





## Article

# Reputation of Public Organizations: What Dimensions Are Crucial?

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationships among variables and determines the influences of dimensions (i.e., municipal satisfaction, organizational performance, perceived quality, contestations and complaints of the municipal executive) on the notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR) of municipal executives. We attempted to understand if citizens' opinions influenced the evaluations, recommendations, and contestations based on NIR. Parishes in the municipality of Valongo were selected and analysed, namely Alfena, Campo e Sobrado, Valongo, and Ermesinde; a total of 998 questionnaires were collected. It was concluded that all of the studied dimensions were statistically significant in the final structural estimated model. The structural results point to municipal satisfaction and contestations and complaints of municipal executives as having directly positive and statistically significant influences on NIR. Organizational performance and perceived quality have directly positive but not statistically significant influences on NIR. The results of this research suggest that obtaining the personal opinions of citizens (e.g., regarding the work performances of their mayors) allows citizens to feel heard and active in their municipalities. From the point of view of public executives, the results of this type of study could provide valid information that allows stakeholders to make political decisions that are appropriate for the interests of their communities (e.g., by listening to their citizens).

**Keywords:** municipal satisfaction; organizational performance; perceived quality; contestation and complaint; notoriety; image; reputation; organizational reputation; public organizations



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## 1. Introduction

Municipal management is increasingly being influenced by citizen perceptions and community satisfaction. Mayors, managers, and technicians are increasingly becoming attentive and conciliatory (and are at the service of citizens and voters). Public institutions in Portugal have become cognizant of the value of information and its effects at the cognitive, persuasive, and behavioural levels. Within the scope of the effects considered, these realities are dynamic and cumulative; moreover, they are accurate thermometers and perceptive barometers that deserve to be attended to by the different agents of public interventions (Meirinhos et al. 2022a). In fact, more public organisations are placing citizens at the centres of their activities and communication strategies, publicly and politically, to respond to the complaints of citizens/voters. We are living in a time in which the perceived values and satisfaction of citizens are decisive aggregates in the strategic orientations of organisations, which leads us to believe that organisations, both public and private, are increasingly

becoming sensitive to the market, the consumer, the citizen, and the voter (Meirinhos et al. 2022b).

Notoriety, image, and institutional reputation are realities that are being considered in public institutions. As for indicators of perceived values, they ascertain institutional performances and organisational qualities via knowledge, representation, and public credibility. These forms are obtained by managing communications over time, where structures, people, and processes are the variables that construct perceived values. Studying the combinations of these different elements implies an interdisciplinary exercise between management, psychology, sociology, and internal and public communications, which definitively define the organization and nature of public management. Reputation management is directly dependent on the relationship between the political and administrative dimensions of the public organization (Lockert et al. 2019). The result of this cohabitation, which is expected to be fluid and fruitful, is expressed in the form of notoriety, image, and reputation.

Before examining the relationships between awareness, image, and reputation from psychological and organisational perspectives, we should first review the core concepts of this article in the academic literature. Notoriety is a concept that refers to the degree to which a consumer is aware of a concept, brand, or situation. Historically, it is an essential concept because it is related to the widespread presence of an informational reality in the consumer's conscious (Bérard and Marchenay 2007). When there is a generalised knowledge of reality, the consumer can build and elaborate attitudes that will be constituted as predispositions guiding their behaviours. A young commercial brand may be widely known, but it has no established image and even less of a reputation. Therefore, notoriety is an initial, informative, and essential state for creating more complex, resilient, timelessly cognitive, and effective elaborations. Notoriety is both a concept and a measure of the awareness of individuals and consumers. Historically, there have been three measurement methods: the top-of-mind recall test, spontaneous recall, and assisted recall (Lendrevie et al. 2010). Companies, organisations, and institutions have several tools at their disposal to increase awareness, namely through advertising, organisational or institutional communications, and marketing and digital communication actions.

One of the main concerns of modern companies and organisations is the public perception of their companies, as it implies a choice and an interpretation of relevant signals by the consumer. This public perception is commonly referred to as the organisation's image, made-up of perceptions, impressions, and valuations about the company and its products. The business, organisational, or institutional image will be positive or negative depending on the organisation's attitudes, behaviours, and messages (Gümüş and Öksüz 2009; Golgeli 2014). In this regard, Don Schultz and Beth Barnes argued that a corporate image offers functional benefits, experimental and symbolic to consumers assimilated in the form of attitudes, with a certain level of favourability, strength, and uniqueness (Schultz and Barnes 1999). In the same sense, Kevin Keller defined corporate image as a set of perceptions about an organization organised in the form of associations in the minds of consumers (Keller 1993). Based on the different perspectives, we consider the image as the result of an organised process diffusing a specific message that is relatively stable in time, which transposes a strategic intention, a mission, a vision, objectives, identity, and the fundamental values of the company, organization, or institution (Leuthesser and Kohli 1997; Van Riel and Balmer 1997; Bravo et al. 2009).

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of reputation is the expression of what is generally said or believed about the skills and/or qualities of something or someone (Hawkins 1990), buoyed by the feeling, taste, and culture of the individual. From a business perspective, reputation is a strategic management variable and simultaneously an intangible asset of the company (Kitchen and Watson 2010). Over time, companies increasingly value the reputations obtained by their communication policies and marketing practices; in the market, it is also considered a tool for competitive differentiation (against the competition). Paul

Argenti and Bob Druckenmiller consider reputation a “collective representation of images of multiple constituent groups of a company built over time” (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004). The companies with the best reputations develop close relationships and continuous interactions with the public through policies and practices that offer continuous and mutual benefits to the public, collaborators, customers, shareholders, regulators, and suppliers (Lockert et al. 2019).

The objective of notoriety is related to knowledge about the public’s offer (the extent and depth). In this sense, the organised accumulation of information on the quantity and quality of public services, combined with the positive experiences of the citizens’ relationships with the institution, is the ideal way to build a stable, deep, and added-value reputation. It is essential to periodically evaluate awareness to understand the nature of perception, the values of which vary according to the techniques used in the form of spontaneous, assisted, or qualified awareness. Several authors consider ‘image’ as a momentary perception capable of summarising the subjects’ expectations, attitudes, and feelings concerning the brand, the product, and in this case, the public service. In these meanings, ‘image’ becomes the organisation’s reality at the personal level (Maldonado-Martinez and Rodriguez-Villafaña 2004; Mahon and Wartick 2003; Heath 2010; Wartick 2002).

