

# Integration of WhatsApp and its Influence on Small and Medium Enterprise Performance in Buloba Town, Wakiso, Uganda

Mugarura Richard<sup>1</sup>, Olutayo K. Osunsan<sup>2\*</sup>, Vincent Byamukama<sup>3</sup>, Micheal Timbirimu<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of Information Technology, Africa Renewal University, Uganda

<sup>2,3</sup>Lecturer, School of Postgraduate Studies & Research, Africa Renewal University, Uganda

<sup>4</sup>Lecturer, Faculty of Business Administration & Management, Uganda Martyrs University, Mbale, Uganda

**Abstract:** This study investigates the adoption of WhatsApp among Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Buloba, Wakiso district, Uganda, and its impact on business performance as a means to help attain some aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The research reveals a high level of WhatsApp adoption, particularly in skilled usage, platform following, customer engagement, product marketing, and customer ordering. Positive correlations between WhatsApp adoption and SME performance indicate its potential role in enhancing business outcomes. Multiple regression analysis demonstrates that approximately 20.6% of SME performance variance is explained by WhatsApp adoption, with customer engagement showing a marginally significant positive relationship. The findings emphasize the role of WhatsApp, especially in customer engagement, for SME success. Recommendations include prioritizing customer engagement, providing SME training, and further research to delve into specific influencing factors. The study contributes valuable insights into the budding landscape of SMEs in Buloba, emphasizing the need for strategic use of WhatsApp for sustained business success.

**Keywords:** SME performance, SDGs, WhatsApp, Social media, Uganda.

## 1. Introduction

In today's economy, the success of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) is crucial for a number of compelling reasons. Due to their entrepreneurial endeavours and income production, SMEs work as powerful engines of economic growth, collectively contributing considerably to a country's Gross Domestic Product (Niyongere & Osunsan, 2023). They also significantly contribute to the creation of jobs by taking on a sizeable share of the labour force, which helps to combat unemployment issues and promote income distribution. SMEs promote innovation and entrepreneurship and frequently act as incubators for new concepts and technologies, which boosts competition and advances technology. Their inclusion across a variety of sectors also lessens the economic risks brought on by sector-specific downturns (Robert et al 2022). SMEs support regional development by opening offices in economically underserved areas, fostering equitable growth, and minimizing regional inequalities. It is also evident that SMEs play a crucial

role in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through various economic, social, and environmental contributions. Some of these include SDG 1: No Poverty; SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure; and SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production among others.

Online social platforms provide SMEs with a means to establish connectivity and enhance transparency, thereby affording them a valuable edge in the competitive landscape. This assertion is validated by Nuseir's (2018) research, revealing that a significant 83% of marketers recognize social media networks as highly significant for their enterprises. Moreover, a comprehensive study by Orient Planet Research emphasizes the growing reliance on social media channels, encompassing Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, among SMEs. These platforms have become instrumental in facilitating various business operations. Within the realm of digital communication tools, WhatsApp stands out, transforming how businesses engage with stakeholders (Kaul, 2015). Renowned for its secure communication ecosystem, WhatsApp transcends diverse domains, from education (Baguma et al., 2019) to finance, culinary expertise and election monitoring in location like Sub-Saharan Africa (Sasseti, 2019). Recognized for its cost-efficiency and effectiveness, WhatsApp facilitates interactions across organizational, academic, and business boundaries (Daramola, 2022). Its widespread adoption is particularly noteworthy for its role in global communication and as a vital information infrastructure, holding special significance in developing nations like Uganda (Baguma et al., 2019).

The assessment of technology acceptance factors pertaining to mobile applications, mostly the utilization of WhatsApp as a communication tool, and its impact on business performance remains a mystery in the regions of Wakiso and Buloba, and possibly Uganda. This research gains significance in view of the obvious shift from traditional social media platforms such as Facebook toward messaging applications like WhatsApp, a change noted for its substantial growth (Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández & Johns, 2020). This study attempts to exploration

\*Corresponding author: oosunsan@afru.ac.ug

the adoption of WhatsApp among SMEs in Buloba Town, located in the Wakiso district of Uganda and its implications on their performance. The selection of this geographical area is guided by its economic significance and the evolving technology landscape within Buloba, Wakiso and Uganda at large.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature reviewed emphasizes the evolving role of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, and their implications for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). These platforms, including WhatsApp, offer SMEs a range of opportunities, such as efficient communication across geographical boundaries and effective marketing strategies, contributing to enhanced customer engagement and overall business performance (Atherton, 2023; Gavrila & de Lucas Ancillo, 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media, as a subset of internet communication technology, encompasses platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn, providing SMEs with avenues to bolster various facets of their operations, including relationship management, information sharing, and logistics coordination (Alzougool, 2019). However, despite the acknowledged significance of social media in business, the adoption of these platforms by SMEs, especially in developing countries, is not automatic and has been observed to be relatively slow (Kyakulumbye & Pather, 2022; Abu Bakar, Ahmad & Ahmad, 2019; Veldeman, Van Praet & Mechant, 2017; Abou-Shouk, Megicks, & Lim, 2013).

