

Administrative Corruption and Citizen Trust in Digital Public Services in Local Governments

Rafael Romero-Carazas¹, Wilfredo Alexander Medina-Esquivel², Marco Antonio Huamani-Molloco², Vidnay Noel Valero-Ancco³, Jesús Atahuasi-Chaparro⁴, Celfa Mónica Samaniego-Montoya⁵, Richard Flores-Cáceres⁶, Roque Juan Espinoza-Casco⁷

¹Universidad Tecnológica del Perú, Arequipa, Perú

²Universidad Nacional de San Agustín de Arequipa, Arequipa, Perú

³Universidad Nacional del Altiplano, Puno, Perú

⁴Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann, Tacna, Perú

⁵Universidad San Ignacio De Loyola, Lima, Perú

⁶Universidad Tecnológica de Lima Sur, Lima, Perú

⁷Universidad César Vallejo, Lima, Perú

Correspondence: Rafael Romero-Carazas, Universidad Tecnológica del Perú, Arequipa, Perú.

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Abstract

Corruption in the public sector in digital services undermines public trust, affects transparency, and hinders efforts to improve service progress. To enhance trust and government efficiency, it is crucial to combat it. The objective of the study is to determine the relationship between administrative corruption and citizen trust in digital public services: perception of users in Arequipa. The structural equation model (SEM) served as the basis for this quantitative, non-experimental, and cross-sectional study, where 700 users who utilize digital public services in the city of Arequipa were surveyed. According to the findings, 76.4% of users are familiar with the concept of administrative corruption, and 58% have a positive impression of the level of citizen trust. Moreover, the structural equation model showed that administrative corruption is strongly correlated with citizen trust (0.879). As well as, regarding the user (0.846), the information (0.826), and citizen participation (0.820). It is concluded that there is a significant relationship between administrative corruption and citizen trust in digital public services according to the perception of users in Arequipa.

Keywords: corruption, administration, trust, citizen, digital public services, users

1. Introduction

State modernization strategies are currently focused on digitalization processes in public administration, with the aim of increasing efficiency, reducing costs, and making public services more accessible to citizens (Mencia et al., 2023; Parano & Echeverry-Mejía, 2024; Villalobos & Linarez, 2023). In this way, by creating online government platforms, automated service systems, and virtual procedures, this digital transformation has, in principle, attempted to reduce the likelihood of corruption by limiting interaction between users and government officials (Ashcallay et al., 2023; Mora & Andrade, 2025). However, the complete trust of citizens in institutions and the total elimination of corrupt behavior cannot be ensured solely by digitalization (Ortiz et al., 2025; Sunción, 2022).

In addition, despite all the new technology that has been developed, administrative corruption remains a major problem in many countries (Medranda et al., 2019; Vera et al., 2024). This is particularly true in countries where public institutions have a reputation for being inefficient, unreliable, and lacking transparency (Benites & Vega, 2024; Ferruz & Hurtado, 2024; Galain & Olasolo, 2023). This situation affects the public's perception of state agencies and their ability to trust the services they offer, regardless of whether those services are provided digitally or not (Araque, 2025; De Mello, 2024). As a result, public trust is crucial for the success of digital transformation initiatives in public institutions (Ávila-Coello, 2024; Muñoz-Pallaroso et al., 2025).

In that vein, the common definition of administrative corruption in the social sciences is the abuse of public authority

for private gain. This type of behavior can take many forms and operate on multiple levels: favoritism, clientelism, bribery, and influence peddling (Bevilacqua & Neira-Villena, 2021). Likewise, corruption harms public policies, diminishes institutional quality, and makes state spending less efficient (Galvis-Ciro & Hincapié-Vélez, 2022; Mendoza & Portillo, 2020). The legitimacy of the State is undermined when this problem is widespread because citizens tend to assume corruption as a habitual or inevitable practice (Nevado-Batalla, 2021; Rodríguez-Arana et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, the term citizen trust refers to the unwavering expectation that people have in the actions of government institutions and public officials (Anrango & Medina, 2022; Morales et al., 2023). Likewise, results are important, but perceptions, past experiences, and degrees of institutional transparency also play a role in establishing this trust (Matalana-Kuan et al., 2021; Saltos-Navarrete & Mantuano-Zambrano, 2023). Research on digital governance shows that citizens' trust in government-managed digital services depends on the openness and security features of the system, as well as its technological capabilities (Fernández-Bedoya & Baldeon-Ccelccascca, 2025; Herrera et al., 2025).

