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EVALUATION OF THE "OPEN2VOTE" PLATFORM IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT "OPEN CITIES FOR EU CITIZENS"

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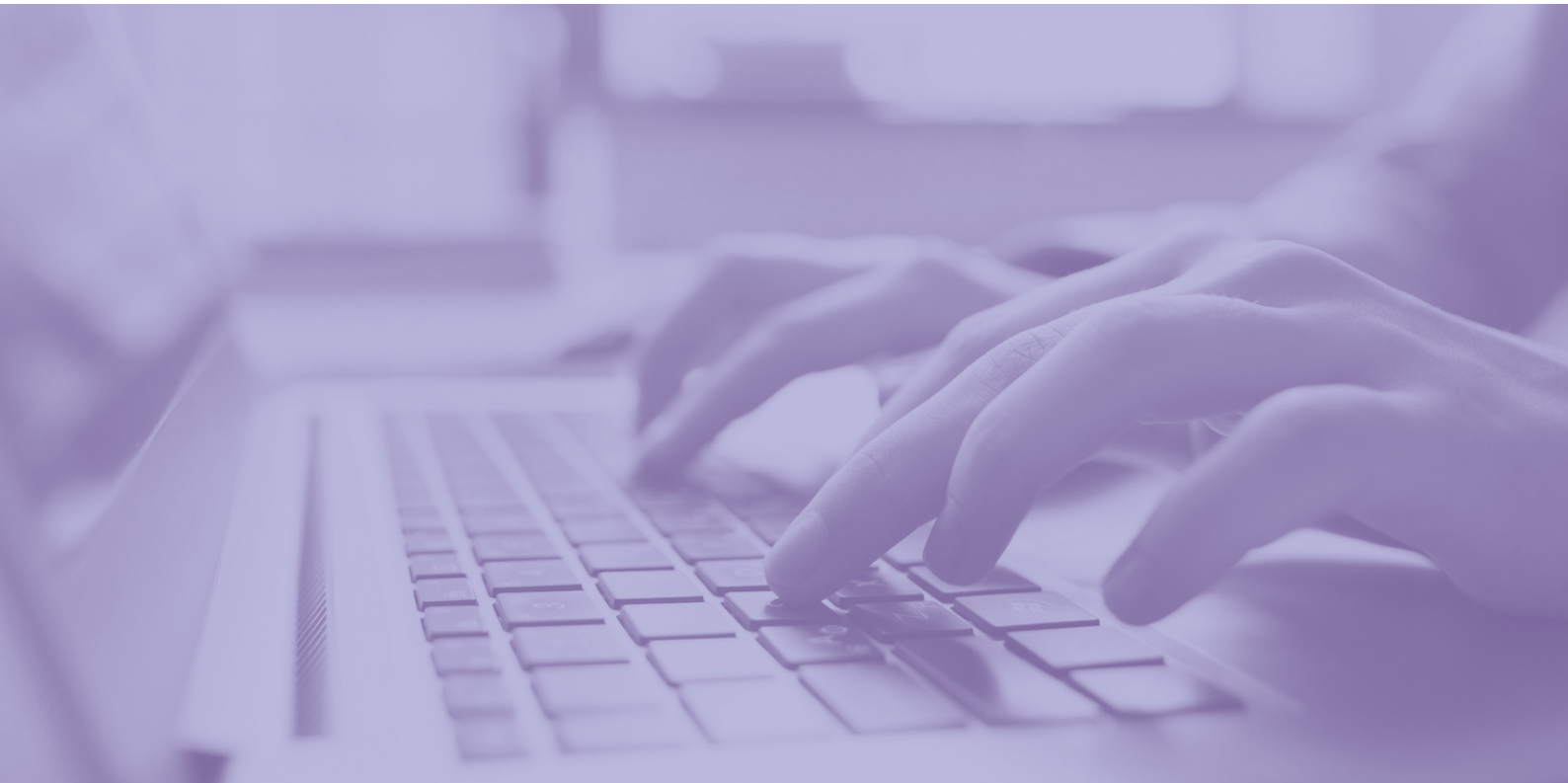

This evaluation elaborated in the project “Open Cities for EU Citizens” (OPENCIT) is aimed at raising the awareness of the rights of mobile EU citizens and facilitating their democratic participation. The project is implemented by the “Foundation of Public Participation” – organisation MyVoice – as well as the non-governmental organization “Open Knowledge Sweden” in Sweden. The project implementation period is 2021-2022. It is funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC 2014-2020) and financially supported by Sabiedrības integrācijas fonds (Society Integration Foundation) in the framework of the co-financing program (“Līdzfinansējuma programma”) financed by the Latvia state budget.

