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### EVALUATING TRUST IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: ATTITUDE TOWARDS E-GOVERNMENT AS A MEDIATOR

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#### *Abstract*

Ensuring public trust in government administration is one of the prime focuses for a government to uphold a satisfactory long term relationship with its citizen. Less level of trust may indirectly lead the citizen to have low confidence towards the decision made by the government. To date, the level of trust in public administration across the globe is diminishing over the years since 1960s. Thus, applying new management style such as e-government initiatives is believed to have a positive impact on public trust level towards the government. This quantitative study aims to investigate the trust in Malaysian public administration through one of the e-government initiatives namely e-service quality using E-S-QUAL four dimensions, focusing on the effect of attitude towards e-government as mediating variable between those four dimensions and public administration trust. A survey was carried out which consisted of 230 questionnaires being distributed to respondents who have experienced in using any of the e-government applications in Malaysia. A total of 168 completed questionnaires were collected. The questionnaires were distributed randomly in Kedah, Malaysia, between September to December, 2017. Employing SMART-PLS as a tool to analyse the data, the findings demonstrated that attitude towards e-government mediates the relationship between efficiency and system availability and trust in public administration. It also proved that attitude towards e-government does not have a mediation effect on the relationship between privacy and fulfilment and trust in public administration.

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**Keywords:** Trust, public administration, e-government, e-service quality, E-S-QUAL, attitude.



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## 1. Introduction

The requirement of trust in public administration is unquestionable. Having a high level of public trust is vital for public administration to be smoothly managed and to perform efficiently and effectively (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010; Crawshaw & Brodbeck, 2011; Sharkie, 2009). Similarly, a great level of trust can assist the managers of an organization in influencing the subordinate to accept their choices, demonstrating good behaviours in the workplace while the staff have low intention to leave the organization besides giving full commitment in doing their work (Erturk, 2006; Appelbaum et al., 2004). Ba and Pavlou (2002) illustrated trust as the subjective valuation of one person to another person who is anticipated to perform in particular action based on his belief in the environment that is categorized by uncertainty. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998), on the other hand, defined trust as a psychological state consisting of the intention to receive vulnerability based on hopes of good behaviour or intentions of another. In the context of public administration, Trust as the relationship where the public are confident that their upper administration is able to deliver their needs without fail. Yang and Holzer (2006) and Fjeldstad (2004) added that having a high level of public trust will support the administration to execute the policies, carry out their directive action, impose the tax collection as well as properly redistribute the income. On the contrary, having absence or low level of public trust might not allow the government to deliver their service effectively (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2010). The citizen easily lose confidence towards the decisions and actions made by the government as trust is the key for the government to administrate the country at its best (Fukuyama, 1995).

## 2. Problem Statement

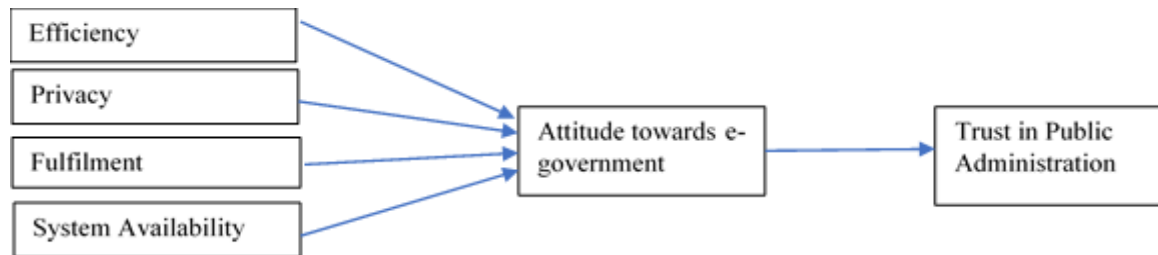
There has been a declining pattern of trust towards public administration over the years (Belanche & Casalo, 2015; Morgeson, VanAmburg, & Mithas, 2011; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005; Bannister & Connolly, 2011). The lessening number of public trust towards the government can be seen by looking at the statistics released by Edelman.com, the largest public relation firm that own more than 5000 staff and its affiliates in more than 90 cities. According to the report, Edelman revealed that the government remains to be the least trusted institution for the fourth consecutive years, with the trust level below 50 percent (50%) in 19 of 27 countries, including the three big and most influential countries namely U.S. (41%), U.K. (43%) and Japan (40%) (Edelman Trust Barometer Malaysia, 2016). Even worse, in Spain for instance, the barometers from the Spain Sociological Research Centre has discovered that the public trust towards the government in this Latin state has decreased from 49.9% in February 1999 to 31.3% in July 2014 (as listed in Medina & Rufin, 2015). Similar pattern also occurred in Malaysia where Edelman Trust Barometer Result revealed that the Malaysian level of public trust towards the government specifically in public administration has reduced every year since 2012 to 2016. In this case, the public trust towards the government stood at 52% in year 2012, a slight increase to 60% in 2013 before dropping significantly to 54% (2014), 46% (2015) and the latest 39% in 2016 (Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Deck, 2012; Edelman Trust Barometer Malaysia, 2016). The reduced level of trust is said due to a number of factors such as the economic condition, the misuse of power; corruption cases and also because of the information revealed by some black websites including WikiLeaks (Yildiz & Saylam, 2013). The differences in socio-

