

ASSESSING THE DUAL ROLE OF WHATSAPP PLATFORM IN STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA.

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Abstract

This study examines the dual role of WhatsApp platform as a channel for communication and entrepreneurship facilitation tools among students at the University of Abuja. The study employed Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by Katz et al. (1973) and Alternative Media Theory (Atton 2002). Using a mixed method design, data were collected through a survey of 380 respondents and content analysis of three major student-driven channels namely Face of UniAbuja, Abuja Campus TV, and Campus Market with a combined membership of over 21,000 students. The findings indicate that WhatsApp platform plays a central role in student communication with notably elevated levels of engagement observed, and particularly among younger undergraduate students and female student populations, while campus-related news emerged as the most predominantly consumed category of content. However, entrepreneurial participation was limited, with only 15.5% of respondents engaging in advertising and most reporting little or no impact. The content analysis confirmed differentiated channel roles, highlighting WhatsApp's strength as an alternative media space. The study concludes by advocating for future research on digital platforms in higher education, emphasizing the need for broader scope and deeper analysis. Therefore, the study recommends that universities should formally integrate digital literacy training, and encourage students to adopt sustainable entrepreneurial practices that can enhance long-term economic empowerment.

Keywords: WhatsApp, Students, Communication, Entrepreneurship, University

Introduction

Social media has become a central feature of youth communication, information exchange, and entrepreneurship in Nigeria. Recent statistics indicate that Nigeria had over 36.7 million social media users as of January 2024, with young people representing the most active demographic (Data Reportal, 2024). Among these platforms, WhatsApp, a platform of social media has emerged as particularly dominant due to its immediacy, affordability, and accessibility. Within higher education, WhatsApp channel has become indispensable for students, serving as spaces for academic updates, peer interaction, and entrepreneurial activity (Udenze & Oshionebo 2020; Kufre & Abe 2017; Minhas et al. 2016).

Globally, similar patterns have been observed. Bosch (2016), for instance, documented how South African students used Twitter during the #FeesMustFall movement to amplify activism, emphasizing the communicative power of digital platforms in youth mobilisation. In Nigeria, WhatsApp platform increasingly replaces traditional communication structures such as notice boards and campus radio, functioning as alternative media that empowers students to bypass institutional gatekeepers (Ajiboye&Jacob2024).

Beyond communication, WhatsApp has become a marketplace for student entrepreneurship. Kierian et al. (2021) posit that WhatsApp advertising significantly influences the patronage of small business start-ups in Nigeria. Similarly, Morah (2018) observed that platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook provide affordable avenues for young people to promote goods and services in Lagos and Onitsha. These affirm broader studies on digital entrepreneurship, which highlight how social media reduces barriers to entry by offering low-cost advertising and direct access to peer markets (Ekwueme & Okoro2018; Eze&Chinedu2020). For students, WhatsApp channels provide a ready-made audience, enabling them to combine academic life with entrepreneurial activity.

Despite these developments, limited attention has been given to WhatsAppplatform (channels) as student driven marketplaces within Nigerian universities. Existing studies often focus on single platforms or broad national patterns, overlooking how multiple channels collectively function as hybrid spaces for communication and business. Questions remain about the types of communication shared across channels, the extent to which they encourage entrepreneurial activity, and how students perceive their trustworthiness compared to official communication structures.

This study therefore, seeks to identify communication and informationsharing patterns across three WhatsApp channels used byNigerian university students (University of Abuja). It also examinesstudents' participation in entrepreneurship/commercial activities within these channels, and assess perceptions of trust and reliability compared to official university communication systems. The importance of this study lies in three areas. Academically, it extends research on social media by highlighting WhatsApp's dual role in communication and entrepreneurship across multiple student-driven channels. Practically, it provides insights into how students use digital platforms for economic empowerment and peer-driven communication: institutionally, it offers recommendations for universities to recognise and integrate student-driven digital platforms into broader communication strategies. The study focuses exclusively on three WhatsApp channels with a combined membership exceeding 21,000 students. Other social media platforms or offline communication structures are excluded.

