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https://doi.org/10.38140/com.v30i.9321

ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)

Communitas 2025 30: 1-16

Date submitted:
13 April 2025

Date accepted:
11 November 2025

Date published:
31 December 2025

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WHATSAPP BUSINESS AS A DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TOOL: FACTORS INFLUENCING SUCCESS AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN SMALL AND MICRO-RETAILERS

ABSTRACT

This study explores how South African enterprises utilise WhatsApp Business for stakeholder engagement and identifies the key factors that influence the success of these digital communication strategies, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated digital transformation. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 12 retail enterprises (six micro and six small businesses) across various retail categories in South Africa's Gauteng province. The participants were selected using heterogeneous sampling to capture diverse perspectives. The thematic analysis identified eight key factors influencing successful stakeholder engagement through WhatsApp Business: clear communication objectives; integration with complementary social media platforms; professional yet conversational messaging; consistent communication frequency; personalised interactions; strategic use of WhatsApp Business features; regular measurement of effectiveness; and leveraging the platform's accessibility and affordability. The findings extend stakeholder theory to digital communication as a sub-discipline, demonstrating how WhatsApp Business enables small and micro-retailers to build and maintain stakeholder relationships through strategic communication. The study contributes to understanding how resource-constrained businesses can implement digital engagement strategies effectively.

Keywords: business communication, stakeholder engagement, digital communication, WhatsApp Business, digital engagement, micro-retailers, South Africa, social media, SDG 8, SDG 9

INTRODUCTION

Small and micro enterprises (SMEs) represent 90% of businesses, over 50% of global employment, and contribute up to 40% of the GDP in emerging economies, creating seven out of ten jobs (Mer & Virdi, 2024). In South Africa, SMEs comprise 91% of the officially recognised business entities (Mer & Virdi, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated the shift towards digital platforms, particularly for SMEs struggling to maintain customer relationships during lockdown restrictions. In South Africa, where 92% of small businesses reported an inability to continue operations during the COVID-19 restrictions, digital communication tools became lifelines for business survival.

During 2020, WhatsApp emerged as a dominant communication platform in South Africa, with over 58% of mobile phone users actively engaging with the app (Statista, 2020). This trend continued to grow, and by 2023, 96% of internet users in South Africa preferred WhatsApp for communication, primarily due to its affordability, ease of use, and business-oriented features (Lith, 2023). WhatsApp Business is projected to have 26 million active users by 2026 (*ibid*.). This makes WhatsApp Business an accessible tool for micro and small retailers to engage with customers. Despite its widespread adoption, research on how micro-retailers specifically utilise WhatsApp Business for stakeholder engagement remains limited (Zarouali, De Vreese & Helberger, 2021). This study addresses this gap by investigating the experiences of South African micro-retailers with WhatsApp Business, guided by the following research questions:

1. How do South African micro-retailers use WhatsApp Business for stakeholder engagement?
2. What factors influence the success of these digital communication strategies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the potential of small, medium and micro enterprises to drive economic growth and employment in South Africa, they face considerable challenges in adopting digital technologies (Afolayan & De la Harpe, 2020). Mncube (2025) states that African SME entrepreneurs lack skills such as financial management, HR management, social and interpersonal skills, marketing skills, technological/digital skills, and business management skills. Engaging with clients and other stakeholders digitally has become essential for micro-retailers to remain competitive. Deloitte (2020) highlights that businesses increasingly leverage digital platforms to enhance their strategies and communication, maximising their potential for growth and efficiency. Azionya (2022) refers to the blending of social behaviours and technical systems in digital platforms and illustrates how human interactions and technology have become deeply connected, accelerating how people engage with digital tools. Azionya (2022) further asserts that this joining together has accelerated how fast humans and automated systems produce content and form connections on digital platforms, which are places for interaction. Balchandani *et al*. (2020) emphasise that these platforms are key in attracting consumers, maintaining relationships, and supporting decision-making processes.

