

Citation: Macharia, S. M, Obuya, J & Mulwo, A. (2021). Communication of Social Messages in Task-Oriented Instant Messaging Groups: A Netnographic Study of Farmers' WhatsApp Groups in Kenya. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*. 5(10), 184 – 207.

Communication of Social Messages in Task-Oriented Instant Messaging Groups: A Netnographic Study of Farmers' WhatsApp Groups in Kenya

By

Stephen Mwangi Macharia*(corresponding author), Obuya, J and Mulwo, A.

Abstract

Group communication through online platforms has become a popular practice since the advent of instant messaging platforms. Communication on those online groups differs from communication in face to face contexts. Facial expressions in face to face communication dynamically transmit information-rich social messages while online communication is built on constrained social cues. To make up for the missing non-verbal cues, members of online groups ostensibly post social messages on their instant messaging platforms. In some sections of literature, social messages have been found to be damaging to outcomes of task-oriented online groups while other scholars have found them beneficial. Extant literature has not outlined the specific types of social messages that are beneficial to group communication. Drawing on observation of messages posted on five WhatsApp groups for farmers in Kenya, this netnographic study sought to answer the following two research questions: 1). How do members of farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya respond to social messages posted on their forums? 2. What specific types of social messages are associated with anticipated patterns of communication? The findings of the study indicate that although group members respond to posting of social messages with disdain and disapproval, certain specific types of social messages may have positive outcomes on the groups. Such messages include humour related to the task, goodwill messages, greetings, appreciation and congratulatory messages. In terms of practical implications, the data suggest that although task-oriented messages take precedence, there is need for WhatsApp group gate-keepers to allow members to post acceptable types of social messages. Communication for development practitioners should pay more attention to setting group communication rules that encourage group members to post both acceptable social messages alongside task related messages. Such messages have been associated with impetus for members to engage on task-related communication.

Keywords: Kenya, Social messages, task messages, netnography, WhatsApp groups, instant messaging

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Introduction

Group communication through online platforms has become a popular practice since the advent of instant messaging platforms. The content of communication within such instant messaging groups comprises task-oriented and social interaction which are pertinent to the sustainability of communication (Beck et al., 2017). In this study, we investigated the communication of social messages in task-oriented instant messaging (IM) groups, with a specific focus on farmers' groups on the WhatsApp platform in Kenya. We adopted Peña and Hancock's (2006) definition of task-oriented communication as messages comprised of opinions, questions and answers aimed at completing a procedure and are assumed to have a neutral affective valence. Task messages relate to important group objectives and outcomes and have also been referred to as instrumental communication (Keyton, 2000). On the other hand, a social message is a statement or part of a statement not related to the formal content of subject matter (Henri, 1992). Social messages comprise relational communication, meant for recreation and tension release with information of an interpersonal nature (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). They have also been referred to as relational messages, affective messages and non-task communication (Kraut, Fish, Root, & Chalfonte, 1990; Walther, Bunz, & Bazarova, 2005; Yoo & Alavi, 2001).

Communication on online groups differs from communication in face to face contexts. Facial expressions in face to face communication dynamically transmit information-rich social messages (Chen et al., 2020) while online communication is built on constrained social cues (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). While there have been scholarly debates on the ideal content of messages in task-oriented online groups, some contexts favour posting of task-oriented messages exclusively. For instance in a study on improving air traffic controller existing research on communication emphasizes posting mostly task-related messages (Kang, Han, & Lee, 2017). On the other hand, scholars have advocated for integration of social messages in task-oriented communication (Stephenson Beck et al., 2017; Marlow, Lacerenza, & Salas, 2017).

Social messages create a social environment within IM groups. Coppola et al., (2004) identify a positive social atmosphere, coupled with predictable communication patterns as essential ingredients for group success. Howirtz, Bravington and Silvis express similar views (2006). Nov (2007) identifies making fun, which is an indicator of social presence as a motivator for participation in IM groups. Messages that emphasize social interaction have been found to significantly increase participation (Harper et al., 2007; Sahib & Vassileva, 2009; Violi et al., 2011). Malinen (2016) observes that members of an IM group value interesting content and people and are unlikely to visit online sites when these are not achieved. Reduced social cues in online group communication as compared to face-face communication is likely to inhibit frequent participation since feelings of acceptance and belonging are not available in the context of virtual groups (Chang & Hsu, 2016; Reio & Crim, 2013; Riegelsberger, Sasse, Angela, & McCarthy, 2005).