This tepid adoption of digital technologies among SMEs in certain regions is attributed to a range of factors, including infrastructural limitations, skills deficits, inadequate cyber regulations, internet speed issues, and connectivity costs (Mavimbela & Dube, 2016; Kabanda & Brown, 2017; Sugandini *et al.*, 2018). The situation is further compounded by a shortage of technical expertise and perceived high costs associated with digital marketing (Sugandini *et al.*, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for change, compelling SMEs to embrace digital technologies as a means of survival (Amankwah-Amoah, 2021; Ting *et al.*, 2020). During lockdowns, various digital tools, including social media, became indispensable for SMEs to maintain customer connections and market their products effectively (Effendi *et al.*, 2020). In this context, WhatsApp, along with other social media technologies, emerged as a crucial means of direct customer engagement, ensuring business continuity and resilience (Effendi *et al.*, 2020; Ahmad *et al.*, 2019). Despite the prevalence of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, research suggests that the adoption and use of multiple social media tools vary among SMEs, with Facebook frequently dominating the landscape (Moghavvemi, 2015; Ahmad *et al.*, 2019).

The WhatsApp Business app has also been made available globally for small, medium, and big organizations. By effectively utilizing the app and marketing the business, this application allows enterprises to remain connected with customers and expand their customer base regardless of where

consumers are situated (Susanto, *et al.* 2021). Business men who own SMEs can use WhatsApp to market their products and services in order to realize their profits. By obtaining early access to the platform, businesses can utilize WhatsApp's marketing platform to advertise their products and engage with consumers by both sending and receiving text and media files (Ghanem, 2020). This can be done by getting in touch with businesses that offer WhatsApp Application programming interface (API) and technical assistance to businesses using the platform (Khatun, & Al-Dhlan, 2017).

WhatsApp's capacity to improve communication in a group is one of its unique qualities according to Bouhnik & Deshen (2014). With large group number members, WhatsApp may be used to build mailing lists or groups where messages can be exchanged and reposted. A cell phone might be used to contact 1,000 people if there were four of these kinds of groupings. Mgbeahurike (2015) asserts that a single concept can approach or reach one million individuals in just a few shares. WhatsApp applications have appealing functions like Share, Tag, Comment, Like, Smiley, and more that appeal to a wide variety of age groups. Church and de Oliveira, (2013) pointed out some of the key applicability of WhatsApp and includes the fact that it offers a straightforward and reliable messaging platform, enabling users to instantly share photos, videos, and messages using their phone's Internet connection. The app supports group conversations, allowing multiple individuals to participate simultaneously, with the ability to share various file types like videos, images, documents, and audio. Ling and Lai (2016) elaborate in their research that WhatsApp messaging services exhibit regional variations. They contend that the choice of instant messaging software in a society as a communication medium is influenced by social factors. Opeyemi *et al.* (2018) demonstrates that applications supporting a country's native language differ across nations; for example, WeChat, accommodating Chinese characters, is the preferred choice in China, while an instant messaging service allowing Hindi text characters is favoured in India. This scenario highlights how modern technology encourages users to select a program aligned with their needs and broader societal norms (Wang, Pauleen & Zhang, 2016). According to Ling and Lai (2016), individuals from different geographical areas tend to use channels that align with their social context. Chang and Ian (2014) clarify that customers adapt their media selection to fit their societal environment. Ariffin and Omar (2018) identify friends as a significant factor influencing people to use WhatsApp, as users prefer apps used by their family, friends, and colleagues to stay connected (Khoir & Davison, 2014). Pazos *et al.* (2013) present two factors affecting WhatsApp usage: individual factors related to users' experience, preferences, and proficiency, and environmental factors determining how the local environment influences media use and user choices. The researchers affirm that unfamiliarity with the application can pose challenges during communication, emphasizing the influence of environmental factors on individuals' choice of a messaging app recognized by the local population. For purposes of marketing, individuals must adopt to WhatsApp in their daily activities (Wang, Pauleen & Zhang,

2016). In this case, it is argued by Khoir & Davison (2014) that digital Natives could be having alternative ways in which they integrate this new technology into their day to day lives. However, researchers agree that it is essential for the old to adopt to the new technology of instant messaging like WhatsApp because cognitive age is much more significant than the chronological age when using WhatsApp. By obtaining early access to the app, businesses can utilize WhatsApp's advertising strategies to advertise their products and engage with consumers by transmitting and receiving text and media files (Stone & Logan, 2018). One can accomplish this by getting in touch with businesses that offer WhatsApp Application programming interface and technical assistance to businesses using the platform. (Khatun, & Al-Dhlan, 2017). WhatsApp has released the WhatsApp Smartphone application for small, medium, and big businesses across all sectors. Regardless of where users are located, this application lets businesses to keep in contact with clients and increase their market share by efficiently using the program and advertising the company (Dar, et al 2017).