Similarly, the term digital public services refer to all the networks, software, and hardware that provide citizens with electronic access to government services, documentation, or procedures (Balboa & Medina, 2021; Linares & Contreras, 2023). One of the objectives of digitalization is to streamline administrative operations and reduce unnecessary human intervention, which in turn should make them more efficient and less susceptible to corruption (Sánchez, 2023; Zavaleta et al., 2024).

Administrative corruption is present in the digital world, despite the fact that official rhetoric has been promoting digitalization as a tool to combat corruption (Hernández, 2023; Villalobos, 2023). In this way, persistent instances of bias in technology tenders, unregulated data processing, and unclear criteria for granting specific advantages or automated services are all problems (Soriano, 2021). As a result of these events, the general public perceives the structural difficulties of the State as if they had been transferred to the digital sphere, without any significant change in administrative methods (González et al., 2021; Vargas, 2021).

In this context, many users still have reservations about using digital services managed by institutions. This could be due to previous negative experiences, overly complicated processes, accusations of fraud, or simply a general lack of trust in government agencies (Cuno et al., 2021; Mendoza & Delgado, 2022). Therefore, citizens may become reluctant to use these platforms, fail to take advantage of technological solutions designed to improve their lives, or even seek informal or illegal ways to obtain services, all of which contributes to the cycle of corruption caused by a lack of trust (Grundy & Zegarra, 2022; Pardo & Bonilla, 2023).

Consequently, the legitimacy and effectiveness of public digital services can be negatively affected when users believe that administrative corruption is present (Balaguer, 2023; González, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the elements that form this impression, reinforce or diminish it, and their impact on user confidence in these services (Huamán & Medina, 2022; Rojas et al., 2022). In this context, the overall objective of this research is to determine the relationship between administrative corruption and citizen trust in digital public services: user perception in Arequipa, using the structural equation modeling (SEM) method.

2. Method

This research employed a quantitative and cross-sectional methodology because the data was collected within a specific time period. Likewise, it has an explanatory scope, since it investigates the chain of events of a phenomenon and its effects. Furthermore, it presupposes relationships between the variables under investigation (Hernández et al., 2014).

Furthermore, to understand how the different aspects of administrative corruption relate to citizen trust in digital public services, a thorough study is being conducted. For this reason, the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) model was used to investigate the connection between citizen trust and administrative corruption in Arequipa (Byrne, 2010; Hayes, 2013). A deeper understanding of the problems and their broader context can be achieved through this type of analysis, which explores a network of interrelated links, as shown in the proposed theoretical model in Figure 1.

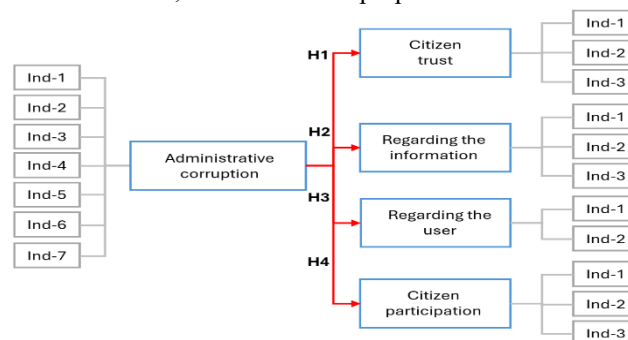


Figure 1. Theoretical model of construct relationships

Within the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework, there are five main components. For the set of five variables, one element represents the dependent variable and four represent the independent variables. The problem was also addressed by proposing a set of eighteen indicators.