The organisation controls the production and dissemination of messages in the form of meaning, and the public in turn processes and interprets them, resulting in the accumulation of meanings. In this dialectic between what is said and what is interpreted, the generation of the institutional image takes place; as a representation, it must be managed, programmed, and controlled. Moreover, reputation is constituted as the credible result of the historical construction of images that are stored and recalled by the subjects who disseminate it within the community (Nguyen and Leblanc 2001), or the organization itself disseminates information in various forms and formats capable of generating dynamics in the media in order to increase its public credibility (Fombrun and Shanley 1990). Therefore, the diffusion and collective sharing of these images in the community allow for the development of a stable reputation (consistent and with public force).

Organizational reputation is a slow construction that mixes stable images and credible mental representations from the consumers themselves, the community, the market, and/or the media. It is a historical construction that assumes its mental pre-eminence in the buying decision processes of consumers, companies, and institutions. Its origin is divided between the perceived quality of the products or the salience or prominence of the organisation in the market, media, or among personalities of high social status (Rindova et al. 2005). In recent decades, reputations have become important realities in the institutional and business context as indicators of competitiveness and organisational performance. This is why the organisation must manage the information disseminated, the knowledge generated, and the representations stored, be better against the competition, or obtain a favourable consumer predisposition toward the organisation’s offer (Overman et al. 2020). This reality is only achieved when there is an isomorphism between the organisation’s identity, personality, and behaviour. The organizations with futures are the ones that have strong customer cultures and relate to the customer truthfully and transparently.

From a psychological perspective, the concepts of notoriety, image, and reputation are intrinsically linked from the receiver’s point of view. Everything begins with the set of characteristics, beliefs, and values of the organisation, which, when conveyed by the different conventional and/or digital media, produce individual and collective perceptions, albeit variable, and underpin appearances, knowledge, and associations. In this context, time is essential in the process because it allows the organization to develop relationships with these intangible assets with the internal and external public, namely customers and stakeholders (Balmer 2001, 2008). In this transfer and informative production flow, the organisation manages this perceptive reality concerning a specific identity and behavioural pattern. Thus, we understand that institutional competitiveness is increasingly dependent on the identity profile of the organisation and what it represents and symbolises in society.

Notoriety as a cognitive reality refers to customers' knowledge about the institution and the reality of the offer. This knowledge is determined through classic memory measures in recall (spontaneous or assisted) and the recognition of stimuli (Franco et al. 2017). Accessing the client's memory is an important exercise because it discriminates the quantity and quality of information stored in the citizen's mind, and becomes the ingredient of evaluation, judgement, and judgment in the form of attitude. In our view, attitude as a predisposition guiding behaviour plays an essential role in recommending and/or contesting the public services provided by parishes and municipalities.

Citizen satisfaction and contestation and complaint levels are realities that directly depend on the quantity and quality of information assimilated by citizens when dealing with public institutions. In other words, when there is a good level of information, in quantity and quality, one is in a more favourable position to form positive thoughts and judgements. Consequently, the contestation and complaint levels are lower, thus favouring citizen satisfaction. In this way, attitudes form the image spectra about products, organisations, or public institutions, enabling us to check the resistance and/or acceptance of messages, and the distance and/or involvement of customers.

Institutional reputation may be defined as the aggregation and consolidation (tending to be positive) of a series of images, experiences, and realities (that have been purged and verified) on an organisation or institution (Fombrun 1996; Fombrun and Van Riel 1997; Fill 2006). The concept of reputation has been defined in several ways, namely as: the ability of a company to meet the expectations of different stakeholders (Fombrun et al. 2004), a belief system among members of a social group (Bromley 2000), the collective beliefs that exist about the identity, the prominence of an organisation (Rao 1994; Kotha et al. 2001), the media visibility of the company (Deephouse 2000), and the representations present in the minds of multiple audiences of an organisation over time (Grunig and Hung-Baesecke 2015; Yang and Grunig 2005). Thus, we can define reputation as the aggregate of the perceptions shared by the public interested in the activities and success of an organisation over time.

Organizational performance and perceived quality are two essential realities and two essential results in the activity of an organization because they explain the differences between the current reality and the ideal reality in the organization's activity and functioning (Cho and Dansereau 2010; Abraham and Jones 2015). Organisational performance results from cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence and leadership skills (Silalahi et al. 2022). Cognitive skills relate to problem-solving and decision-making (Sun and Hui 2012; Lee et al. 2013). Emotional intelligence refers to the management of employees' feelings by the leaders to convert this reality into an opportunity (Boyatzis 2009). Moreover, social intelligence is directly related to the power of observation, which allows an individual to achieve certain goals in a particular social environment (Beheshtifar and Roasaei 2012). Perceived quality is defined as the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service in relation to its purpose (and the alternatives) (Fombrun and Van Riel 1997). In this sense, perceived quality is a global and intangible feeling about a person, organization, or brand. Nevertheless, this reality is based on dimensions such as trustworthiness and performance, being, in our opinion, an objective, global, and useful construct for building a fluid, normal, and value-added relationship between parties.

The dimensions and aggregates of municipal satisfaction (MS), organizational performance and perceived quality (OPPQ), and municipal executive complaints (CCME) assume important explanatory and scientific capacities in the understanding of the phenomenon of the NIR of a public organization. Therefore, within the scope of NIR, a series of statements were presented in which the respondents positioned themselves, namely statements related to seriousness, credibility, responsibility, sensitivity, transparency, innovation, creativity, trust, public visibility, media strength, public communication management, and politics (Meirinhos et al. 2022a, 2022b). This aggregate allows us to ascertain the mental representation residing in the collective memory about a set of vectors related to the knowledge, representation, and social evaluation of the quality of political action carried out by elected representatives.