politics atmosphere, easy access to the media, the economic climate, the participatory culture and high public expectations towards the government played contributing factors to this problem (Peters, 1999). On top of that, the delays of administrative and red tape also contributed to the decrease in public trust in public administration (Kaufmann, Taggart, & Bozeman, 2019).

To overcome this problem, electronic government or e-government has been projected as one of the best strategies to improve public confidence towards public administration (Carter & Belanger, 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). The employment of e-government is capable to increase the citizen trust level due to the interaction occurs between the government and the public since e-government encourages the participation of both parties (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Carter & Belanger, 2005). According to West (2004) and Zhao, Scavarda, and Waxin (2012), the idea of e-government implementation-related action might probably bring positive changes in public administration as it can increase efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and connectivity between the two (West, 2004; Avgerou, Ganzaroli, Poulymenakou, & Reinhard, 2009). Sprecher (2000), Kumar and Best (2006) believed that e-government which is based on information technology is used to simplify and expand the transactions as well as to improve the operations and service delivery not only between government and the people but also other actors including constituents, businesses and other government agencies. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the relationship between e-government initiatives and citizen trust towards public administration. Its focus was to investigate the relationship between one of the e-government initiatives in Malaysia specifically e-service quality using E-S-QUAL dimensions that was first introduced by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) and its connection with trust in public administration while attitude towards e-government acted as the mediating variable. A number of previous related research including Belanger and Carter (2008) and Warkentin, Gefen, Pavlou, and Rose (2002) only treated trust as the antecedent factor for e-government implementation. Many studies as well such as Belanche, Casalo, and Guinaliu (2012), Wu and Chen (2005) emphasized on the relationship between e-government initiatives such as e-service quality and citizen's trust level towards public administration focusing on particular public e-services. There is an obvious gap in evaluating the effects of e-government initiatives on trust such as work by Bannister and Connolly (2011) or investigating the relationship between e-government and improved level of public trust towards public administration (Belanche & Casalo, 2015).

E-service quality refers to the degree to which a website enables efficient and effective purchasing and delivery (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002). Similar from the public administration perspective, e-service quality can be referred to as the degree of the website ability to provide an efficient and effective service delivery. The dimensions of E-S-QUAL which are efficiency, privacy, fulfilment and system availability represented the e-service delivery questions. On the other hand, attitude towards e-government refers to the effective-evaluative inclination to respond positively or negatively towards an object or a target (Shaver, 1977). The proposed framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1. The study narrowed down the focus on attitude towards e-government as the mediator in the relationship between the E-S-QUAL dimensions and trust in public administration relation since previous study such as Belanche and Casalo (2015) proved that positive attitude towards e-government has a positive effect on trust in public administration. In Belanche and Casalo (2015) study on public administration communication in Spain as one of the e-government initiatives demonstrated that the communication in

promoting e-government can be more effective to enhance trust if the citizen has a positive attitude towards e-government. Besides Belanche and Casalo (2015), Carter and Weerakkody (2008) also proposed that cultural differences may affect the public acceptance of e-government which indirectly might also affect the result of the study. This study intended to investigate whether or not the attitude towards e-government is able to affect e-service quality in enhancing public trust.



**Figure 01.** Proposed Framework for the Study

### 3. Research Questions

Research question refers to the central issue that needs to be solved through a formal dissertation, thesis or research project (John, 2016). In this case, the answers given to the research question help to address a research question or problem (Booth, Colomb, Williams, Bizup, & Fitzgerald, 1995). Moreover, research question is significant as it could assist to outline the boundary of the study and confirm the stagnant attention on the study topic (Punch, 1998). In this context, the research questions are as follow:

- 3.1. Does attitude towards e-government mediate the relationship between efficiency and trust towards public administration?
- 3.2. Does attitude towards e-government mediate the relationship between privacy and citizen trust towards public administration?
- 3.3. Does attitude towards e-government mediate the relationship between fulfilment and trust towards public administration?
- 3.4. Does attitude towards e-government mediate the relationship between system availability and trust towards public administration?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The main aim of the study was to examine whether or not e-service quality with E-S-QUAL dimensions of efficiency, privacy, fulfilment and system availability has a connection with trust in public administration when mediated by attitude towards e-government. Thus, the specific research objectives for this study are listed as follow;

- 4.1. To test the mediator role of attitude towards e-government in the relationship between efficiency and trust in public administration.