2.1 Sample

The total number of units that meet the pre-established conditions is called the population (Hernández et al., 2014). To evaluate the correlation between administrative corruption and citizen trust, 700 users of digital public services in Arequipa were considered.

In addition, Hernández et al. (2014) state that the research focuses on a subset of the population, called a sample, in order to delve deeper into the study. The sampling was census-based, meaning that researchers considered user accessibility when selecting participants, rather than selecting a subset of the population. In other words, the census sample is the population itself, since all its members are included in the study: 700 users in Arequipa.

In this regard, participant recruitment was conducted through direct contact. Each participant was clearly informed of the purpose of the research and the relevance of their participation. In this regard, the instrument was administered on a scheduled, personalized basis, allowing for individual follow-up with participants and providing support during the data collection process without any coercion or pressure, which resulted in a 100% response rate from the sample. Additionally, the study ensured compliance with all relevant ethical requirements, such as obtaining informed consent from participants, not disclosing their identities, and protecting the privacy of their data.

2.2 Instruments

The survey was chosen as the method because it is appropriate for scientific study, opinion assessment, data collection, and obtaining current facts. Likewise, the survey served as a research tool. A survey is defined as a collection of questions about some measurable element or aspect (Hernández et al., 2014).

For their part, the data necessary for the research were collected using a questionnaire adapted for this study by Pineda (2024), with the survey serving as the instrument. The first variable, administrative corruption, was assessed using an instrument that measured the following dimensions: crime, social factor, and trust in the institution. With 13 questions in total, all scored on a dichotomous (yes/no) scale. The second instrument assessed the variable of citizen trust and its dimensions: trust in information, trust in the user, and citizen participation. It consisted of 16 questions in total, using a Likert-type scale (1–5).

On the other hand, the instrument's validity process was conducted using the expert judgment technique with three experts; for each item, criteria of relevance, importance, and clarity were evaluated, yielding a content validity index of 0.894 for the first variable and 0.914, indicating that the instrument's content and the construct being evaluated were acceptable. Likewise, the instrument's reliability was assessed internally using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Arias, 2016). The results demonstrate that the instrument is highly consistent with respect to the public trust (0.713) and administrative corruption (0.766) variables.

2.3 Processing

Data analysis was performed using Excel and the AMOS SPSS statistical tool, version 26. The variables and indicators of the research model were characterized using descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequencies, applied to the data. The structural equation modeling (SEM) made it possible to see the relationships between the hypotheses that were proposed.

3. Results

As shown in Table 1, 61.4% of the surveyed users stated that they have a level of knowledge or awareness about crimes. Likewise, 83.9% believe that they do have expectations regarding the social factor. Furthermore, 75.3% indicate that there is a level of trust in the institution. Meanwhile, 76.4% mention that they are aware of the phenomenon of administrative corruption in institutions.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of administrative corruption and its dimensions

Scale	Crime		Social factor		Trust in the institution		Administrative corruption	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
No	270	38.6%	113	16.1%	173	24.7%	165	23.6%
Yes	430	61.4%	587	83.9%	527	75.3%	535	76.4%
Total	700	100.0%	700	100.0%	700	100.0%	700	100.0%

Table 2 shows that 67.1% of respondents stated that there is a good level of information regarding the availability, quality, and accessibility of digital public services. Regarding the user, 40.9% mention that there is a good level of use of digital resources and tools, as well as specialists. Also, a good level of 50.9% was observed in terms of citizen participation (procedures, responses to queries, and user participation). On the other hand, citizen confidence was at a good level of 58%.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of citizen trust and its dimensions.

