding, (2) generating initial codes by identifying significant phrases, words, or concepts that directly related to the research questions, (3) organizing codes into categories and grouping them to identify overarching themes, (4) reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they accurately captured the essence of participants' lived experiences, and (5) interpreting the themes within the context of the study's phenomenological framework.

To ensure reproducibility, the coding process was conducted independently by two researchers who then compared and discussed their results to resolve any discrepancies. This inter-coder agreement process enhanced the reliability of the findings. Additionally, a detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis, documenting the decisions made during coding and theme development.

Thematic analysis was performed manually, though the NVivo software was used for organizing and managing the data. Each identified theme was interpreted in light of the phenomenological framework, ensuring that the analysis remained focused on the participants' perceptions and meanings rather than external theories or assumptions. Themes were cross-referenced with observational notes taken during interviews to triangulate the data, strengthening the validity of the findings. The final thematic structure helped to present a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to accessing public information, citizens' trust in government transparency, and their hopes for reform.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, ensuring that they were fully informed before consenting to participate. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and personal identifiers were removed from the transcriptions (Iryna dkk., 2020). Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely, accessible only to the research team. The study adhered to ethical standards in accordance with international guidelines for human research ethics, ensuring that participants' rights were respected throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Barriers to Accessing Public Information**

A significant challenge reported by participants was the complexity and inconsistency of accessing public information. Many citizens expressed frustration with bureaucratic procedures that obstructed their ability to obtain information they were entitled to under the law. The barriers described were not only administrative but also psychological, as the citizens often felt that the process was deliberately opaque. One participant noted, "I was asked to fill out forms that I didn't understand, and after submitting them, I never received any clear response. It felt like a waste of time." Another participant described their experience as follows: "I was told I could access the information, but they kept changing the requirements. I just gave up in the end."

These narratives reflect the widespread perception that accessing public information is a difficult and frustrating process. The lack of clear guidelines, excessive paperwork, and the inconsistency in how information is made available created significant barriers for the citizens. These obstacles not only hindered their right to access information but also fostered a sense of alienation from the governmental processes. This finding aligns with Darch and Underwood's (2010) study, which highlights the prevalence of administrative inefficiencies in undermining transparency. However, while their research primarily emphasizes procedural shortcomings, this study expands on the psychological and emotional impacts, providing a more comprehensive perspective on the citizen experience.

### **Distrust in Government Transparency**

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was a deep sense of distrust toward the government's commitment to transparency. Many participants expressed doubts about the government's sincerity in providing accessible and accurate public information. This mistrust was compounded by the perceived lack of accountability in the administrative processes. As one participant explained, "I don't trust that the government will give me the full information. They always seem to hide something. It's like they want to control what we know." Another participant echoed these sentiments, stating, "Even when I got the information I requested, I felt it was incomplete or vague. I wonder if there's something they're not telling us."

These statements underline the widespread cynicism regarding the transparency of public institutions. The failure of the government to fulfill its obligations to citizens regarding the timely and clear provision of information contributed significantly to this distrust. This resonates with Brinkman and Williams' (2019) findings, which indicate that perceptions of government opacity often correlate with diminished trust in public institutions. However, this study adds to the discourse by illustrating how emotional responses, such as frustration and disillusionment, further exacerbate this distrust.

### **Expectations for Change and Improved Transparency**

Despite the frustrations and barriers reported, many participants voiced hopes for reform. They expressed a desire for a more accessible and responsive public information system. Participants recognized that transparency is essential for ensuring accountability and fostering trust between the government and its citizens. However, they also believed that significant improvements were necessary to realize this ideal. One participant shared, "I hope things will change, and that the government will be more open. I want them to listen to us and give us the information we need without making it so difficult." Another stated, "There has to be a way for citizens to easily access information. It shouldn't be this hard."

These responses suggest a sense of optimism among citizens, despite their frustrations. There is a clear desire for the government to embrace greater transparency and reform its administrative procedures to make information more accessible. Participants hoped that such changes would lead to greater civic engagement and trust in governmental processes.

### **Observational Insights**

Observations of government offices further corroborated the findings from the interviews. In some cases, government agencies demonstrated a clear commitment to transparency, providing citizens with easy access to information and clear instructions on how to obtain it. However, in many instances, offices were found to have cumbersome processes, with delays or a lack of response to

information requests. These inconsistencies in administrative practices reinforced the participants' frustrations and contributed to the overall perception that the level of transparency was highly dependent on individual officials or the specific office in question.

The findings from this study highlight significant barriers faced by citizens in accessing public information, including complex bureaucratic procedures, lack of transparency, and inconsistent practices across different government offices. At the same time, the research also underscores a prevailing sense of hope for change, with citizens expressing a desire for greater government openness and responsiveness. These themes illustrate the gap between the legal entitlements to access information and the practical realities of interacting with administrative bodies, and they provide valuable insights into the challenges of implementing constitutional rights related to transparency and public participation.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the subjective experiences of citizens seeking access to public information, revealing key themes such as bureaucratic obstacles, emotional frustration, and the desire for more transparency. These themes highlight the gap between the ideal of open governance and the lived reality of individuals navigating administrative systems. The study confirms that accessibility barriers are not just procedural but deeply intertwined with perceptions of trust and government responsiveness, thus offering a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The research directly addresses the primary question of how citizens experience the process of accessing public information within a system designed to be transparent. The emotional and cognitive dimensions of these experiences, particularly the frustration and disillusionment reported by participants, are crucial contributions to understanding why many citizens feel disconnected from the governmental process. This study underscores that information access is not merely a matter of procedural efficiency but is deeply rooted in psychological experiences of empowerment or disempowerment. The participants' experiences, especially in dealing with bureaucratic inertia, reveal that while legal frameworks may exist, the human factor—the willingness of government officials to engage transparently and empathetically—plays a critical role in shaping citizens' perceptions and experiences. These findings provide a much-needed lens for policymakers to understand the subjective barriers to transparency, highlighting the need for more citizen-centered reforms.