Literature Review

WhatsApp in Learning and Communication

WhatsApp has been extensively recognised as a tool for collaborative learning and peer communication. Udenze & Oshionebo (2020) and Maria (2016) demonstrate its role in supporting group discussions among undergraduates, while Kufre & Abe (2017) argue that whatsapp serves

as an instructional medium beyond the classroom. Similarly, Ijeh (2020) observed that WhatsApp supplements teaching by fostering collaboration, though challenges such as distraction and information overload were noted. Udenze & Oshionebo (2020) postulate that WhatsApp is a multimedia communication platform that allows users to send contents like pictures, audio, videos, make voice calls, send document etc. The unique feature of the mobile application has made it one of the best in the world. Another unique feature of WhatsApp is its group chat feature. (p. 30).

Taken together, these studies highlight WhatsApp's centrality to students' life and its ability to gratify communication needs. However, they often generalise across contexts and do not examine how multiple student-driven channels collectively shape communication within Nigerian universities. This gap underlines the need to investigate WhatsApp's role in specific institutional settings.

WhatsApp in Entrepreneurship

WhatsApp has become an increasingly vital tool in promoting entrepreneurial activity among university students, functioning simultaneously as a communication platform, a collaborative workspace. With minimal financial cost, yet a strategically potent marketing platform through which student entrepreneurs can effectively penetrate competitive markets, amplify their brand, and sustain customer engagement at a fraction of cost compared to traditional marketing outlets. Beyond communication, WhatsApp has become a marketplace for student entrepreneurship. Over time, the use of this platform can contribute to enhancing students' financial capacity and entrepreneurial skills, thereby equipping them with sustainable & Udensi 2023).

Kierian et al. (2021) reported that WhatsApp advertising significantly influences the patronage of small business start-ups in Nigeria. The intersection of social media platforms and entrepreneurship within Nigeria's informal economy, particularly among youth population should necessitate the development of frameworks to adequately sustain this growing sector. Ekwugha. & Udensi (2023) postulate that:

Today, businesspeople are utilizing the innovations of social media to harness opportunities and wealth. They also deploy social media platforms in promoting their lives in so many ways. WhatsApp has greatly become part of young people's life where they connect and interact with friends and family. This gratifies their information, entertainment, and educational needs. This suggests that Whatsapp is valuable in the hands of young entrepreneurs as an economic enhancer.(p.73).

The above resonates that WhatsApp has emerged as an increasingly consequential digital instrument in advancing entrepreneurial activity among university students business landscape. Consequently, by virtue of its widespread, WhatsApp has distinguished itself among social media platforms adoption. While these studies confirm WhatsApp's entrepreneurial potential, Eze & Chinedu (2020) caution that student entrepreneurship on WhatsApp is often informal and unsustainable, raising questions about regulation and long-term viability. Most existing research focus on urban or national contexts leaving a gap in understanding how university students integrate entrepreneurship into their academic environments.

Alternative Media Role of WhatsApp

The concept of alternative media provides another lens for understanding WhatsApp channels. Atton (2002) define alternative media as participatory, decentralised, and peer-driven platforms that challenge mainstream structures. Ajiboye & Jacob (2024) extend this to Nigerian youth (undergraduates), showing how platforms empower students to access opportunities independently, without unnecessary institutional barriers. They further observe that WhatsApp groups often serve as unofficial newsrooms in Nigerian universities, where students circulate information faster than institutional channels, albeit with varying degrees of accuracy.

These studies highlight WhatsApp's role as an alternative media, enabling grassroots communication and identity formation. However, they also raise concerns about credibility and misinformation. Few studies have systematically examined how WhatsApp channels balance empowerment with risks, particularly in higher education contexts (Zannuet al. 2024).

Digital Literacy and Challenges

Effective use of WhatsApp is closely linked to digital literacy (Khan et al. 2021). Jacob & Saka (2023) found that digital literacy skills significantly influence undergraduates' ability to use WhatsApp effectively, suggesting that competence in navigating digital tools shapes engagement. Minalla (2018) and Mefolere (2016) note that WhatsApp groups foster informal learning but risk spreading misinformation when not moderated.