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Introduction

This evaluation aims to facilitate the development of recommendations regarding the introduction of digital tools for engagement of mobile EU nationals in politics, based on the expertise gained during the implementation of the project "Open cities for EU citizens".

The objectives of the project are twofold. First, via the platform Open2Vote.eu (O2V), to make the everyday work of Riga City Council more open, transparent, and more understandable for EU nationals residing in Riga and to help EU nationals to learn about the decisions made on the local level regularly, not only before or during the local elections. Second, to raise awareness of citizenship rights among EU nationals living in Latvia with a particular emphasis on voting and standing as the candidates in local elections.

To evaluate the platform, the unified theory of acceptance and usage of technology (UTAUT)[1] is applied.

Following the principles of user-centric design, the evaluation of the O2V platform focuses on its challenges and benefits both for the users and the ultimate goal of raising the awareness of the rights of mobile EU citizens and facilitating their democratic participation by analyzing the preliminary considerations for the development of O2V, users' survey data, and target audience interviews.

The evaluation uses the socio-technical approach and considers the factors leading to the acceptance and usage of the technology among the target groups as well as broader social and political implications of the participation of mobile EU citizens.

[1] Viswanath Venkatesh, Michael G. Morris, Gordon B. Davis, and Fred D. Davis. 2003. User Acceptance of Information Technology: Toward a Unified View. *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Sep. 2003), pp. 425-478. Accessed at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036540

Summary

According to the preliminary considerations for the development of O2V, users' survey data, and target audience interviews, platform Open2Vote.eu corresponds to all the determinants of acceptance and usage of technology to motivate behavioral intention and positively influence usage of the platform by mobile EU citizens residing in Latvia. Hence, the platform is well suited for the aims of the project "Open cities for EU citizens" (OPENCIT) and further engagement of the target audience.

When considering the implementation of this technology and expertise for engagement of mobile EU nationals in politics in other countries, the level of the engagement effort of the users should be considered. The minority opinion in the survey (14%) reflects that the registration on the platform was "quite difficult". To ensure a "one person – one vote" principle and "trolls-free" environment, in the OPENCIT project, the strong authorization of the users was demanded to assure complete trust in this kind of civic participation.

Understandably, such an engagement is not "free of effort", and the level of the data trustworthiness coinciding with the level of the engagement effort of the users in further applications of this technology should be considered.

Methodology and findings

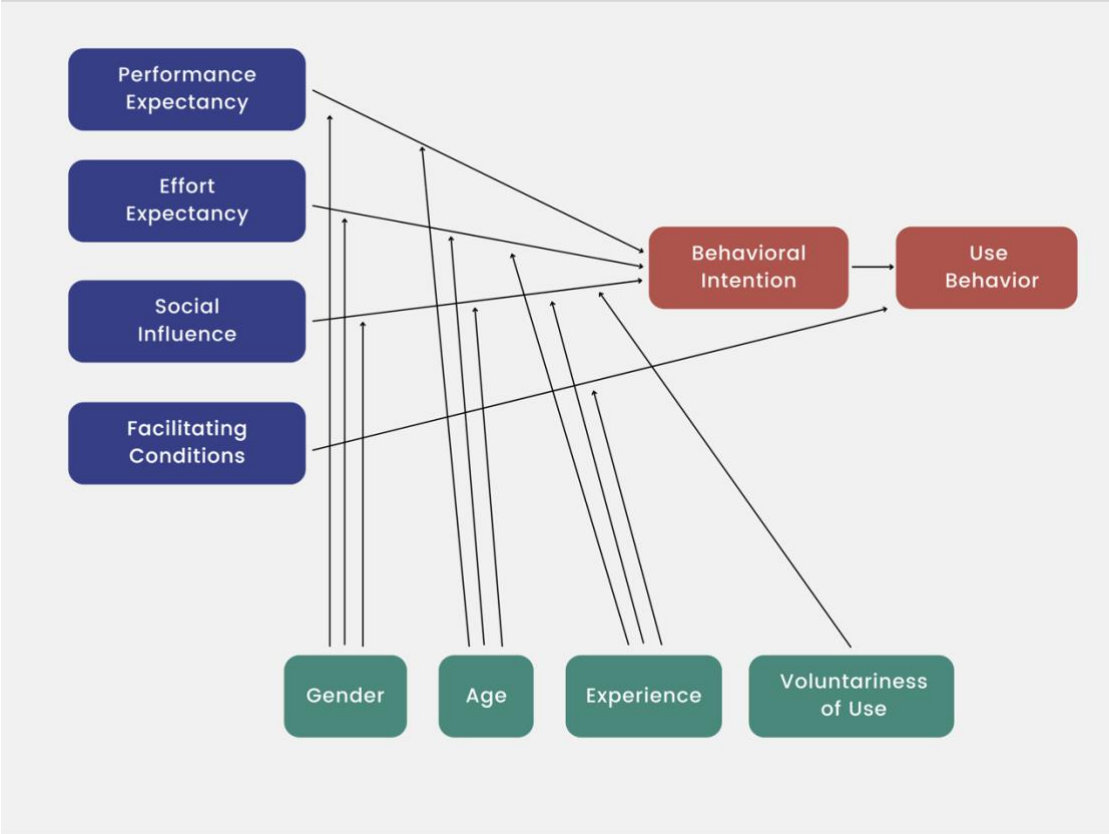
According to UTAUT, there are four core determinants of intention and usage of technology as well as up to four moderators of these key relationships.