WhatsApp Business as a communication platform

WhatsApp Business was launched in 2018 as a dedicated application for small businesses. It offers features specifically designed for business use, including business profiles, catalogues, quick replies, and message labelling tools (Asmayanti *et al*., 2021). The Meta-owned application, WhatsApp Business, enables SMEs to showcase their products and services through a mobile storefront (Meta, 2025). The free app allows small businesses to reach hundreds of customers via a single device with basic customisation options. Users receive 1000 free monthly conversations, with standard pricing applying thereafter as businesses scale their communication (Meta, 2025). A Forrester Consulting study (2024) involving 1231 respondents indicates that messaging platforms provide direct communication channels that facilitate ongoing two-way interaction that benefits brands throughout the customer journey – from initial awareness and conversion to enhanced customer lifetime value and improved retention rates. The direct nature of these interactions enables more targeted follow-up engagement and strengthens post-purchase relationships (Forrester Consulting, 2024).

However, Lith (2023) warns about the possible downsides of using WhatsApp Business:

> These features enable micro-retailers to operate more efficiently despite resource constraints. On the other hand, businesses that have already started using WhatsApp, but in an ad-hoc manner and not as part of an omnichannel platform, risk alienating or angering customers and losing valuable business intellectual property.

Integrating WhatsApp into business communication strategies has proven effective for many SMEs, aligning with the growing customer preference for convenient and familiar platforms (Mustafa *et al*., 2023; Mugarura *et al*., 2023). WhatsApp's instant messaging capabilities facilitate prompt and efficient customer support, enhancing engagement and quick issue resolution. The platform's support for rich media, such as images, videos and documents, allows businesses to provide comprehensive support and to streamline customer service processes (Mustafa *et al*., 2023). Additionally, WhatsApp's integration of automation and chatbots enables SMEs to handle routine enquiries efficiently, freeing up human resources for more complex interactions. With end-to-end encryption, WhatsApp ensures secure communication, addressing privacy concerns and building trust (Ayed & Dawood, 2025). Its widespread use across various regions and demographics further makes it an ideal tool for businesses looking to expand their reach. For SMEs, aligning WhatsApp integration with their overall business objectives and customer journeys is crucial to enhance the customer experience and to foster greater satisfaction and loyalty (Agbolade, 2024; Dankwa & Yeboah, 2025).

Stakeholder engagement through digital platforms

Geibel and Machavariani (2023) and Koilakonda (2023) emphasise that effective stakeholder engagement fosters positive relationships by ensuring that content is strategic, targeted, purposeful, and delivered quickly to build trust. Personalised

brand experiences can influence a positive brand experience (Petruzzellis & Winer, 2023) and consumer purchasing decisions (Bakhshandeh, Sharifi & Rezaei, 2023). For micro-retailers, understanding how to engage consumers through digital platforms is essential for building and maintaining these relationships. Zerfass *et al*. (2018: 493) define strategic communication as follows:

> Strategic communication encompasses all substantial communication for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organisation or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.

Therefore, strategic communication serves as the foundation for stakeholder engagement. Both Jannah (2023) and Rahmadania and Nurhidayat (2023) suggest that WhatsApp Business can strengthen customer relationships through strategic communication. Micro-retailers can deliver relevant and targeted messages by developing a comprehensive understanding of consumer needs (Lindberg & Vermeer, 2019).

Freeman's (1984: 46) oft-cited definition describes stakeholders as "individuals who can impact or be impacted by the accomplishment of the organisational goals". In the context of micro-retailers, consumers represent key stakeholders whose engagement is essential for business success. Freeman, Harrison and Zyglidopoulos (2018) emphasise that optimising stakeholder relationships can enhance productivity and return on investment. Applied to digital communication, stakeholder theory suggests that platforms like WhatsApp Business can serve as tools for managing stakeholder relationships. These platforms enable micro-retailers to better understand and address consumer needs by facilitating direct, personalised communication.

The stakeholder engagement concept emphasises establishing, developing, and maintaining strong relationships with consumers (Limani *et al*., 2024). For micro-retailers using WhatsApp Business, this involves crafting strategic messages that resonate with consumers and encourage interaction, sales or complaint resolution. Rajhans (2018) posits that the cultivation of positive consumer relationships hinges upon the adroit management of expectations and the strategic, timely dissemination of messages, thereby engendering trust. Within this context, WhatsApp Business's functionalities, particularly quick replies and catalogues, present micro-retailers with efficacious mechanisms for sustaining prompt and pertinent communication with their clients.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of SMEs in South Africa, examining how these businesses integrate WhatsApp Business into their operational and communication strategies. Through the rigorous thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, the research illuminates the nuanced ways in which these enterprises navigate the digital transformation landscape, revealing both the opportunities and challenges inherent in adopting this communication technology in the South African retail context. The interpretivist approach gives deep insights into

how these businesses engage with stakeholders through digital platforms. The target population consisted of SMEs in South Africa's Gauteng province that use WhatsApp Business for customer engagement.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF SAMPLE SMEs