The literature therefore points to a dual challenge: maximising the benefits of WhatsApp while mitigating risks of distraction, overload, and misinformation across student-driven WhatsApp channels. Overall, the literature establishes WhatsApp as a platform that supports learning, communication, and entrepreneurship while functioning as alternative media. However, most studies either focus on single platforms or broad national contexts. There is limited research on how multiple WhatsApp channels collectively operate within Nigerian universities, particularly in balancing communication, commerce/entrepreneur, and credibility. This study addresses that gap by examining three major student-driven channels at the University of Abuja.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates Uses and Gratifications Theory and Alternative Media Theory.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Katz et al.(1973) argue that audiences are active participants who select media to satisfy needs such as information, social interaction, entertainment, and identity. UGT provides an individuallevel explanation of why students engage with WhatsApp channels. Applied to WhatsApp, this framework explains why students turn to platforms like Face of UniAbuja and Abuja Campus TV: they seek immediacy in academic updates, social belonging through peer interaction, and entrepreneurial opportunities via advertising and patronage. Recent studies confirm these patterns. Udenze & Oshionebo (2020) discover that WhatsApp gratifies academic and social needs, while Kierian et al. (2021) and Morah (2018) demonstrate its role in satisfying entrepreneurial needs.

Yet, while UGT captures motivations, it does not fully explain the structural autonomy of WhatsApp channels as student-driven platforms. This is where Alternative Media Theory complements the analysis of the study.

Alternative Media Theory

Alternative Media Theory situates WhatsApp channels within broader debates about media autonomy and grassroots participation. Atton (2002) defines alternative media as participatory, decentralised, and peer-driven, contrasting with hierarchical mainstream media. This view aligns with wide-ranging discourse on counter-hegemonic media, wherein alternative platforms are theorised as sites of resistance, community empowerment, and discursive contestation against dominant power structures that conventionally govern the production and circulation of knowledge in society (Downing, 2001)

Ekwugha & Udensi (2023) extend this to other social media, showing how its platforms enable students to navigate beyond institutional barriers while fostering environments for business. This perspective highlights WhatsApp's role as alternative media, enabling students to construct their own communicative and entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, it also raises concerns about credibility, regulation, and sustainability issues that UGT alone cannot address.

Integrating Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Alternative Media Theory

The UGT and Alternative Media theories provide a dual-level framework for this study. UGT explains the individual motivations behind student engagement immediacy, convenience, peer connection, and entrepreneurial opportunity. Alternative Media Theory explains the structural autonomy of WhatsApp channels as decentralised, peer-driven communication systems that evade official university structures.

This integration captures the varied nature of WhatsApp channels: they simultaneously gratify personal needs and function as alternative media spaces. It is particularly relevant in Nigerian universities, where students rely on WhatsApp not only for academic and social communication but also for entrepreneurial empowerment. By combining these perspectives, the study addresses both the micro-level (student motivations) and macro-level (structural autonomy), offering a comprehensive lens for analysing WhatsApp's dual role in communication and entrepreneurship.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory mixed-method design, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative content analysis to investigate how WhatsApp channels function as spaces for communication and entrepreneurship among students. The survey provides measurable data on usage patterns, trust perceptions, and entrepreneurial practices, while the content analysis offers objective evidence of the types of information shared across the platforms. This triangulated approach was chosen to strengthen validity and reduce reliance on self-reported data.

The population of the study comprises undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Abuja who are members of three major student-driven WhatsApp channels:

1. Face of UniAbuja with 14,440 members.
2. Abuja Campus TV with 1,487 members.

3. Campus Market with 5,608 members.

Altogether, these channels represent a combined membership of 21,535 students, cutting across faculties and levels of study. They were selected because they serve as primary spaces for campus communication, news dissemination, and entrepreneurial activity. From this population, a total of 380 valid survey responses were obtained. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, ensuring statistical adequacy. Purposive sampling was employed to target active members of the selected channels, a technique appropriate for the study in examining peer-driven communication and entrepreneurship.