Determinants are as follows: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitation conditions.

These determinants are moderated by the characteristics of a user: gender, age, experience, and voluntariness of use.

Moderated determinants lead to behavioral intention and use behavior of technology, in this case – Open2Vote.eu platform.

Open2Vote evaluation model[2]



The first determinant – **performance expectancy** – is the degree to which an individual believes that using the system will help him or her to attain desired gains.

The original UTAUT was designed for economics and business and links performance expectancy with the desired job performance. During the years, the TUAUT is applied to evaluate the acceptance of IT in different sub-fields.[3] This evaluation applies the UTAUT model and its components to the civic digital

[2] According to UTAUT; ibid., p. 447.

[3] See co-citation map by Thompson Reuters indicating the academic papers frequently cited together: https://bit.ly/31SuHRd.

participation, and in the O2V case equals performance expectancy to the desired goal of mobile EU citizens residing in Latvia to participate in the local decision-making processes.

Performance expectancy is defined by five root constructs with several measurable outcomes. In the preliminary considerations for the development of O2V, these root constructs and the desired eventual aims or outcomes are included by default.

According to the users' survey data, the outcome measurement vis-à-vis the corresponding constructs is as follows.

Open2Vote performance expectancy

Nr.	Construct	Outcome measurement
1.	Perceived usefulness	Using O2V enhance makes it **easier to participate** in policy-making and **enhances my chances** to be heard. – **Yes.**
2.	Extrinsic motivation: the perception that users will want to perform an activity because it is perceived to be instrumental in achieving valued outcomes that is distinct from the activity itself.	Operationalized using the same items as perceived usefulness. – **Yes.**
3.	Fit for the aim: How the capabilities of O2V enhance individual's performance	It **enhances my performance** on the way to the desired outcome. – **Yes.**
4.	Relative advantage: using the innovation is perceived as being better than using its precursor	Enables me to **engage quicker, easier,** and **improves the quality** of an engagement and is **more productive**. – **Yes.**
5.	Outcome expectations: performance and personal	Increases **effectiveness and quality** of an engagement, and promotes the goals of my extrinsic motivations. – **Yes.**

Notes:
Construct Nr. 2 here does not correspond to the original UTAUT extrinsic business motivations, like, pay rise or promotion. Still, when applied to civic digital participation, these motivations can be better integration in the host country, invigoration of the expat community, building up one's social capital in the host country, etc.

Construct Nr. 3 in the original UTAUT is "Job-fit". In O2V as a voluntary-engagement instrument, constructs of the general perceived usefulness and "fit for the individual" coincide.
Due to the voluntary nature of an engagement in O2V, also in the construct Nr. 5 originally job-related general performance of an instrument and the individual desired outcomes coincide.

The target audience interviews[4] implicitly reflect the need for these outcome measures to be operational to foster the mobile EU citizens' engagement in the policy-making processes.

The second determinant – **effort expectancy** – is the degree of ease associated with the use of O2V.

[4] Gustavs Erglis, Didzis Melkis. 2021. Situation description with recommendations. Chapter in: EU Mobile Citizens in Latvia: Situation description with recommendations, pp. 36-40. Accessed at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RoqS9KtaBXs8b4I5SRztKEZq467BvOCt/view.