Characteristic	Micro enterprises (n=6)	Small enterprises (n=6)
Employee count	0-10 employees	11-50 employees
Annual turnover	≥R7 million	≥R17 million
Retail categories	Dance studio Fashion/Clothing Food/Restaurant Hair and beauty Hair and beauty Transport and storage services	Cleaning services Cleaning services Dance studio Food/Restaurant Kitchen utensils Painting services

A heterogeneous sampling strategy was applied to capture a diverse range of participants. The final sample included 12 businesses: six micro enterprises (0-10 employees) and six small enterprises (11-50 employees) across various retail categories, including hair and beauty, fashion/clothing, food/restaurant, and service-based businesses. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Each interview explored the participants' experiences with WhatsApp Business, including their communication strategies, challenges, and success factors. A pilot study was conducted with two micro-retail entrepreneurs to assess the viability of the interview schedule. Ethical protocols were observed throughout the study, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, the anonymity of participants, and ethics approval.

FINDINGS

Through the analysis, three themes incorporating eight key factors were constructed pertaining to how South African SMEs use WhatsApp Business for stakeholder engagement and the factors influencing their success. The three themes are: (1) strategic communication through WhatsApp Business; (2) building relationships through personalised engagement; and (3) leveraging WhatsApp Business features for efficiency. The eight key factors are: 1) clear communication objectives; 2) integration with complementary social media platforms; 3) professional yet conversational messaging; 4) consistent communication frequency; 5) personalised interactions; 6) strategic use of WhatsApp Business features; 7) regular measurement of effectiveness; and 8) leveraging the platform's accessibility and affordability.

Theme 1: Strategic communication through WhatsApp Business

This theme focuses on how SMEs use some aspects of strategic communication strategy in a digitally mediated space. The small and micro-retailers ensured that they used various objectives linked to strategy. They also used converged media strategies

by integrating various social media platforms and metrics aligned with their strategic communication goals.

Key factor 1: Clear objectives

The participants indicated that they primarily use WhatsApp Business to reach customers and engage with them:

> *To reach more clientele and let more people know about our services.* (P3)

The platform serves as a direct channel for customer communication, allowing micro-retailers to inform customers about products, services, and promotions. A key factor influencing success is the clarity of the strategic communication objectives for engagement. The participants with clear objectives reported more effective engagement strategies.

Key factor 2: Integration with complementary platforms

Most of the participants reported using WhatsApp Business alongside other social media platforms from Meta and others to create a comprehensive digital presence:

> *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.* (P7)

Several participants highlighted the importance of platform integration:

> *I linked the Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp business account to receive messages on both platforms when a message is sent to either Facebook or WhatsApp.* (P6)

The linking of platforms can generate leads and direct traffic:

> *When we run an ad for example on Instagram, there will be a link provided which will direct the person to WhatsApp or Twitter and the Facebook ad.* (P1)

Integrating multiple platforms was identified as a success factor, allowing micro-retailers to reach a wider audience while maintaining consistent messaging across the channels. This approach helps businesses leverage the strengths of each platform while directing customers to WhatsApp Business for more personalised communication.

Key factor 3: Measuring communication effectiveness

The participants used various metrics to assess the effectiveness of their WhatsApp Business engagement strategies. Successful communication was indicated by customer engagement on WhatsApp and connected social media, and in app responses and sales metrics. Customer feedback and reviews are measured in several ways, primarily through follow-up and systematic feedback seeking:

> *I allow them to rate my services that I offer, and I allow them to complain about the services that I have rendered so that I can improve.* (P3)

> *Checking up on them regularly, check if they are happy with their products and to give me reviews, 'post-purchase' reviews.* (P1)

> *I check in on them before … and after they pick up their orders. I usually have a questionnaire on WhatsApp to find out how they find the service I offer them.* (P5)

The sales and engagement metrics include sales, orders placed, likes, event attendance, views and follows on linked social media:

> *I had increased sales and people were buying the products to a point where I ran out of stock. I realised how quickly my products was selling and most people were placing orders immediately.* (P1)

> *We had a massive turnout and response from the customers.* (P12)

> *I upload statuses for interaction, and I get an average of 700-900 views per status update.* (P8)

> *I got a following on social media, got a response and engagement from people.* (P2)

> *We assess the income category if we reach the target that we have. Thirty to 70 percent of students would sign up for it before COVID-19, but things have changed due to COVID-19, and we have a smaller number signing up annually.* (P4)

Conversely, unsuccessful communication was characterised by a lack of engagement:

> *I did not reach the target goal, no engagement, and the audience was not as responsive as I thought they would be.* (P1)

Therefore, the ability to measure and adapt communication strategies based on these metrics is a success factor. The participants who regularly assessed their effectiveness and adjusted accordingly reported more successful engagement outcomes.