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Statement of the Problem

Communication on online platforms has become a norm in social and work-related settings. Savicki and Kelley (2000) stress on the need for scholars to study communication in these virtual groups to provide our increasingly network-based society with information that will augment the functioning of computer mediated communication. In regard to communication of social and task messages, Kang, Han and Lee (2017) call for meaningful future research with studies that examine group members' reactions to messages in various industries. As farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya comprise of members with varying demographics, misalignment of social and task-related messages may end up offending some group members

From a theoretical perspective, the social presence theory advocates that the design of an IM should be as close to face-to-face communication as possible (Pavlou, Liang, & Xue, 2007). Ramirez et al., (2008) observe that social of presence is an essential but often neglected aspect of mediated communication that accounts for the level of satisfaction of individuals interacting in an online conversation. This is a position advanced by another scholar who explains that the first approach for sustaining and enabling online group discussions is to advance and maintain social presence in the communication done in the group forums (Rovai, 2007).

The role of social messages on task communication remains an empirical gap that the current study sought to fill. Wang, Sanjay and Leskovec, (2012) invite scholars for further investigation into the relationship between the content of group messages and interaction geared towards meeting the objectives of the group meaningful for future research. Existing studies do not take the type of social messages posted into account and Beck, Paskewitz, Anderson, Bourdeaux, & Mueller (2017) opine that analyzing trends of messages and social support types over time may offer more insight on communication of relational and messages. The purpose of this study was to investigate the acceptable social messages in task-oriented instant messaging groups in farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya. The study sought to find answers to the following research questions: 1). How do members of farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya respond to social messages posted on their forums? 2. What specific types of social messages are associated with anticipated patterns of communication?

Review of Related Literature

Madrid-Morales and Ileri (2021) explain that in the context of group communications, mobile phones enable users in Africa to use popular apps such as WhatsApp, exchange texts, and to access social media sites like Facebook for information, entertainment, communication, and social interaction. Kenya ranks first in Africa in terms of internet use (Statista, 2020). As internet penetration continues to rise in the country, digital media has also become widespread. According to a report by the Bloggers Association of Kenya (Bake, 2020), WhatsApp was the most downloaded instant messaging application in Kenya in 2019, with millions of users daily. The report indicates that WhatsApp leads in penetration rates of social media in Kenya ahead of Youtube (8 million), Facebook (7.1 million) and Instagram (4 million), among others. Another recent report indicates that A majority of Kenyans in the rural areas, where farming is mainly practiced, use WhatsApp (Wamuyu, 2020). The popularity of WhatsApp can be attributed to its ease of use and affordability.

According to CAK (2019) reports, internet usage in Kenya continues to soar, boasting more than 46 million mobile phone subscribers and 42 million data/internet subscribers. All the sectors of the economy use technology and agriculture, which forms the largest part of the GDP (KNBS, 2018), has not been left behind. People have formed online groups to maintain

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friendship and family ties, seek entertainment and exchange thoughts and ideas. These diverse areas of usage affirm the centrality and capability of the WhatsApp platform to foster socio-economic development in the country. In Kenya, the use of IMs, specifically WhatsApp rose significantly in 2018 leading to a decline in the use of international telephone traffic as well as mobile short messaging service (KNBS, 2018). In the previous year, statistics indicated that over 55 per cent of Kenyans were using WhatsApp IM platform (KNBS, 2017). This is a testament to the popularity of IM use in Kenya, which cuts across all the sectors of development.

The decentralized nature and ability to share information with a large number of people have made new ICTs, such as instant messaging apps, well suited for grassroots mobilization (Ndlela & Mulwo, 2017). With the burgeoning popularity of Whatsapp in Kenya, it has become a tool for not only social communication but also for interaction within formal and task-oriented activities in areas that include health communication, education, business and government ministries among others. An estimated half of mobile phone users in the country use WhatsApp to communicate either one on one, one to many or many to many levels in the country (Henry, Winters, Lakati, Oliver, Geniets, & Mbae, 2016). WhatsApp is also used for both task and social purposes. When used in task-oriented contexts, the question of whether messages should be task-related, socially-related, or whether both will suffice arises.

Methods

We used a netnographic strategy of inquiry in this study. Based on the nature of my research question, netnography was the most suitable method to rigorously collect and analyse interaction in instant messaging groups. Understanding the communication of task and social messages on WhatsApp groups over a period of time required a research method that would enable me to conduct an online ethnography. This method brought to this study a clear set of steps and procedures that we followed.