Two instruments were used for data collection. The first was a structured questionnaire, designed to capture demographic details, usage patterns, motivations and perceptions, and entrepreneurial participation. Distributed electronically via Google Forms, the questionnaire ensured accessibility and ease of response. The second instrument was a content analysis framework, which systematically examined posts from the three channels and categorized them into six themes: academic updates, campus news, social interaction, entrepreneurship and advertising, general awareness, and spam or misinformation. This dual approach allowed the study to capture both subjective perceptions and objective communication patterns.

Survey data were collected electronically, with respondents participating voluntarily and confidentiality assured. For the content analysis, posts were coded into the six categories, and frequencies were recorded to identify dominant communication and entrepreneurial trends. This provided a snapshot of activity within the channels during the study period. Data analysis relied primarily on descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to present demographic distributions, usage patterns, motivations, perceptions, and entrepreneurial participation. Content analysis data were examined by counting the frequency of posts in each category, which revealed the differentiated roles of the channels: *Face of UniAbuja* was dominated by social interaction, *Abuja Campus TV* focused on campus news, while *Campus Market* was oriented toward entrepreneurship.

Consequently, by combining survey statistics with content analysis frequencies, the study achieved methodological triangulation, offering a comprehensive yet exploratory understanding of how WhatsApp channels operate as communication and entrepreneurial platforms within the University of Abuja context. The exploratory nature of the design reflects the intention not to establish definitive causal relationships but to provide an initial mapping of patterns, perceptions, and practices that can inform future, more expansive research.

Results

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 380)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	16–20	248	65.3%
	21–25	111	29.2%
	26–30	19	5.0%
	Above 30	2	0.5%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	266	70.0%
	Male	114	30.0%
Level of Study	100 Level	252	66.3%
	200 Level	77	20.3%
	300 Level	20	5.3%
	400 Level	25	6.6%
	500 Level	1	0.3%
	Postgraduate	5	1.3%

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of respondents is summarised in **Table 1**. The majority were aged 16–20 (65.3%), followed by 21–25 (29.2%). Females constituted 70% of the sample, while males accounted for 30%. In terms of level of study, most respondents were in 100 Level (66.3%), with participation declining at higher levels. Postgraduates represented only 1.3%. These results confirm that WhatsApp channels are predominantly used by younger undergraduates, with female students showing stronger participation.

Table 2: Usage patterns, trust, and entrepreneurship (N = 380)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Membership Duration	< 6 months	226	59.5%
	6–12 months	39	10.3%
	> 1 year	115	30.3%
Frequency of Access	Daily	211	55.5%
	Occasionally	128	33.7%
	Weekly	41	10.8%
Content Engagement	Campus news	232	61.1%
	Social posts	75	19.7%
	General awareness	65	17.1%
	Adverts	8	2.1%
Trust Motivation	Immediacy of updates	195	51.3%
	Convenience	95	25.0%
	Peer recommendations	83	21.8%
	Affordability	7	1.8%
Communication Effectiveness	Very effective	242	63.7%
	Moderately effective	115	30.3%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Not effective	23	6.1%
Advertising Participation	Yes	59	15.5%
	No	321	84.5%
Advertising Impact	No impact	250	65.8%
	Moderate impact	73	19.2%
	Significant impact	57	15.0%

Usage Patterns, Trust, and Entrepreneurship

Patterns of channel use, trust motivations, communication effectiveness, and entrepreneurial participation are presented in **Table 2**. Most respondents (59.5%) joined less than six months ago, and 55.5% accessed channels daily. Campus news was the most consumed content (61.1%), while adverts were least consumed (2.1%). Immediacy of updates was the strongest trust driver (51.3%), and 63.7% rated channels “very effective” for communication. Entrepreneurial participation was limited: only 15.5% had advertised, and 65.8% of those reported no impact.

Table 3: Chi-square test results

Test	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Result
Frequency of Access $\times$ Trust Motivation	6.34	6	.386	Not significant
Level of Study $\times$ Entrepreneurship Effectiveness	8.36	10	.593	Not significant

Chi-Square Analysis

Two chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between categorical variables. Results are shown in **Table 3**.