Theme 2: Building relationships through personalised engagement

This theme focuses on the moderating effects of the message approaches and their frequency, small and micro-retailers' responsiveness, and the personalisation of engagements to build customer relationships.

Key factor 4: Messaging approach and tone

The findings revealed that successful engagement on WhatsApp Business requires a strategic approach to messaging:

> *I used catchy phrases. For example, 'If you are too lazy, being healthy is a step away' when selling an easy chopper, etc. The posters … shared on the platform … used catchy phrases.* (P12)

Some also use emojis to build rapport and likeability with customers:

> *I make use of emojis, especially the smiley faces. I take note of the language I use; I have to be friendly at all times. It makes them feel safe.* (P6)

The participants emphasised the importance of maintaining a professional yet conversational tone:

> *I take note of the language I use, and I must be friendly at all times.* (P7)

> *We are cautious of the way we communicate to our customers on WhatsApp; we make sure that we are not rude towards our customers … we ensure we greet them and check if they are well rather than just talking about business or getting right straight to business.* (P12)

This balance between professionalism and approachability was identified as a key success factor, as it helps build trust while maintaining a business's credibility.

Key factor 5: Communication frequency and responsiveness

Consistent communication frequency emerged as a critical factor for successful engagement, although there were differences in their availability. Some of the participants indicated that they were available at all hours:

> *We want to be available for enquiries at any time when needed.* (P7)

> *Every single minute. We are on WhatsApp every 24/7.* (P1)

Most of the participants indicated they had cut-off times for engagement, ranging from late at night, during regular business hours, and on specific workdays in Gauteng:

> *From six am to midnight every day, I get messages every two minutes, and I would like to respond to clients faster as they usually get annoyed when I take time to respond.* (P8)

> *I communicate with customers on WhatsApp business daily from 08:00 am until 5 pm. I place orders, rectify and verify orders, and ensure that we send everything to the customers. We plan for the next day, but we make sure that we are online from 08:00 am to 5:00 pm for any new queries and purchase orders or any other things that customers need.* (P2)

The participants also generally set clear boundaries and cut-off times for their availability:

> *Daily, till 9 pm, but we do not communicate during weekends. We want to be available for enquiries at any time when needed.* (P7)

> *I communicate with them on a daily basis from 08:00 until 19:00 on a daily basis. After these hours, I do not respond to questions or enquiries ... I have a specific time because I am trying to manage time.* (P3)

> *Every single day, but not after 09:00 pm.* (P5)

> *After 4:30 pm, I leave an away message to let them know that I will get back to them the following day. I only reply the next day if people send messages after 4 pm.* (P12)

This indicates that setting clear communication schedules helps manage customer expectations and set boundaries for when customers can engage, while ensuring timely responses. Responsiveness was highlighted as a key success factor, with the participants noting that delayed responses often led to customer dissatisfaction. Responding quickly and effectively to customer queries was essential for maintaining positive relationships and growing the enterprise.

Key factor 6: Personalisation and relationship building

The participants emphasised the importance of personalised communication for building and maintaining customer relationships:

> *I usually have one-on-one conversations with my clients and get to know their needs.* (P3)
>
> *We are normally in conversations, (in) direct contact with customers, sending voice notes, sending pictures of their hair, and sharing pictures ... it helps in building relationships and interact(ing) with customers.* (P6)

The participants build authentic connections by focusing on their clients' needs and creating rapport by posting non-business-related content, such as motivational content:

> *I do not only focus on the work I do, but I talk about other general or personal things as well with them, and they end up being my friends.* (P9)
>
> *I engage with them a lot. I do not only advertise my business, but I also post words of encouragement on my WhatsApp statuses, and it works better because people do not think every time I post on the platform, I post only about business, and they would get bored too … To build rapport, it is not enough to not promote the business, but responding to unrelated queries and comments makes the brand less clinical and more personable. I make sure I am not a robot, I respond to other things as well (and) even if they are not business related, I offer advice as well.* (P8)

The ability to engage in dialogue rather than one-way communication emerged as a success factor. The participants who built relationships through personalised interactions reported stronger customer loyalty and engagement.