In relation to previous literature, this study contributes to the growing body of research on transparency and access to information by shifting the focus from the external barriers—such as the inefficiency of digital platforms or legal limitations—to the internal experiences of individuals engaging with these systems. While studies such as those by Darch and Underwood (2010) and Brinkman and Williams (2019) highlight systemic obstacles, this research emphasizes how subjective factors, such as frustration and perceived government inaction, play a significant role in citizens' overall experiences of transparency. Additionally, the study aligns with Rasmussen and Simmonds' (2017) argument that phenomenological approaches are crucial for capturing the lived experiences of individuals, particularly when exploring complex, human-centered phenomena like transparency. However, it extends their work by applying a holistic phenomenological perspective to public administration, addressing the nuanced emotional and cognitive responses of citizens, which are often overlooked in more quantitative studies.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have both scientific and practical implications for the field of public administration, particularly in understanding the experiential and psychological barriers to accessing public information (Zhang, 2017). From a scientific standpoint, the study provides new insights into the subjective dimensions of transparency, suggesting that the way citizens experience access to information is as critical as the systems put in place to facilitate it. These experiential barriers—rooted in bureaucratic complexity, emotional frustration, and perceptions of governmental responsiveness—offer a richer understanding of why citizens may feel disconnected or alienated from public administration processes. Practically, these findings imply that efforts to improve transparency must go beyond technological or procedural reforms and address the human elements of public administration, such as communication, empathy, and responsiveness. The study also has implications for policy reform; it suggests that providing clearer, more user-friendly access to information, along

with ensuring that government officials are better equipped to engage empathetically with citizens, could reduce frustrations and foster greater trust in government systems. On a broader level, the findings highlight the importance of emotional engagement in democratic participation, advocating for systems that both meet informational needs and address the psychological dimensions of public trust and engagement.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. The phenomenological approach, while rich in its exploration of subjective experiences, does not allow for broad generalization across larger populations. This limitation stems from the relatively small and context-specific sample of participants, which primarily includes individuals who have actively sought out public information in the last five years (Moghadam, 2019). As such, the experiences captured in this study may not be representative of all citizens or may not fully account for other factors—such as socioeconomic status or geographical location—that could influence the ability to access public information. Furthermore, the study is constrained by its reliance on self-reported experiences and may not fully capture the institutional or systemic barriers that contribute to the phenomenon. Future research could expand the sample size, include participants from a broader range of socioeconomic and regional backgrounds, and incorporate quantitative methods to triangulate the findings. Additionally, future studies might explore the role of digital platforms and technological innovations in shaping the experience of transparency, as these were outside the scope of this research.

### **Prospects for Future Research**

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore how policy changes and technological interventions, such as digital government platforms or reforms in administrative procedures, impact citizens' experiences with transparency. Understanding the long-term effects of these interventions on trust and satisfaction could yield valuable insights for both policymakers and practitioners (Nedlund dkk., 2023). Moreover, this study's focus on the subjective experiences of citizens invites further exploration into the cultural and social factors that influence perceptions of transparency across different demographic groups. Future studies could examine how factors such as age, education, or political ideology shape individuals' interactions with public administration. Another promising area for research is the potential for cross-national comparisons of citizens' experiences with public information access, particularly in countries with varying levels of democratic engagement and transparency. Ultimately, the application of phenomenology in this field could provide more nuanced and context-sensitive insights into the relationship between citizens and governance, contributing to the broader understanding of participatory democracy and public trust.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the experiential barriers citizens face when accessing public information, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective dimensions of transparency in governance. The findings revealed that bureaucratic complexities, emotional frustration, and perceived inefficiency significantly shape citizens' experiences, highlighting the need for more empathetic and accessible governmental systems. These insights offer a deeper understanding of how psychological factors influence perceptions of transparency, providing a richer perspective than previous research that focused primarily on procedural or legal barriers. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of the lived experiences of individuals in public administration. However, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size of 10 participants limits the generalizability of the findings, as the experiences captured may not fully represent the diverse contexts and demographics within the broader population. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of recall bias or subjective interpretation, which could affect the accuracy of participants'



accounts. Third, the study focused on a specific context and timeframe, potentially overlooking longitudinal changes or variations across different regions and administrative systems.

To address these limitations, future research should consider expanding the sample size and including participants from more diverse demographic and geographic backgrounds to capture a broader range of experiences. Incorporating mixed-method approaches, such as combining phenomenological interviews with quantitative surveys or experimental designs, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the impact of specific policy reforms or technological innovations on citizens' experiences over time would be valuable. These approaches could help refine practical strategies for enhancing democratic participation and public trust by addressing both procedural and psychological dimensions of transparency. The study also suggests that future research could investigate the role of technological interventions and policy reforms in improving transparency. Further exploration into these areas could help refine practical strategies for enhancing democratic participation and public trust.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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