- **Frequency of Access $\times$ Trust Motivation:** $\chi^2(6, N = 380) = 6.34, p = .386$. No significant association was found, indicating that trust motivations did not differ by frequency of access.
- **Level of Study $\times$ Entrepreneurship Effectiveness:** $\chi^2(10, N = 380) = 8.36, p = .593$. No significant association was found, suggesting that perceptions of entrepreneurship effectiveness were consistent across academic levels.

Table 4: Distribution of content categories across channels (n = 100 each)

Category	Face of UniAbuja (%)	Abuja Campus TV (%)	Campus Market (%)
Academic updates	0	0	2
Campus news	21	47	5
Social interaction	79	39	68
Entrepreneurship/advertising	0	3	9
General awareness	6	11	8
Spam/misinformation	0	0	0

Content Analysis

The distribution of content categories across channels is presented in **Table 4**. Face of UniAbuja was dominated by social interaction (79%), Abuja Campus TV by campus news (47%), and Campus Market by social interaction (68%) with notable advertising activity (9%). Academic updates were rare, appearing only in Campus Market (2%), while spam or misinformation was negligible.

Table 5: Channel participation (N = 380)

Channel/Group	Frequency	Percentage
Face of UniAbuja	121	31.8%
Abuja Campus TV	81	21.3%
Campus Market	50	13.1%
Departmental/class groups	64	16.8%
Miscellaneous groups	9	2.4%
Combination channels	55	14.6%

Channel Participation

Channel participation patterns are summarised in **Table 5**. Face of UniAbuja (31.8%) was the most popular, followed by Abuja Campus TV (21.3%) and Campus Market (13.1%). Departmental groups accounted for 16.8%, while miscellaneous groups were marginal (2.4%). A majority (60.3%) of respondents reported participating in more than one channel, confirming that multichannel engagement is the norm.

Findings

The results confirm that WhatsApp channels are central to students' communication, with younger undergraduates and female students dominating participation. Campus news is the most consumed content, and immediacy is the strongest trust driver. Communication effectiveness is widely acknowledged, but entrepreneurial adoption is limited, with advertising participation low and impact uneven. Content analysis reveals distinct channel roles, and chi-square tests show no significant associations between frequency of access and trust motivation or between level of study and entrepreneurship effectiveness. Together, these findings highlight the communicative strength of WhatsApp channels, while suggesting that their entrepreneurial potential remains supplementary rather than transformative.

Conclusion

This study confirms that WhatsApp channels are central to students' communication in Nigerian universities, particularly among younger undergraduates and female students. Daily access and preference for campus news highlight the platform's role in satisfying information and social interaction needs, consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory. WhatsApp enhances immediacy, accessibility, and peer-driven learning, yet its entrepreneurial potential remains limited. Only a small proportion of students engaged in advertising, and most reported little or no impact. This outcome reflects structural barriers such as the informal nature of students'

businesses, lack of institutional support, credibility concerns, and competition from other platforms. While WhatsApp channels embody the decentralised, participatory qualities of alternative media, their economic empowerment capacity is constrained.

The study contributes by integrating Uses and Gratifications Theory with Alternative Media Theory, offering a dual-level framework that captures both individual motivations and structural autonomy. Methodologically, it advances study by combining survey data with content analysis, providing both subjective perceptions and objective communication patterns. Consequently, the need for universities to formally integrate WhatsApp into student development programmes, provide digital literacy training, and encourage students to adopt sustainable entrepreneurial practices are recommended.

Furthermore, the entrepreneurial dimension, though acknowledged, remains underdeveloped, as the study does not probe deeply into the reasons behind low adoption and impact.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, the study recommends that higher institutions of learning formally incorporate digital literacy training into their academic frameworks. Secondly, foster the adoption of sustainable entrepreneurial practices among students as a means of enhancing long-term economic empowerment. Thirdly, the study advocates for continued scholarly inquiry into the role of WhatsApp and other digital platforms within higher education contexts, emphasising the imperative for expanded scope.

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