Theme 3: Leveraging WhatsApp Business's features for engagement

This theme discusses how small and micro-retailers use WhatsApp Business's features to create communicative access and synchronous and asynchronous customer engagement.

Key factor 7: Strategic use of WhatsApp Business's features for engagement

The participants highlighted several WhatsApp Business features that enhance their engagement strategies. The participants identified the labelling feature, the starring feature, the catalogue, and quick replies as helpful tools for managing stakeholder engagement:

> *The labelling feature … helps me to categorise the customers with different colours, and they make it easy for me to prioritise my customers. The starring of messages … helps me not lose messages and to remind myself to inform the customers and to keep them up to date with their purchases. I use catalogues to communicate prices and to save time spent on responding.* (P1)

Automated functionality via status updates and automated responses was also cited as an important feature:

> *The Status Updates keep them updated about the business, what we have to offer and sales, and if we are closing early on a particular day.* (P12)

> *I use quick replies and greeting messages in welcoming and keeping the customers updated.* (P1)

> *I am not online all day, every day, and this* [the automated response feature] *helps to respond to my clients or customers when I am not online.* (P10)

The strategic use of these features emerged as a significant success factor, allowing micro-retailers to organise customer communications, prioritise responses, and save time on routine enquiries.

Key factor 8: Accessibility and affordability

The participants valued WhatsApp Business for its accessibility and affordability:

> *Most people are on WhatsApp, and we will lose clientele because not everyone is on Instagram, and people find it easy to communicate on WhatsApp. It is also affordable as well. People also prefer to buy data or spend on data rather than airtime.* (P11)

> *It is an easy way to communicate. It is fast and allows communication even when you cannot meet with clients. We post quickly; it is private, cost-effective and fast.* (P8)

> *When it comes to affordability, businesses stated their preference for the value of the free version. I think the free version offers everything that I currently need.* (P2)

> *I do not see the advantages or benefits of the paid version, but the free version currently provides enough for us.* (P4)

During lockdown it was primarily used to remove the geographical and physical barriers with their clients:

> *I would communicate easily with the customer and receive information from them as well. It was convenient, and it still is.* (P5)

The platform's widespread adoption among South African consumers is a key advantage, allowing small and micro-retailers to reach a large audience without significant investment. This accessibility is identified as a success factor, particularly for businesses with limited resources for digital marketing.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that WhatsApp Business is valuable for stakeholder engagement among South African micro-retailers. The platform's success factors align with the key principles of stakeholder theory and strategic communication.

Strategic communication through WhatsApp Business

The study confirms that effective stakeholder engagement through WhatsApp Business requires strategic communication. As Zerfass *et al*. (2018) note, strategic communication involves purposeful communication to fulfil organisational objectives. The participants who approached WhatsApp Business with clear objectives and strategic messaging reported more successful engagement outcomes. The findings also reveal that micro and small entrepreneurs strategically utilise social media for three primary marketing functions, namely, communication/promotion, transactions, and customer service to enhance the customer purchasing journey.

Integrating WhatsApp Business with complementary social media platforms aligns with Kalidas, Magwentshu and Rajagopaul's (2020) observation that businesses must leverage multiple digital touchpoints to engage effectively with consumers. The participants who used WhatsApp Business as part of a broader digital strategy reported more comprehensive stakeholder engagement. These findings are consistent with those of Bellaaj (2023), who found that small and micro-retailers selected multiple channels based on their utility, ease of use, cost-effectiveness, enjoyment factor, and widespread adoption among local clients. This integration allows micro-retailers to leverage the strengths of different platforms while maintaining consistent messaging across channels. Due to their use of the free version of WhatsApp Business, most small and micro-retailers could not integrate the WhatsApp API with third-party applications that would assist with a dashboard for tracking engagement metrics within the application. Micro and small entrepreneurs can scale their platform integration and significantly improve metrics. ChatArchitect (2025) states that recent data from HubSpot indicates that organisations implementing multiple messaging channels experience significant benefits, with over two-thirds reporting enhanced customer satisfaction and response times, decreasing by more than a third through unified messaging approaches. Integrating these communication platforms enables a comprehensive multichannel strategy that optimises audience engagement whilst ensuring consistent and reliable message delivery. Nonetheless, due to their strategic communication, small and micro-retailers use a range of rudimentary and fit-for-purpose ways of measuring their prospecting, sales, and customer support initiatives.