- 4.2. To test the mediator role of attitude towards e-government in the relationship between privacy and trust in public administration.
- 4.3. To test the mediator role of attitude towards e-government in the relationship between fulfilment and trust in public administration.
- 4.4. To test the mediator role of attitude towards e-government in the relationship between system availability and trust in public administration.

## 5. Research Methods

For this study, data were collected from a survey that targeted Malaysian citizen who have experienced in using any e-government services including MyEG, e-filing, *e-notifikasi*, *e-syariah* provided by the Malaysian government. A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed and completed 168 questionnaires collected. The constructs for the questions were adopted and adapted from Parasuraman et al. (2005) and Belanche and Casalo (2015) for e-service quality, Bhattacharjee (2000), Belanche and Casalo (2015) and Wu and Chen (2005) for attitude towards e-government and Belanche and Casalo (2015), Lee and Turban (2001), Carter and Belanger (2005) for trust in public administration. Answers for the questionnaires were recorded using five-point Likert Scale to increase response rate and response quality and at the same time reducing respondents' frustration level (Babakus & Mangold, 1992). Moreover, five point Likert Scale is generally readily comprehensible to respondents and enable them to express their views (Marton-Williams 1986).

## 6. Findings

Prior to data analysis, data cleaning process was carried-out using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to ensure no missing data, outliers or suspicious response rate while ensuring the normality of the data distribution.

**Table 01.** Statistics of Missing Data

		<b>EFF_ Total</b>	<b>PRIV_ Total</b>	<b>FUL_ Total</b>	<b>SISTA_ Total</b>	<b>ATT_ Total</b>	<b>TPA_ Total</b>
N	Valid	168	168	168	168	168	168
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0

### 6.1. Statistics of Missing Data

The findings noted that there is no recorded missing data as shown in Table 1. The findings also realized that no suspicious response pattern were discovered. However, while checking the outliers using Boxplots, one respondent was deleted due to his or her extreme answers that were greatly different compared to other sets of data. Finally, normality test was carried-out to check the normality level of the data. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test shows that the distribution of the data is not normal due to the results of each variable being less than 0.05. This concurred with Pallant (2005) that said data is not normal which is not significant when sig.value is more than 0.05. In this case, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov result for trust

in public administration, efficiency, fulfilment is equal to 0.00 each in which privacy equals 0.02 except for system availability variable that equals 0.09.

## 6.2. Testing on Mediation Effect

**Table 02.** Mediation Effect

No	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	Confidence Interval (BC)		P-value	Decision
					LL	UL		
1.	Efficiency -> Attitude toward e-government -> Trust in Public Admin	0.150	0.052	2.867**	0.049	0.246	0.004	Mediating
2.	Privacy -> Attitude toward e-government -> Trust in Public Admin	0.014	0.040	0.341	-0.061	0.085	0.733	Not Mediating
3.	Fulfilment -> Attitude toward e-government -> Trust in Public Admin	0.088	0.046	1.923	0.005	0.176	0.055	Not Mediating
4.	System Availability -> Attitude toward e-government -> Trust in Public Admin	0.156	0.037	4.202**	0.088	0.228	0.000	Mediating

Table 2 demonstrated the results of testing on the mediation effect. Based on the bootstrapping two-tailed analysis with 500 samples, the results presented two indirect effects for efficiency and system availability with  $\beta = 0.150$  and  $\beta = 0.156$  as well as P-value equals 0.004 and 0.000 respectively. This indicated that the mediation effects of attitude towards e-government occurs for these two variables. Thus, the study concluded that attitude towards e-government mediated the relationship between efficiency and trust in public administration and system availability and trust in public administration. On the contrary, the study also discovered that there was no mediation effect of attitude towards e-government on the other two variables; privacy and fulfilment since the P=value is greater than 0.05. In other words, the P=value for privacy is 0.733 ( $\beta = 0.014$ ) while the P=value for fulfilment is 0.055 ( $\beta = 0.088$ ).

## 7. Conclusion

Having a strong trust level towards public administration is crucial for ensuring the smooth and stability of government administration particularly for countries that practice a democratic system including Malaysia. This is certainly important in order to make sure that the government is able to implement the planned agendas and programme properly. Lack of trust tends to lead to public resistance in the forms of

rebel, demonstration, resistance and alike which could possibly lead to a disruptive political system. The findings concluded that even attitude towards e-government does not help the availability of the system and the fulfilment of e-service delivery received to increase level of trust. However, efficiency and strong level of privacy could increase the trust level in government with the help of positive attitude towards e-government. Future studies could also focus on the same variables on other respondents who have experienced in using specific e-government application in Malaysia or other countries.

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