Scale	Regarding the information		Regarding the user		Citizen participation		Citizen trust	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Deficient	1	0.1%	0	0.0%	8	1.1%	0	0.0%
Low	18	2.6%	34	4.9%	74	10.6%	4	0.6%
Regular	208	29.7%	250	35.7%	247	35.3%	290	41.4%
Good	470	67.1%	286	40.9%	356	50.9%	406	58.0%
Very good	3	0.4%	130	18.6%	15	2.1%	0	0.0%
Total	700	100.0%	700	100.0%	700	100.0%	700	100.0%

The SEM model, shown in Figure 2, determines the requirements for constructing the general model and identifies the normalized estimated values. Using the overall fit measures of the SEM model, the theoretical model represented in Figure 1 was implemented (Alaminos et al., 2015; Byrne, 2010).

On the other hand, as shown in Figure 2, the factor loadings were 0.879, 0.826, 0.846, and 0.820, respectively. Table 3 shows that the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) does a good job of predicting the association between users' perceptions of digital public services in Arequipa and administrative corruption. As a result, the calculated probability level was 0.000, which is less than the significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$. In addition, the model had 272 degrees of freedom and a Chi-square value of 689.542.

Table 3 also shows two significant model fit metrics: a CMIN/GI ratio of 2.535 and a CFI value of 0.903. Figure 2 shows the appropriate SEM model, as predicted by the given criteria (an RMSEA value between 0.05 and 0.08 indicates an ideal fit); the full model fit yielded an RMSEA of 0.058 (Schumacher & Lomax, 2010).

Table 3. Results of the global structural model fit.

Adjustment values	Chi-squared	GI	NP	CMIN/GI	CFI	RMSEA
	689.542	272	0.000	2.535	0.903	0.058

GI= degrees of freedom; NP = probability level; CMIN/GI = Chi-square/degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

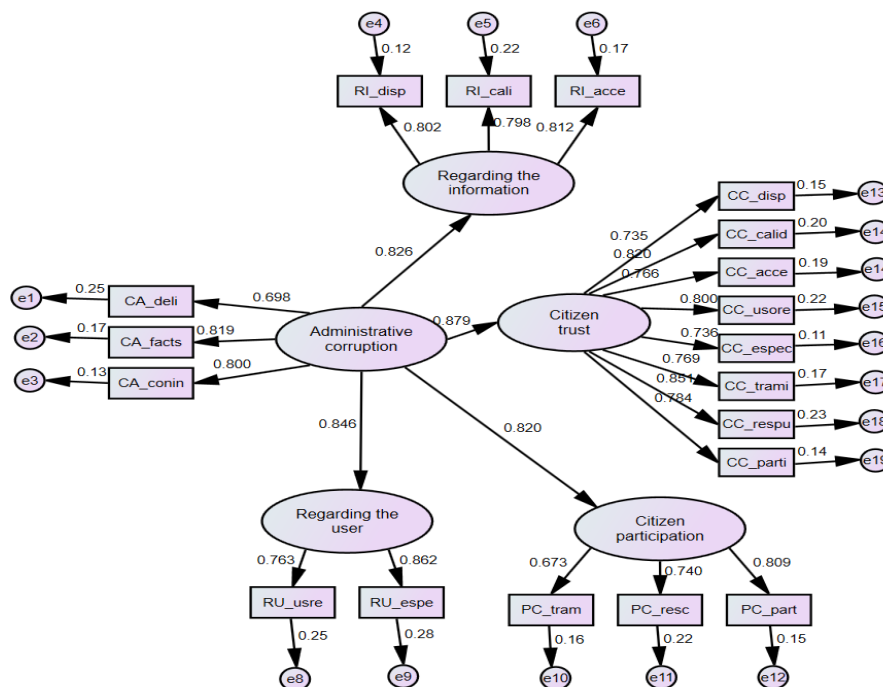


Figure 2. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) of administrative corruption and citizen trust

Figure 2 shows that the administrative corruption variable reveals a causal relationship with the dimensions: crime (CA_deli) with a normalized value of 0.698, social factor (CA_facts) with a value of 0.819, and trust in the institution (CA_conin) with a value of 0.800, among users linked to the use of digital public services in Arequipa. The following variable, with respect to information, has a causal relationship with its most significant indicators, such as availability (RI_disp) with a value of 0.802, quality (RI_cali) with a value of 0.798, and finally accessibility (RI_acce) with a value of 0.812.