These steps include entrée, data collection, data analysis and research ethics (Bratucu, Gheorghe, Radu, & Purcarea, 2014). In view of that, we started this study with the entrée stage. The principal researcher was a member in each of the five WhatsApp groups under investigation before the study began. As advised by Kozinets(2010), entrée can either make or break interactions; a researcher can be rejected by the group if he or she does not understand the traditions or customs of the community under investigation. It was therefore imperative, as a first step to ease entry into the groups we were studying by forming a relationship with the members as well as learning the dos and don'ts of the group. Scholars suggest 'lurking' as a suitable entry point (Beaulieu, 2004; Given, 2008; Kozinets, 2010; Schaap, 2002; Shoham, 2004). At the entrée stage, we gathered relevant information about the culture and posting behaviour of the groups under focus through lurking.

Being a participant-observation research, in a netnography data collection involves a direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings (Bowler, 2010). In the current study, we read observed the messages posted on the five WhatsApp groups for farmers for a period of one year. As we did this, we recorded field notes that provided essential details that were useful when analysing data. We also extracted some useful message threads as screen-shots and recorded them on a Microsoft Word document. The collected data was analysed thematically through the manual steps described by Braun and Clarke (2013) that included reading data to have a general idea of the content and identifying social message

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and taking notes on the response of group members to such messages. The data was thereafter put into categories according to the emerging themes. Similar themes were grouped together and used to reflect the issues under investigation in line with the research questions of the study.

Similar to other studies relying on data gathered from online spaces this netnographic investigation raised some unique ethical concerns that we needed to address to ensure that data collection and reporting avoided any potential harm to individuals or groups. While studying WhatsApp groups, we expected to encounter some practical difficulties and controversial ethical positions. Whether consent needs to be obtained from individual contributors or from system administrators is fraught with uncertainty and in that case, information that is treated as public data may not require obtaining informed consent (Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope, 2017). Traditional ethical guidelines could not be applied in this context. The application of traditional ethical standards in studying online communication is contentious (Grinyer, 2007). Lester (2020) observes that a critical ethical consideration when doing research on digital platforms is whether a researcher does or perhaps more importantly should orient to digital spaces as public or private contexts and the implication on whether informed consent should be sought or not. To navigate the ethical conundrums of collecting participant data on WhatsApp groups, we treated those groups as public spaces. This is informed by Markham and Buchanan (2015) who advise that on digital platforms, individuals' data and messages are constant and public while personal information is globally distributed, implying that what one may consider as private is actually public data. Also, we considered that there was no risk of harm to members of WhatsApp we studied especially because the content they posted was not sensitive. We anonymised the groups and the members and removed any personal identifiers such as phone numbers and names.

Findings

This section of the article presents the findings of the research, focusing on the key themes that emerge from the gathered data. In general, the findings point at a strong desire by members of the WhatsApp groups to focus on task messages exclusively. Their response to social messages shows disapproval and indifference. Contrary to this desire by members of those groups to keep away from posting social messages, there is an emerging inextricable connection between task and social messages in group communication. The findings demonstrate that there are certain types of social messages that are associated with better group communication outcomes.

Disapproval of social messages

In light of the first research question that sought to investigate how members of farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya respond to social messages posted on their forums data gathered through observation shows that social messages are detested and posting them is challenged by group members.

Across the groups, the group members whose messages were studied expressed disdain and disapproval of social messages posted on their platforms. They were categorical on the notion that such messages are not only distractive but also a source of conflict between members. The formed group communication rules that were meant to meet the members' need for a communication environment devoid of social messages. For instance, in the PLC group, a member responds to rules against social posts, praising the administrator for keeping people posting social messages at bay. They viewed social messages as an avenue to a

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communication environment where gatekeeping is no longer effective and the desire to remain focused on the task is hindered by their disruptive and unpredictable nature.

This is very good at least notify members and it seems unstructured well enough. I was kicked out of a group that had no objectives or even rules and regulations that I had been placed. I wasn't given a warning or notification. Just removed. Keep it up. (PLC 16)

In the same group, a member posts a social message that angers members and the administrator. The administrator remarks: “*Jean, this is a poultry group. This should be the last warning. Read the rules.”(PLC 17)