The satisfaction of the citizen (MS) as a result of a process of comparisons between performances and a personal and/or regulated standard (Oliver Richard 1997) is a particularly relevant metric in and for the functioning of organisations, especially public institutions. The interaction between the parties allows the citizen to judge the action of the public entity (concerning its performance) against the legitimate expectations of any citizen. When expectations are equal to or are even exceeded, the citizen's satisfaction is created or sedimented; the results reiterated over time consolidate the perception of satisfaction (Meirinhos et al. 2022b).

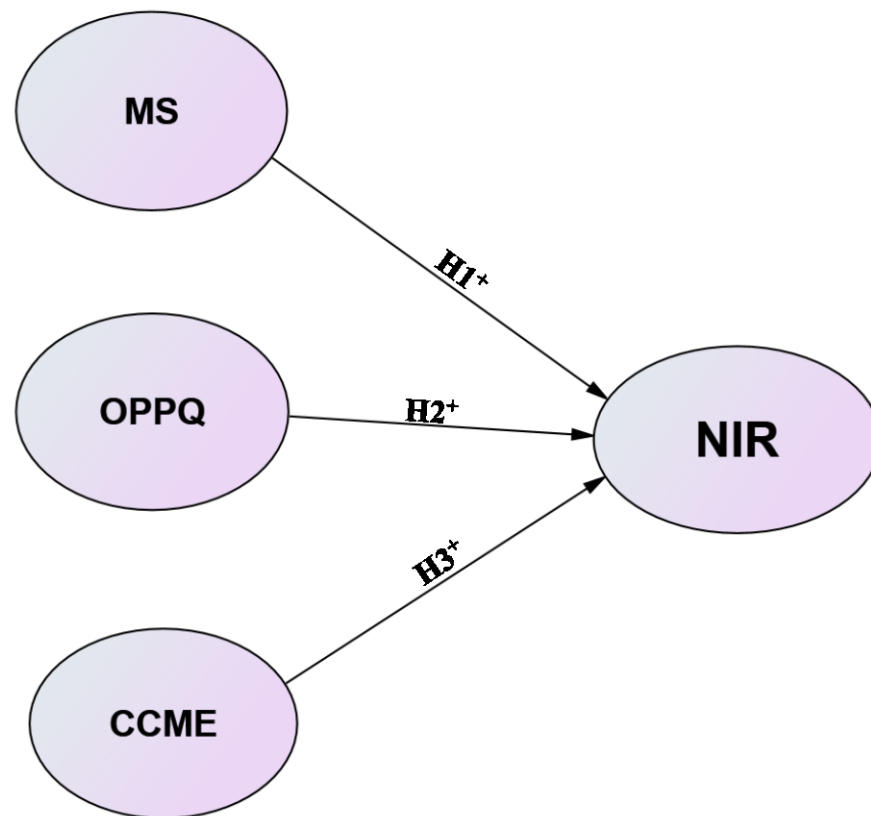
In the scope of our work, and around municipal satisfaction, we assess the performance of the municipality in different areas of political intervention, namely social action, emigrant support, water and sanitation, the environment, collection and inspection, accounting and treasury, culture, sports, education, hygiene and urban cleaning, urbanism, parks and gardens, patrimony, veterinary services, and traffic and road networks (among others) in municipal services, namely the environment, internationalisation, social interventions, mobility and transport, tourism, urbanism, the economy and entrepreneurship, sports, culture and leisure, and youth, among others, as well as the overall satisfaction with the municipal executive and with the mayor.

Within the scope of organisational performance and perceived quality (OPPQ), we investigated the quality of organisational functioning and its perception by the citizen. To this end, a series of statements were presented relating to the direction and management of the municipality, concern for people and companies, compliance with deadlines, database management, variety of means of contact with the community, opening hours, internal procedures, location and places of attendance, and the human qualities of public servants (Meirinhos et al. 2022a, 2022b). This aggregate allows us to clarify which vectors deserve greater valorisation as well as the vectors that the municipality will have to invest in, review, or change.

Finally, the contestations and complaints of the municipal executive (CCME) allow us to ascertain the negative charges presented by residents of the community about the actions and management of the municipal executive. In this context, we could ascertain whether there are reasons to complain, whether complaints are attended to and resolved, and whether complaints improve the behaviours and services of the municipality. We also understand whether contestations and complaints influence municipal decisions. This aggregate is becoming increasingly important in municipalities (it is a legal obligation to ascertain the levels of satisfaction with the services); municipal executives look at contestations and complaints as opportunities to improve the functioning of the public entity.

The data collection questionnaire was based on the theoretical and validated models: SERVQUAL, the common measurement tool (CMT), the common assessment framework (CAF), Speyer's model, and the European customer satisfaction index (ECSI). However, it should be noted that none of these models has been adjusted and validated so far for public administration or the evaluation of Portuguese public services. Therefore, our research model (see Figure 1) and respective survey are references used in understanding the influences of dimensions, such as municipal satisfaction (MS), organizational performance and perceived quality (OPPQ), contestations and complaints of the municipal executive (CCME), and the NIR of municipal executives.





**Figure 1.** Research model.

In this sense, the purpose of this paper is to explore the relationships among variables and determine the dependencies among dimensions, indicators, and variables present in the general model of notoriety, image, and reputation, whose antecedents are related to the citizen's perceived value and the consequences related to the citizen's evaluation, recommendation, and contestation.

According to the literature review, it is possible to hypothesize that the MS, OPPQ, and CCME dimensions increase notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR). In this sense, the following research hypotheses were defined:

**H1.** *Municipal Satisfaction (MS) has a positive effect on notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR).*

Notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR) is a central theme in the evaluation of public service performances and should be analysed over time so that public administrators can implement effective political action programmes, leading to an increase in municipal satisfaction (MS), organizational performance and perceived quality (OPPQ), and a reduction in the contestations and complaints of the municipal executive (CCME). There is a relationship between these dimensions because it is not possible to have public notoriety, a good image, and a consequent reputation if citizens are not satisfied with the public policies implemented during the (public administrator's) time in office (Lee et al. 2013; Boyatzis 2009). Moreover, the contestation, if it exists, influences the reputation of the executive and consequently the confidence of the voters. Organisation and performance, which are strictly linked to the quality of public service, will lead to an increase in the notoriety, image, and reputation of those who manage the destiny of the population. In fact, those who have the power of decision are constantly being evaluated (Lee et al. 2013; Beheshtifar and Roasaei 2012).