Building relationships through personalised engagement

This study's findings support Freeman *et al*.'s (2018) emphasis on the importance of relationship building in stakeholder engagement. The participants who engaged in personalised communication and customer dialogue reported stronger relationships and customer loyalty. This concurs with Dutta and Arivazhagan's (2024) observation that personalised content on WhatsApp Business can increase customer loyalty.

The ability of WhatsApp Business to facilitate one-on-one direct conversations enables micro-retailers to deliver tailored messages that resonate with individual customers. Similar to Bellaaj's (2023) findings, small and micro-retailers in this study use WhatsApp Business as a direct communication channel. The message approaches and tone of communication are also important in driving engagement. The importance of professionalised communication which was highlighted by the participants resonates with Gonzalez and Arrojo's (2019) assertion that digital platforms require a strategic approach to messaging. The balance between professional and conversational tones enables micro-retailers to build credibility while maintaining approachability. The findings emphasise the importance of what type of communication and how communication occurs in WhatsApp, aligning with the findings of Petrocchi *et al*. (2020), who found that message content and presentation significantly influence assessing how reachable and responsive a communication partner is in digital communication. Their study (*ibid*.) revealed that empathic, accurate responses (message valence) and the inclusion of emojis (modality) enhanced both perceived and subjective social presence. The current study also identified the inclusion of emojis to increase connection. Emojis further help reduce the likelihood of the misinterpretations of messages without facial and voice cues.

The study revealed that the participants identified prompt communication as a key element for success, emphasising that customers frequently expressed dissatisfaction when replies were not timely. This corroborates with the findings of Petrocchi *et al*. (2020) that immediate responses (synchronicity) increased perceived accessibility and responsiveness in digital interactions. Both studies underscore how message delivery timing substantially shapes interpersonal communication and engagement in WhatsApp-mediated communication, with promptness being essential for maintaining positive customer engagement.

Leveraging WhatsApp Business's features for efficiency

The strategic use of WhatsApp Business features was identified as a significant success factor. These features allow micro-retailers to organise and prioritise customer communications despite limited resources. This efficiency is crucial for micro-retailers lacking dedicated customer service teams. This finding accords with Lindberg and Vermeer's (2019) assertion that accessing and managing customer data throughout the interaction process is essential for delivering relevant and targeted messages throughout the customer journey in digital contexts. WhatsApp Business features, such as labelling and starring messages, enable micro-retailers to track customer interactions and respond appropriately. The accessibility, widespread consumer adoption, intuitive user interface, and affordability (free version) of WhatsApp Business are characteristics that appeal to entrepreneurs in emerging markets (Bellaaj, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how South African micro-retailers use WhatsApp Business for stakeholder engagement and identified eight key factors that influence the success of these digital communication strategies. The findings reveal that WhatsApp Business

is an accessible and effective tool for building and maintaining customer relationships. The use of clear communication objectives improves engagement. Specifically, micro-retailers with defined goals for their WhatsApp Business engagement report more effective strategies. The findings indicate that successful engagement often involves using WhatsApp Business alongside other social media platforms to create a comprehensive digital presence. The tonality of interactions also plays a role. Micro businesses must find ways to balance professionalism and approachability to build trust while maintaining credibility with their stakeholders. Consistent communication frequency and personalised interactions that engage stakeholders in dialogue rather than one-way communication strengthen customer relationships. Regularly assessing engagement metrics and adapting strategies improves outcomes to leverage WhatsApp's widespread adoption among South African consumers and maximise reach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, we recommend that South African micro-retailers develop clear objectives for their WhatsApp Business engagement, integrate it with complementary platforms, maintain a balance between a professionalism and conversational tone, establish consistent communication schedules, prioritise personalised customer interactions, utilise platform features strategically, regularly measure effectiveness, and leverage WhatsApp's widespread adoption to maximise reach. This study addresses a gap in research on how micro-retailers specifically utilise WhatsApp Business for stakeholder engagement. It provides empirical evidence of digital communication practices among South African micro-retailers and identifies critical success factors that can inform both business practice and future research.

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