Effort expectancy is defined by three root constructs with several measurable outcomes. In the preliminary considerations for the development of O2V, these root constructs and the desired eventual aims or outcomes are included by default.

According to the users' survey data, the outcome measurement vis-à-vis the corresponding constructs is as follows.

Open2Vote effort expectancy

Nr.	Construct	Outcome measurement
1.	Perceived ease of use	**Learning** to operate O2V and be skillful in it **will be easy.** – **Yes.**
2.	Complexity	Takes **too much time** to engage and is **difficult to understand**. (Reverse measurement.) – **No.**
3.	Ease of use	Interaction is **clear and understandable.** – **Yes**, mostly.

Notes:
Construct nr. 3 measurement reflects a minority (14%) opinion that the registration on the platform was "quite difficult". It should be noted that organisation MyVoice on its platforms in Latvia prefers to use strong authorization to ensure the "one person – one vote" principle and a "trolls-free" environment to assure both the audience and the final decision-makers complete trust in these platforms. Understandably, such an engagement is not "free of effort" as the original UTAUT construct nr. 1 is defined and predictably results in some complaints regarding the ease of use, if only by a minority.

Accordingly, in evaluating the transfer of O2V technology and expertise to other countries, the desired level of data trustworthiness coinciding with the level of the engagement effort of the users should be considered.

During the OPENCIT, MyVoice also received a couple of friendly "sorries" from eventual international O2V users who would like to try out the platform and participate. As these persons did not have the Latvian official eSignature or i-banking accounts, they could not register and make their profiles. As the aim of OPENCIT is engagement only of the mobile EU citizens residing in Latvia, this lack of the sought-for functionality is understandable. Still, while evaluating the transfer of O2V technology and expertise to other countries, the authorization level and the consequential scope of participation should be considered.

The third determinant – **social influence** – is the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use O2V.

Social influence is defined by three root constructs with several measurable outcomes. In the preliminary considerations for the development of O2V, these root constructs and the desired eventual aims or outcomes are included by default.

According to the observations during the OPENCIT implementation and the users' survey data, the outcome measurement vis-à-vis the corresponding constructs is as follows.

Facilitating conditions are defined by three root constructs with several measurable outcomes. In the preliminary considerations for the development of O2V, these root constructs and the desired eventual aims or outcomes are included by default.

According to the users' survey data, the outcome measurement vis-à-vis the corresponding constructs is as follows.

Open2Vote facilitating conditions

Nr.	Construct	Outcome measurement
1.	Perceived behavioral control	My **resources, opportunities and knowledge** makes it easy to use O2V. – **Yes.**
2.	Facilitating conditions	A **guidance to engage** and use O2V was available. Contacts for **service** et al. questions was available. – **Yes.**
3.	Compatibility	Using O2V is compatible with my **desired goals** and my **style of engagement.** – **Yes.**

Notes:
Positive outcome measurement for the construct nr. 1 is assumed by the fact that the respondents of the survey in particular and the O2V users, in general, are a self-motivated, comparably advanced, and purposeful societal group.

The importance of the construct nr. 2 was pointed out in the survey, like, active social media presence of the O2V services for the targeted audience. During OPENCIT, the specific audience was purposefully targeted in the relevant social media groups and individually.

Even though developers of UTAUT regard facilitating conditions as nonsignificant in predicting intention to use technology if the performance expectancy and effort expectancy constructs are present, like in OPENCIT case, according to the opinions expressed in the survey, they still are important factors in acceptance and usage of O2V.

Key moderators of the four determinants – gender, age, experience, and voluntariness of use – are present at the acceptance and usage of O2V. In the original UTAUT, these moderators are observed to be stronger for women, particularly younger women, and particularly at early stages of experience. Data of the self-selected participants of the survey suggest this to be true also in O2V case, as 70% of respondents are men. The age distribution also indicates higher usage of the platform by presumably more experienced users. Only 14% of the respondents are aged 18-25.

Although this perceived disproportion can depict the actual composition of the target group in Latvia,[5] for the sake of comprehensive representation, in principle, there is a necessity of calibrated communication especially with the women and young adults in the target group. In OPENCIT it was done by involving publicly recognizable women in the initial promotion of the platform and by publications in the social media groups where young international professionals residing in Latvia and their family members meet.

[5] Lack of reliable data about the number and structure of the EU expat community in Latvia is among conclusions of OPENCIT. The necessity for such data is emphasized in the open support letter to the involved stakeholders on the decision-makers' side.

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