Municipal satisfaction requires efficiency and effectiveness in the process and relationship with the citizen (Lamsal and Gupta 2022) and, therefore, a constant need to listen to and involve citizens in institutional dynamics so that the municipality can adjust to the needs and expectations of the citizens (Balan and Burlea-Schiopoiu 2017). In this interaction

and conciliation, the state improves its performance in the provision of public services (Beheshtifar and Roasaei 2012) and, consequently, the reality of the public organisation's notoriety, image, and reputation. Several authors, such as Sabrina Helm, Andreas Eggert, and Ina Garnefeld argue that more than half of the effect of reputation is the responsibility of the nature and level of customer satisfaction (Helm et al. 2010). Municipal satisfaction is a tool for performance evaluation and management, as citizens are considered public service stakeholders (clients) who are concerned with the quality of public goods and services and with equity and accessibility to public goods and services. In this sense, public managers must develop forms of management that allow recognition and notoriety and increase their reputations with citizens/electors (Collins et al. 2019). The loss of citizen satisfaction has high political costs that may have consequences on future choices (Chen et al. 2020). Citizens constantly analyse the performance of the executive concerning the influence of decisions taken by political forces on their personal lives, consolidating their perception of satisfaction, which in turn influences the notoriety achieved, the image held, and the reputation achieved (Ochoa Rico et al. 2022; Gendel-Guterman and Billig 2021).

Public initiatives and management influence the notoriety, image, and reputation of the municipal executive, and there is a substantial impact on citizen satisfaction (Czepiel and Gilmore 1987; Gremler and Brown 1996), which considers aspects, such as honesty, environmental responsibility, humanisation, quality of services, social and economic transparency, cultural development, innovation, communication, and keeping promises as fundamental for improving the notoriety of the municipality (Zins 2001).

**H2.** *Organizational performance and perceived quality (OPPQ) have positive effects on notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR).*

Since the citizens are the main beneficiaries of public services (Winkler 1987; Thomas and Palfrey 1996), politicians should meet public and private needs that can add value to lives. For this reason, we believe that organisational performance creates a positive effect on an individual's knowledge, on individual mental representations in the form of an image, as well as on the aggregation and consolidation of positive experiences and realities lived by the citizens that consolidate the reputation of the public organisation (Helm et al. 2010). In terms of organizational performance and perceived quality, previous studies have shown a direct influence of this dimension on the notoriety, image, and reputation of the municipality (Zins 2001; Meirinhos et al. 2022a, 2022b), suggesting that this dimension is a valid tool for measuring the competence and decisions of the municipal executive (Zeithaml et al. 1996; Boyne 2003). The performance of the executive and the perception of the quality of its decisions and management methods leads to positive or negative evaluations by the citizens who daily feel the influences of these decisions in their personal and family lives. In this context, citizens attach importance to the balance between the political decisions/measures taken and their social and economic realities (Czepiel and Gilmore 1987; Gremler and Brown 1996). The quality perceived by the citizen is related to the balance between the expected value in the form of benefits and the total cost for the citizen (in terms of personal and/or financial sacrifices) (Chang and Dibb 2012). This balancing between the good and not-so-good things provided by political decisions is related to a set of mental representations, judgements, and meanings stored around functional, symbolic, emotional, and social realities of everyday life (Zeithaml et al. 1996).

**H3.** *Contestations and complaints of the municipal executive (CCME) have positive effects on notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR).*

Contestation in the form of social activity (e.g., reactive contestation) and the critical mode (e.g., proactive contestation) means criticism and an objection to the norms and functioning in the case of a public body (Wiener 2017). We believe that this opposition constitutes an opportunity to improve functioning. Therefore, we believe that reactive contestation and the respective response that the public entity has to formulate, contribute to the improvement of the NIR. In this context, transparency and the power of communication

are essential ingredients to contain reactive and proactive contestations, thus preserving the NIR (Oržekauskas and Šmaižienė 2014).

The contestations and complaints of municipal executives assume explanatory capacities of significant impact on the notoriety, image, and reputation of the executives because the evaluation of this dimension is strictly related to aspects such as seriousness, credibility, responsibility, sensitivity, transparency, innovation, creativity, trust, public visibility, media strength, and public and political communication management. This aggregate allows us to verify the mental representation residing in the collective memories of the citizens (Collins et al. 2019; Chen et al. 2020). The effective resolution of problems, the speed and efficiency of the organisational response, and the quality of the services provided influence the contestations and complaints, which, in turn, will positively or negatively impact notoriety (in this sense, the quality of organisational functioning and its perception by citizens) (Chen et al. 2020; Chang and Dibb 2012). In this sense, the more influential the executive's response to the concerns of individuals and companies, compliance with deadlines, database management, variety of means of contact with the community, opening hours, internal procedures, and the location and human quality of public employees, the less contestation and the more reputation, image, and notoriety the municipal executive will obtain. These results allow citizens to appreciate their public managers and praise the actions of the management, which will, consequently, keep them in power for longer. Thus, contestations and complaints about the municipal executive are significant factors in the evaluation of the reality of the functioning of a municipality (Gremler and Brown 1996; Czepiel and Gilmore 1987; Boyne 2003).

The rigorous analysis of the dimensions reviewed above makes it possible to obtain a reliable picture of the citizen's active involvement in the daily life of his/her municipality, as well as the need for valid information that will encourage the executive to take political action that is appropriate for the citizens' interests and expectations.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Study Background

In the last 30 years, Portugal's public administration has undergone numerous reforms by introducing principles and mechanisms for performances and performance evaluations (Rocha 2009; Mota et al. 2016). The trend toward the corporatisation of the state (present in the principles of new public management) (Hood 1991; Pollitt 1990; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017) had a serious impact on the activity of the state as a whole. Furthermore, the paradigms of governance (Rhodes 1997) and new public services (Denhardt and Denhardt 2003) have forced the state to look at the municipality, citizens, and voters as central elements of its functioning.