Several studies (Ghanem & Hamid, 2020; Syaifullah, et al 2021; Atah & Abang, 2022) have showed that social media (including WhatsApp) not only has a positive impact on business performance but also enhance the prospects go transforming the business model. There is however limited evidence to confirm the impact of whatapp alone and its role on SME Performance.

### 3. Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive quantitative survey approach to evaluate the performance of SMEs in Buloba. The population under investigation encompasses 170 SMEs in Buloba. A sample of 120 was determined using the Slovin's formula. The sampling process utilized a simple random method; however, 150 questionnaires were distributed to account for potential nonrespondents. Data collection was carried out through the use of questionnaires, which were structured based on research findings pertaining to technology adoption and SME performance in Buloba.

Validity assessment involves the Content Valid Index (CVI) method, evaluating the questionnaire's quality through SME owner and expert scoring. The study's CVI of 0.76 indicates the instrument's legitimacy. Reliability assessment, drawing from Kasomo, uses the test-retest approach, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.81, signifying consistent research tools. Data collection procedures prioritize ethical considerations, seeking approvals and ensuring participant consent and data confidentiality. Clear directions and collection protocols are established, maintaining data integrity and respondent comfort. Data analysis encompasses editing, cleaning, and coding quantitative data using SPSS. Quantitative analysis utilizes frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulation, with Spearman rank correlation for ordinal scale associations. To establish the effect of WhatsApp Usage on SME Performance in Buloba, we conducted the regression below:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \mu$$

Where: Y = dependent variable,  $\beta_0$  = intercept of Y,  $\beta_1$  = parameter of the independent variables, and  $\mu$  = error term. To estimate the multiple regression models, it was converted as follows:  $SMEP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 WA + \mu$

Where: SMEP= SME Performance, WA = WhatsApp Usage,  $\beta_0$  = Constant or Intercept,  $\beta_1$  = Coefficient of WhatsApp Usage,  $\mu$  = Error term

The determination of the effect of WhatsApp Usage on SME Performance was based on the sign of the slope coefficients ( $\beta_1$ ). Positive and statistically significant slope coefficients within the framework of WhatsApp Usage and SME Performance would indicate that the incorporation of WhatsApp positively affects SME performance. Equally, negative and statistically significant slope coefficients would infer that WhatsApp Usage negatively influences SME performance in the specific context of Buloba Town, Uganda. The a priori expectation for the slope coefficients is anticipated as  $\beta_1 > 0$ . All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of five percent (5%).

## 4. Results

### A. Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of respondents reveals that 50.8% were male, while 49.2% were female, indicating a male-dominated participation in Buloba's SME sector. The majority of respondents (38.3%) were under 25 years old, aligning with Uganda's youthful population. The respondents' educational levels, where 28.2% possessed Bachelor's degrees, suggesting educated youth turning to SMEs due to limited job prospects. Marital status, with 51.7% single, possibly reflecting young entrepreneurs' readiness for risk. The duration of business operations, with 45.8% having less than 5 years of experience, indicating a dynamic landscape. Lastly, 47.5% were business owners, while 52.5% were employed staff, reflecting varied engagement in SMEs, potentially due to evolving opportunities and job market dynamics.

Table 1  
Levels of WhatsApp adoption

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
WhatsApp Adoption	3.73	1.011	High
Skilled Usage	3.79	1.328	High
Platform Following	3.68	1.290	High
Customer Engagement	3.78	1.217	High
Product Marketing	3.66	1.280	High
Customer Ordering	3.71	1.266	High
Average	3.724	1.232	High

Table 1 presents an analysis of the levels of WhatsApp adoption based on mean scores and standard deviations for various aspects. The table suggests that when considering the average score for all items combined, it is 3.724, with a standard deviation of approximately 1.232. This suggests a consistently high overall level of WhatsApp adoption among SMEs in Buloba. The table indicates that respondents have a high level of WhatsApp adoption for various purposes, including skilled usage, platform following, customer engagement, product marketing, and customer ordering. According to the data,