In addition, the user variable has a causal relationship with its most significant indicators, such as the use of digital resources and media (RU_usre) with a value of 0.763, and the specialization indicator (RU_espe) has a causal correlation of 0.862. Likewise, the citizen participation variable has a causal relationship with its most significant indicators, such as online procedures (PCtram) with a value of 0.673, response to inquiries (PC_resc) with a value of 0.740, and user participation (PC_part) with a normalized value of 0.809.

On the other hand, the citizen trust variable shows relevant loadings, where availability (CC_disp) had a value of 0.735, service quality (CC_calid) had a value of 0.820, access to platforms (CC_acce) had a value of 0.766, use of technological means (CC_usore) had a value of 0.800, specialization (CC_espec) had a value of 0.736, online processing of services (CC_trami) had a value of 0.769, timely response to requests (CC_respu) had a value of 0.851, and active participation of users (CC_parti) had a value of 0.784.

The results of testing the four hypotheses using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) are shown in Figure 1. The projected impacts and causal links of the internal and external components analyzed are shown in Figure 2. Furthermore, all p-values were statistically significant and greater than the threshold of 0.5. After rejecting the alternative model and the null hypothesis, the original theoretical hypothesis (H1) can be accepted. As a result, administrative corruption is significantly related to citizen trust in digital public services: user perception in Arequipa (effectiveness index: 0.879).

On the other hand, with an effectiveness value of 0.826, the second hypothesis (H2) of the theoretical model confirms the relationship between administrative corruption and information in digital public services: user perception in Arequipa. Additionally, the third hypothesis of the structural equation model (H3) confirms a significant relationship between administrative corruption and information in digital public services: user perception in Arequipa, with an effectiveness value of 0.846. Finally, the theoretical hypothesis H4 is validated with an effectiveness value of 0.820, indicating that administrative corruption and citizen participation in digital public services: user perception in Arequipa, are significantly correlated.

Table 4. Standardized results of the constructs' correlation

Causal Relationship			Estimate	Standardized Coefficient	Sig.
Administrative corruption	--->	Citizen trust	1.283	0.879	***
Administrative corruption	--->	Regarding the information	1.124	0.826	***
Administrative corruption	--->	Regarding the user	0.736	0.846	***
Administrative corruption	--->	Citizen participation	0.697	0.820	***

4. Discussion

This study uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the theories behind statistical testing; in this way, it contributes to the understanding of how administrative corruption affects the trust that residents of Arequipa have in digital public service systems.

The findings lend credibility to hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4 regarding the connection between administrative corruption and citizen trust in its various dimensions among users in Arequipa. Consequently, the relationship between administrative corruption and citizen trust in digital public services among users in Arequipa is indicated by p-values of the correlations below the significance level of 0.05, which supports these assumptions.

Several recent studies have found a gap between people's perceptions of the reliability and integrity of digital public services and the level of technological advancement (Delgado, 2020; Villalta et al., 2023). Although numerous nations have made substantial investments in their digital infrastructure, reaching top positions in international rankings, the public image of these nations does not always reflect these achievements (Laura, 2024; Pessina, 2024). According to Chuquicahua et al. (2023), residents do not fully trust the reliability of government digital services, which implies that technology adoption is not enough to establish trust.

Similarly, establishing digital trust is difficult due to the widespread belief in corruption (Vaquero & Cadaval, 2022). According to Marichal-Guevara et al. (2025), most users believe the government is not doing enough to combat corruption, and some users in the population believe corruption has worsened recently. As a result of citizens' natural skepticism towards both the physical and digital environments, which they see as a mere extension of the old bureaucratic system, the legitimacy of digital services is severely compromised (Herrera-Sánchez et al., 2024).