The reduction in the number of civil servants in recent years, their ageing, and the freezing of their salaries and careers have led to the loss of social dignity in public employment as well as a collective demotivation of workers (Madureira and Rodrigues 2015). Based on this context, quality is lost in the relationship between the state and the citizen. However, the state is increasingly being equipped with internal and external evaluation metrics and citizens are increasingly becoming demanding and knowledgeable about their rights. Therefore, the problems presented in this article are important because they allow us to understand if the basic metrics of satisfaction, organizational performance, perceived quality, and complaints contribute to the improvements in the levels of awareness, image, and reputation of Portugal's public institutions.

Our overall model consists of four dimensions. First, in the scope of municipal satisfaction, we have indicators, such as satisfaction with the different intervention axes (formed by 13 variables); satisfaction with municipal services (formed by 20 variables); satisfaction with the municipal executive (formed by 4 variables); and overall satisfaction with the municipality (formed by 1 variable) for a total of 38 variables. Organizational performance and perceived quality are formed by 27 variables; contestations and complaints of the municipal executive are formed by 4 variables; and notoriety, image, and reputation are



formed by 20 variables. With ‘notoriety, image, and reputation’, a series of statements were presented in which the respondents positioned themselves, namely statements related to seriousness, credibility, accountability, sensitivity, transparency, innovation, creativity, trust, public visibility, media strength, public communication management, and politics. This aggregate allows us to ascertain the mental representations residing in the collective memory about a set of vectors related to the knowledge, representation, and social evaluations of the quality of political actions of elected officials. Please see Appendix A for the selection of research variables.

### 3.2. Data Collection Tools

The quantitative scientific method used presents itself as an instrument of knowledge acquisition provided by collecting, classifying, analysing, and interpreting data collected through the questionnaire survey administered face-to-face by approaching citizens in the different parishes of the municipality under study. In this way, a consistent and coherent survey was developed with the very particular reality of Portugal’s municipalities, having as references the following theoretical models: SERVQUAL developed by (Parasuraman et al. 1993); the common measurement tool (CMT) of the Canadian Management Center (Strickland et al. 1998); common assessment framework (CAF) inspired by the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (European Foundation for Quality Management or EFQM) (Engel 2002) and the Speyer model of the Deutschen Universität für Verwaltungswissenschaften (Speyer n.d.); and the European customer satisfaction index (ECSI) (Ciavolino and Dahlgaard 2007), based on the American Consumer Satisfaction Index of the University of Michigan. The questionnaire was scientifically tested and validated due to the various levels of complexity and expertise in its construction. The construction work was based on a macro-structure, namely the information to be provided to the respondents; the flow and sequence of questions; the appearance of the survey; the sections of the survey, and the use of filters and control questions. The microstructure of the survey construction had to do with the response scales and their assertive statistical treatments. Another concern was the language used in the survey, given the weight of the population aged over 50 in most of Portugal’s municipalities. In addition to linguistic obstacles, there were inevitable differences in the meanings of the same signifier between two or more interlocutors, which may have led to errors and variabilities in the interpretation of statements. According to (Hayes 2001), for an item response to be formally valid, it has to be a measure of the variable that the researcher intends to measure. However, in addition to formal validation, content validity measures the degree to which respondents understand the questions. It is clear that the survey, similar to any other research instrument, has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages far outweigh the disadvantages because the survey can be used simultaneously with many subjects spread over large regions.

Moreover, people can feel more secure in the anonymity of their answers and, therefore, express more freely the answers that they consider the most personal. In this way, a series of protocols and methodological concerns were taken care of so that there were no biases or halo effects (Ghiglione and Matalon 1997), which is why specific global questions were asked at the end of each section of the survey. In this sense, and at the moment of questioning, it became easier to generate perceptions, design evaluations, and rethink dispositions to match what the respondent thought in relation to what was requested. The questionnaire was divided into three dimensions, with 4 indicators for each dimension, totalling 127 closed-ended questions, associated with estimating the dimensions, indicators, and variables of the model, which were tested through a pilot survey before the actual data collection. A 5-point Likert-type numerical scale was used in the survey, with the extreme points presenting the semantic descriptions “Strongly disagree” and “Strongly agree”, respectively. It is important to note that the scale was composed of a set of statements with logical or empirical relationships and was a form of evaluation aimed at measuring a concept or a characteristic of the individual. At the end of the survey, and on an optional

basis, the respondent was informed of the possibility of being part of a panel of citizens to be set up, in order to obtain their responses every six months electronically. If the citizen agreed to participate in the panel, all of the participant's data were processed in accordance with the general data protection regulation (RGPD). These nominative and electronic contact data were used exclusively to allow participants to have private access to the questionnaire area, excluding any possibility of relating their personal data to the nature of the survey responses.

### 3.3. Sample

Samples were randomly collected on the streets of each city. All of the cities belong to the Oporto district. People were approached about their willingness to answer a questionnaire evaluating the work of the municipal executive. Five enumerators were assigned to each city, who, through paper questionnaires or the use of devices (iPad/tablet), allowed respondents to give their anonymous opinions about municipal satisfaction (MS), organizational performance and perceived quality (OPPQ), contestations and complaints of the municipal executive (CCME), and notoriety, image, and reputation (NIR). The sample represented about 3% of the total population (the total population of each municipality was 98,812 inhabitants). Although the robustness of the sample did not reach 5% of the population, the samples collected from men and women were balanced and allowed relevant conclusions to be drawn.

The samples were probabilistic and stratified by demographic and geographic criteria so that the results could be extrapolated and representative of the population of the municipality. There were several concerns in the selection of the samples beyond the criteria previously mentioned, such as people being effective residents, taxpayers, and voters in the municipality. Therefore, we, as social researchers, ensured that the subjects participating in the study were active citizens and aware of public reality, in the proportions defined before data collection. In this sense, a population study of the municipality was carried out based on the official data from the Portuguese National Institute of Statistics, which allowed us to define the sample weight of each of the parishes in the municipality, discriminating the number of subjects per gender that would make up the sample of each parish. This weighting and constitution process was complete when we added the questions about effective residence and voter status in the municipality, via two control questions that were asked before applying the data collection instrument to the population of Valongo. Both answers to the control questions (being a voter in the municipality and being over 18 years old) had to be affirmative to proceed with the survey. Moreover, after daily collections by several surveyors, the controls of the questionnaires were also systematically carried out to check their internal consistency and factor validity.