Table 2  
correlation between aspects of WhatsApp adoption and SME performance

Correlations		SME Performance	1	2	3	4	5
<b>SME Performance</b>		1					
Skilled Usage (1)	.368**		1				
Platform Following (2)	.293**	.540**	1				
Customer Engagement (3)	.425**	.471**	.550**	1			
Product Marketing (4)	.417**	.393**	.484**	.712**	1		
Customer Ordering (5)	.394**	.408**	.421**	.689**	.705**	1	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3  
Regression model between aspects of WhatsApp adoption on SME performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.952	.361		5.408	.000
Skilled Usage	.095	.087	.112	1.089	.278
Platform Following	-.104	.101	-.118	-1.024	.308
Customer Engagement	.237	.130	.259	1.822	.071
Product marketing	.180	.130	.195	1.392	.167
customer ordering	.040	.120	.044	.331	.742
R	.454				
R Square	.206				
Adjusted R Square	.172				
F Statistic	5.933				
Sig.	.000				

WhatsApp is evidently an integral platform for SMEs in the Buloba, utilized for a range of business-related activities, including engaging with customers, marketing products, and receiving customer orders.

Table 2 displays correlation coefficients between WhatsApp adoption and various aspects of SME performance. Positive correlations are noted with Skilled Usage (mean = 0.368), Platform Following (mean = 0.293), Customer Engagement (mean = 0.425), Product Marketing (mean = 0.417), and Customer Ordering (mean = 0.394). This implies that higher levels of WhatsApp adoption correspond to improved SME performance.

Table 3 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis assessing the effect the aspects of WhatsApp adoption on SME performance. The overall model is statistically significant ( $F = 5.933$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$ ). Approximately 20.6% of the variance in SME performance is explained by the aspects of WhatsApp adoption. However, only customer engagement shows a marginally significant positive relationship ( $Beta = 0.259$ ,  $Sig. = 0.071$ ) at a significance level of 10%, suggesting that increased engagement with customers through WhatsApp may positively influence SME performance. The other variables—skilled usage, platform following, product marketing, and customer ordering—do not exhibit statistically significant relationships with SME performance at the conventional levels of significance (0.10, 0.05, 0.01).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study confirms several findings. It confirms a high level of WhatsApp adoption among SMEs in Buloba, as reflected by the mean scores for skilled usage, platform following, customer engagement, product marketing, and customer ordering. This suggests that SMEs are extensively using WhatsApp for various business-related activities, showcasing its significance as a communication and marketing tool. Secondly, the positive

correlations between different aspects of WhatsApp adoption and SME performance suggests that higher levels of WhatsApp adoption correspond with better SME performance, highlighting the platform's possible impact on business outcomes. Thirdly and finally, the multiple regression analysis indicates that aspects of WhatsApp adoption collectively explain about 20.6% of the variance in SME performance. Though only customer engagement demonstrates a marginally significant positive relationship, suggesting that increased engagement with customers through WhatsApp may positively influence SME performance.

The findings support the literature suggesting that social media, including WhatsApp, can contribute to improved customer engagement, marketing, and overall business performance (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021; Ghanem & Hamid, 2020; Syaifullah, et al 2021; Atah & Abang, 2022). Studies by Begam, (2020) found out that the usage of WhatsApp as a marketing technique has a considerable impact on SME performance across various firms, it in fact supports the aforementioned conclusion. This is due to the fact that customers presently are more actively using social networking sites for connection than ever before. Hence, because of its extensive network connections, SMEs can no longer disregard their clients' online reviews and knowledge of user-generated information. The nuanced findings of this study further correspond with previous literature that underscores the importance of specific social media activities, such as customer engagement, in driving business success (Sahaym et al., 2021). For instance, Zulqurnain et al. (2016) discovered that WhatsApp is swiftly rising to the top of the list of crucial elements of digital marketing due to its amazing advantages in reaching millions of clients throughout the world. This suggests that any company that does not use WhatsApp is missing out on a huge advertising opportunity because it makes it simple to spread the word about the company's product and goals. There

can therefore be no doubt that social media marketing has significant benefits for both emerging SMEs and well-established ones. Regularly updating the appropriate social media marketing strategy will increase traffic, strengthen brand equity, enhance consumer satisfaction, and do a lot more. Bala and Verma (2018) and others discovered that WhatsApp is one of the least demanding and effective digital marketing platforms that can be used to raise one's company's visibility.

WhatsApp is widely adopted among SMEs in Buloba, with positive correlations between its adoption and various performance indicators as documented in this study. While the overall model is significant, the study emphasizes the importance of customer engagement through WhatsApp for enhanced SME performance. The findings of this study act as the basis for the following recommendations:

1. SMEs should focus on enhancing customer engagement through WhatsApp, as it shows a potential positive impact on performance.
2. Continuous training and education programs should be provided to SMEs to maximize the benefits of WhatsApp adoption in different business aspects.
3. Further research and exploration are needed to understand specific factors influencing the relationships between WhatsApp adoption and SME performance.

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