Research conducted by Ibrahimy et al. (2023) indicates that the introduction of digital public services significantly reduces the likelihood of corrupt practices. This is particularly true in environments where bureaucratic processes are automated, leading to less direct contact with public officials and, consequently, higher levels of public trust in these institutions (Vatamanu & Tofan, 2025).

On the other hand, the analysis by Hooda et al. (2022) found that nations' levels of trust in government are positively correlated with their investments in digital infrastructure and e-government, suggesting a link between the two. Likewise, the importance of the institutional environment for digital services to deliver good results in public trust is underscored by the fact that this was particularly the case in nations with robust legal frameworks and efficient oversight mechanisms (Palmisano & Sacchi, 2024).

Furthermore, the study by Latupeirissa et al. (2024) showed the impact of the rapid digitalization of government services on citizens' perspectives, as there was an increase in the perception of openness and efficiency due to rapid digitalization, finding that trust cannot be fully established due to the persistence of harmful conventional behaviors. Therefore, it is crucial to complement digitalization with institutional reforms and anti-corruption initiatives (Alaa & Misko, 2022).

Finally, according to Newman et al. (2022), digital public administrations depend on invisible government (i.e., one driven by automated processes) to establish credibility. Therefore, according to Sundberg and Holmström (2024), states should promote digital design policies that put citizens first, focusing on openness, accessibility, and transparency. This requires the incorporation of human support channels, easy-to-understand appeal mechanisms, and transparent communication methods regarding the operation of digital services (Matheus et al., 2023). This is the only way to build public trust and move towards ethical and contemporary governance (Wijaya et al., 2024).

5. Conclusions

The study on administrative corruption and its effects on public trust in digital public services has shed light on the ways in which corruption can influence the state-citizen relationship within the framework of the digitalization of public services. The observed results validated the objective that user confidence in digital services decreases substantially when there is administrative corruption in government organizations.

The results show that people are more likely to distrust digital public services when they perceive or suspect dishonest behavior within administrative systems. This problem manifests itself in the lack of transparency in the processes and in the concern, people feel about the possible misuse or unauthorized access to their personal information. Consequently, the level of trust citizens place in digital platforms is indicative of the perceived quality and ethical standards of administrative procedures. By accepting the hypotheses, it can be stated that there is a correlation between citizens' trust in digital public services and their perception of administrative corruption.

The findings offer a solid foundation for public policies aimed at improving the relationship between government and citizens through technological implementation; this is one of the main contributions of this study. By isolating the elements that contribute most to the public perception of administrative corruption, concrete measures are proposed to rebuild trust, such as making government agencies more open and accountable, and implementing stricter privacy laws. Furthermore, the need for public officials to receive professional and ethical training is emphasized, in order to prevent cases of corruption that could compromise the effectiveness of digital resources.

However, it is worth mentioning some limitations. The results may not be applicable to other regions, as the user study does not encompass the full diversity of social and cultural backgrounds of the population. Furthermore, there may be significant regional and socioeconomic differences in how people perceive corruption and in their trust in digital services. Likewise, a comprehensive assessment of the reality of corrupt practices within government institutions cannot be achieved because the study only examined user perception. In other words, the degree to which corruption is perceived does not necessarily coincide with its actual magnitude, even though perception is a useful indicator.

In addition, to address the constantly evolving perceptions of corruption, it is crucial to conduct future research that broadens the scope of analysis to include new public sector technologies such as blockchain and artificial intelligence. These tools hold great potential in the fight against corruption and in restoring trust in digital public services. Nevertheless, the results are fundamental to laying the foundations for a more open, reliable, and productive digital public administration.

In conclusion, the relationship between administrative corruption and citizen trust in digital public services represents one of the most important challenges in consolidating a modern, efficient, and legitimate public administration. As a result, administrative corruption and citizen participation in digital public services are correlated. In general, the three dimensions of citizen trust—regarding information, the user, and citizen participation—showed a significant correlation with administrative corruption among users in Arequipa.

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Authors contributions

All authors participated equally in the conceptualization, methodology, analysis and writing of the study.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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