The participants were citizens between 18 and 82 years old, 48.3% male and 51.7% female. A total of 2260 questionnaires were collected, with 1169 female participants ( $\approx 52\%$ ) and 1091 male participants ( $\approx 48\%$ ). Regarding the participants' academic qualifications, 1201 (53.14%) had 12th grade (or less) education, 899 (39.77%) had undergraduate degrees, 160 (7.09%) had master's degrees or higher, and 137 (20.7%) had master's degrees or higher. Regarding the regions where they lived, 504 (22.3%) lived in Alfena, 403 (17.83%) lived in UF Campo e Sobrado, 711 (31.46%) lived in Ermesinde, and 642 (28.41%) lived in Valongo (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characterisations of the samples.

Towns	Total Population	Sample	Male	Female
Alfena	18,125	504	198	306
UF Campo e Sobrado	15,969	403	227	176
Ermesinde	38,798	711	322	389
Valongo	25,920	642	344	298
	<b>98,812</b>	<b>2260</b>	<b>1091</b>	<b>1169</b>

### 3.4. Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA)

To perform the AFC, a model was tested with a set of variables corresponding to the six constructs under analysis and another one with the removal of variables whose factorial loadings were lower than 0.5 (having chosen the one whose adjustment of variables revealed better statistical consistency (Brown 2015; Marôco 2010)). We verified the results of the final model estimation, which improved with the removal of variables belonging to the MS, OPPQ, and NIR constructs. The most statistically significant model presented the following statistical evidence, ( $\chi^2/df = 2.261$ , RMSEA = 0.065, SRMR = 0.0382, NFI = 0.916, GFI = 0.992, AGFI = 0.907, and CFI = 0.900), after removing some items that made it statistically more robust, having excluded all items whose factor loadings were less than 0.5 (Marôco 2010; Brown 2015). Regarding the reliability of the items and factors, the samples obtained, consisting of 998 Valongo municipal citizens, showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.955$ ).

## 4. Results

### Validity and Reliability

The analysis of the proposed research model resorted to the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using a structural equation model (SEM) and SPSS/AMOS 27 software (Ringle et al. 2015). The mediation model was tested (for validity and reliability of the measures) according to the literature, and several research hypotheses were tested to determine the meanings of loadings and coefficients of each path (Hair et al. 2014). Table 2 shows the model's convergent validity and sufficient validity and reliability. The sample size met the criteria for structural equation analysis that suggested there should be a minimum of five interviewees for each model variable (Hair et al. 2010; Hoelter 1983). Hair et al. (2010) corroborated this threshold but proposed complex models with few indicators per construction and more significant samples. According to the sources mentioned earlier, it is fair to state that the collected sample was representative enough to be used in a structural equation model. The presented structural equation model enabled a multivariate analysis, which allowed for the testing of more complex models than the traditional linear regression model (Bagozzi and Yi 2012).

Table 3 presents a summary of the hypotheses that were tested, using what were found to be the best research models, as well as the results that were obtained, which allows one to conclude that such dimensions accounted for the variations that occurred in NIR as MS ( $\beta = 0.603$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), OPPQ ( $\beta = 0.040$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), and CCME ( $\beta = 0.510$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Only two of three dimensions were statistically significant in the final structural estimated model (Figure 2). The structural results point to MS and CCME dimensions having directly positive and statistically significant influences on NIR, validating research hypotheses H1 and H3. The OPPQ dimension has a directly positive but not statistically significant influence on NIR, not validating research Hypothesis 2.

After the validity and reliability of the final model (NIR), some variables whose scores were less than 0.5 were removed, thus improving the model's internal consistency.

The obtained results also allow one to conclude that the dimensions that affected notoriety, image, and reputation were MS and CCME. It should be noted that the OPPQ dimension had a positive impact on NIR, which did not affect it in a statistically significant manner.

It has been noted that the dimensions MS and CCME proved to be the most pertinent dimensions concerning the NIR increase. MS was the strongest NIR predictor, followed by CCME, which has a close regression factor.

Regarding the tested hypothesis model, it accounted for most of the variances of the dependent variables. In addition, most of the variables were highly correlated, strongly affecting NIR.

**Table 2.** Validity and reliability of the constructs.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Cronbach Alpha
Notoriety, Image, and Reputation (NIR)	NIR1	0.880	0.965	0.682	0.980
	NIR2	0.900			
	NIR4	0.860			
	NIR5	0.890			
	NIR6	0.800			
	NIR7	0.720			
	NIR8	0.750			
	NIR9	0.800			
	NIR10	0.839			
	NIR11	0.837			
	NIR13	0.831			
	NIR18	0.779			
	NIR19	0.831			
Municipal Satisfaction (MS)	SM1	0.790	0.965	0.648	0.964
	SM6	0.700			
	SM10	0.780			
	SM11	0.780			
	SM12	0.760			
	SM13	0.700			
	SM27	0.760			
	SM28	0.840			
	SM29	0.780			
	SM31	0.800			
	SM33	0.690			
	SM34	0.930			
	SM35	0.940			
SM36	0.850				
SM38	0.920				
Organizational Performance and Perceived Quality (OPPQ)	DOQP8	0.760	0.979	0.828	0.979
	DOQP17	0.710			
	DOQP18	0.950			
	DOQP19	0.950			
	DOQP20	0.940			
	DOQP21	0.900			
	DOQP22	0.970			
	DOQP23	0.960			
	DOQP24	0.960			
	DOQP25	0.960			
Contestation and Complaint of the Municipal Executive (CCME)	ECME1	0.760	0.938	0.754	0.908
	ECME2	0.710			
	ECME3	0.950			
	ECME4	0.950			
	ECME5	0.940			

**Table 3.** Research hypotheses and statistical results.

Hypotheses	Relation	Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	t	p-Value	Result
H1	MS → NIR	0.603	0.043	14.114	<0.001	Supported
H2	OPPQ → NIR	0.040	0.022	1.824	>0.05	Not Supported
H3	CCME → NIR	0.510	0.037	13.891	<0.001	Supported

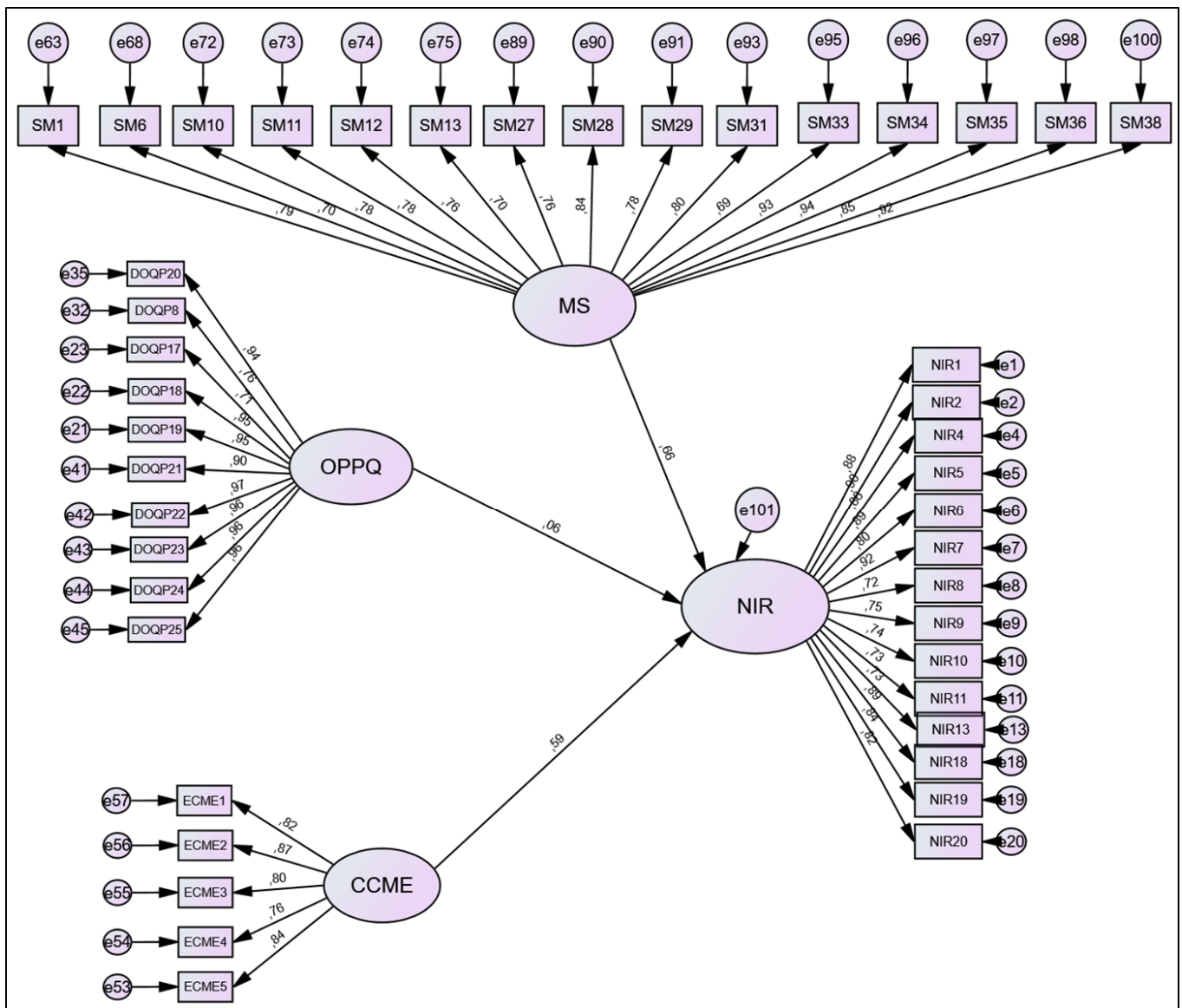


Figure 2. Final research model.

### 5. Discussion

The model tested allowed us to verify that notoriety, image, and reputation attributed by the citizens were positively affected by municipal satisfaction and the contestations and complaints of the municipal executive, which corroborates previous studies that demonstrated that public knowledge in municipalities led to a positive relationship between citizens and the public institution, leading to increases in satisfaction (Maldonado-Martinez and Rodriguez-Villafañe 2004; Mahon and Wartick 2003; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). The meaning attributed by municipalities to the image of the local executive power influenced their perceptions related to contestations and complaints, which allowed them to create positive institutional images in the communities where they lived (Rhodes 1997; Denhardt and Denhardt 2003). Non-statistical validation of the influences of organizational performance and perceived quality on notoriety, image, and reputation was considered a surprise, but this did not prevent the conclusion that there was a direct positive influence. However, in this research sample, it was not statistically significant contrary to previous studies (Nguyen and Leblanc 2001; Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Madureira and Rodrigues 2015), which showed that organizational reputation depended on the diffusion, sharing,



and consistency of public administration bodies, as well as the truth and transparency of the decisions taken (Grimmelikhuijsen 2010).

The validations of hypotheses 1 and 3 of this study allowed us to understand that notoriety, image, and reputation are firstly influenced by municipal satisfaction, followed by contestations and complaints of the municipal executive, showing that citizens give great relevance to these two dimensions, which affect both their quality of life and their futures. Our research work allowed us (for the first time) to hear from citizens about organizational awareness, image, and reputation. This study evaluated the perceptions of political-administrative dimensions and their impacts on the community; moreover, it is an instrument and mechanism for public consultation on the current state of the functioning and organizational performances of local public administration. Even though hypothesis 2 was not validated, the OPPQ dimension had a positive (but not statistically significant) influence, meaning that in an abstract sense, it also contributed (to some extent) to the constitution of the NIR.

Balan and Bulea-Schiopoiu suggested that public administration should adjust to the needs and expectations of citizens by optimizing efficiency and effectiveness in the procedural handling of citizens' requests (Boyatzis 2009). Only through a capable public administration at the service of the community can good levels of citizen satisfaction be built. Our work confirms that citizen satisfaction has a direct influence on the reality of organizational awareness, image, and reputation. Oržekauskas and I. Šmaižien noted that complaints constitute opportunities to improve the functioning of an organization (Collins et al. 2019). In the case of the municipality of Valongo, we verified that the existence of this mechanism (and the results) prove that transparency and the power of communication are essential ingredients to contain reactive and proactive contestations, allowing this dimension to contribute to the increase of the NIR of a public organization. The added value of this research was in identifying the dimensions that contributed to organizational awareness, image, and reputation. Thus, we verified the positive effects of citizen satisfaction on the NIR reality. The dimension 'contestations and complaints of the municipal executive' started to have a positive effect on the NIR (an understandable but somewhat surprising reality).

## 6. Conclusions

This scientific research results from a project implemented in northern Portugal and analyses of the most relevant results obtained through the use of a computer platform (CIDIUS<sup>®</sup>), were developed by the authors of this work, in an effort to support the decision-making processes of Portugal's mayors. The results of this research suggest that this type of direct approach to citizens, i.e., obtaining their personal opinions about the work performances of their mayors, allows citizens to feel heard and be active in their municipalities. From the executive public's point of view, the results of this type of study provide stakeholders with valid information that enables them, by listening to their citizens, to make political decisions and measures that are appropriate for the interests of their communities.

This platform and scientific work allowed us to verify the relevance of these variable aggregates because it allowed us to integrate the citizens' perceived values, citizen satisfaction, and the loyalty of voters as objectives in the management of municipalities, providing the mayors with management/public intervention tools, by evaluating the levels of public information and knowledge about municipal performances. Ultimately, this research contributes to the competitiveness and development of municipalities and increases the notion of citizenship and public transparency.

In summary, the dimensions of municipal satisfaction and municipal executive contestations and complaints have statistically significant influences on awareness, image, and reputation. As for organizational performance and perceived quality, although their influences on notoriety, image, and reputation are perceived, the data indicate that the research hypothesis is not statistically significant.

## 7. Limitations, Contributions, and Implications of the Study

Data collection instruments can always be questioned because others have been previously validated in the literature, which allows for obtaining better and different results. Perhaps one of the limitations of this study was the use of collection instruments adapted to the reality of municipalities. However, the academic validity of these instruments leads us to believe that the data obtained were robust. A great contribution of this study involved the direct analysis of local public reality, i.e., listening to those who were genuinely interested (citizens) in improving the quality of their living conditions. Studies such as these may, in the future, be replicated in other areas of the country and extrapolated internationally to other sociocultural realities.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Selection of Research Variables.

Survey Variables	Study Dimension
The City Council is honest and truthful.	Notoriety, Image and Reputation
The Town Council is credible and serious in its relationship with the citizen.	
The Town Council is humane and sensitive to the difficulties of the of the population.	
The City Council is stable and well managed.	
The City Council has quality services	
The City Council is transparent	
The Town Council provides excellent customer service	
The City Council contributes to social, economic and cultural development	
The City Council is innovative and forward-looking	
The City Council is creative in its interventions and and solutions.	
The City Council is visible to the public.	
The City Council is known nationally and international level.	
The City Council has media presence and strength.	
The City Council manages communication on social media.	
The City Council is organised in the field of public and political communication.	

Table A1. Cont.

Survey Variables	Study Dimension
<p>Environment: revitalising public spaces, rationalising natural resources, preserving the environment, air quality.</p> <p>Culture and leisure: congresses, museums, events, shows, festivals.</p> <p>Sports: existence of sports and leisure equipment, promotion of (school) sports activity, physical activity as occupation of free time/school holidays.</p> <p>Economy and entrepreneurship: development of economic activity in the municipality, business/industrial parks, business incubators, science and technology parks.</p> <p>Education: school network (management of school groupings of the various cycles, school meals).</p> <p>Urban hygiene: urban cleaning, cleaning of public buildings and equipment.</p> <p>Internationalisation: international promotion of the municipality, sports and business activities.</p> <p>Social intervention: childhood, youth, old age, employment, training, precariousness, economy, health.</p> <p>Youth: management of youth centres, cultural promotion.</p> <p>Mobility and transport: mobility/public transport network, other mobility (cycle paths), parking, heavy traffic induction roads, road safety.</p> <p>Safety: road prevention and control, safety and monitoring of the elderly, policing (environment, commercial and public space control, surveillance and vigilance).</p> <p>Tourism: information offices, tourist routes.</p> <p>Urbanism: public space management, public heritage maintenance, licensing, infrastructures.</p> <p>Is satisfied with the notoriety, image and reputation of the Municipality.</p> <p>Is satisfied with the attention that the Municipality gives to the citizens.</p> <p>Is he/she is satisfied with the functioning of the municipal services.</p> <p>He/she is satisfied with the fees charged by the Municipality.</p> <p>Overall, he/she is satisfied with the way the Municipality works.</p>	<b>Municipe Satisfaction</b>
<p>The City Council delivers what it promises to citizens and businesses.</p> <p>The opening hours of municipal services are appropriate to the needs of people and organisations.</p> <p>The waiting times are acceptable and bearable.</p> <p>The procedures and application forms have a simple language understood by everyone.</p> <p>The organisational performance of the municipality corresponds to the expectations of citizens and businesses.</p> <p>The performance of the Municipality is on par with the ideal and recommendable Municipality.</p> <p>The location of municipal services is suitable for citizens and businesses.</p> <p>The furniture and equipment of the municipal services are modern modern and appropriate to the function.</p> <p>The service areas are accessible to people with reduced mobility.</p> <p>The reception and service areas are comfortable, pleasant, clean and in good condition, pleasant, clean and well maintained.</p>	<b>Organizational Performance and Perceived Quality</b>
<p>Citizens have reason to complain about the management of the municipal executive.</p> <p>Complaints submitted to the City Council are attended to and resolved.</p> <p>Complaints improve the behaviour and the municipal services.</p> <p>Challenges and complaints influence municipal decisions.</p> <p>Disputes and complaints decrease support</p>	<b>Contestation and Complaint of the Municipal Executive</b>

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