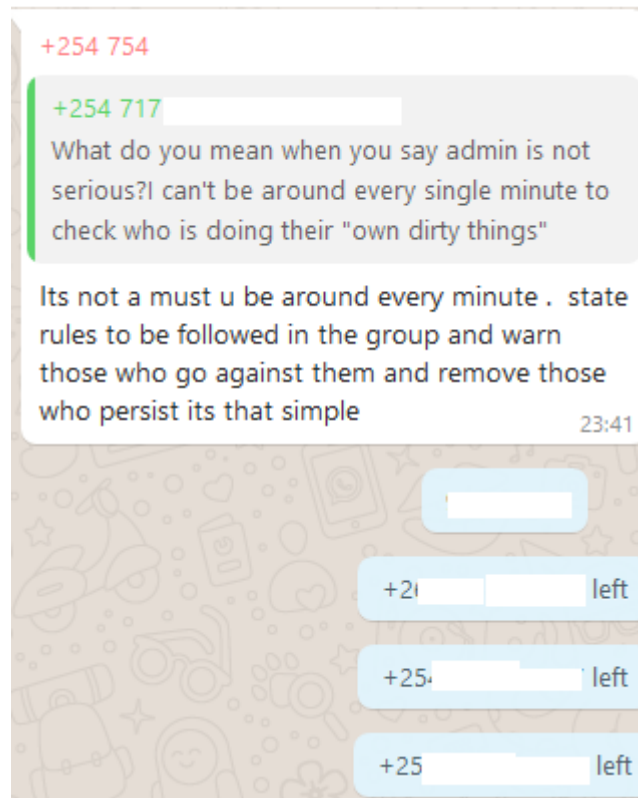
The response by the group administrators to that social message among others is evidence of their disdain for such messages. A similar reaction is seen in other groups, such as VPE when a member sends a social message on the subject of student indiscipline in schools, he gets the response that it was a good read but in the wrong forum. Still in VPE, a social message receives the wrath of members. Some leave the group immediately after that post while another remark with a reminder that the offending member should adhere to the rules and that they only discuss matters to do with chicken on that group. The exclamation marks used on the comment above meant to emphasize the irritation of the aggrieved member by that message. After that message, two more responses and several members leaving the group indicated members' disapproval of such messages.

Shame on you. (VPE 17)

Geoffrey, I think is the high time you becomes mature, you shud b (sic) ashamed of yourself (VPE 18)

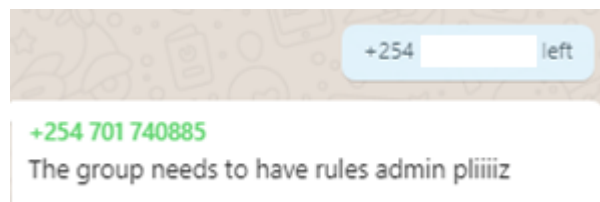
Besides those responses, patterns emerging in the other groups indicated that members responded to most social messages by leaving the groups or withdrawing from active participation. A case in point is the VPE group. There is a verbal altercation between members after one of them sends a social message. Eventually, a number of people leave the group as shown on the thread below:

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(VPE 18)

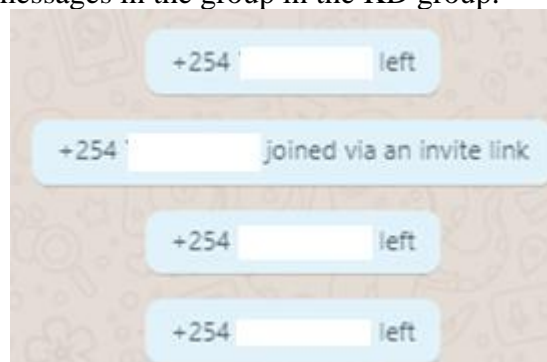
Still in the VPE group, members respond by leaving the group in several other occurrences of social messages.



(VPE 19)

The response by a member of the group on the above screenshot comes after a member leaves the group in protest over a social message that had been posted.

Besides those members who left after the thread above, scores of others left in protests against the posting of social messages in the group in the KD group.



KD 13

In the PLC group, after members spent some days posting social messages, a number of them responded by leaving from the group. In other instances, the administrator complained of

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diminishing activity after noticing a lull in posting activity and acted by calling members to act as indicated below:

PLC 10. Administrator: And by the way...*wakulima mmekimya sana*..(Farmers, you are so quiet) Just wondering is everything sailing OK..how is the poultry business taking our farmers? Any challenges so far?

PLC 11. Administrator: Remember December is the month to reap big in terms of poultry meat and eggs..*leteni*(bring) ideas.

The administrator of PLC keeps reminding members about the rules of the group. The more he enforces the rule, the more my observations of communication trends suggest that members are shying off from posting messages as indicated by the thread below:



The last statement on this thread shows the concern of the administrator over declining member participation. This finding suggests that task communication in an environment where no social messages are allowed can potentially discourage group members from participating through posting messages on the group.

In VPE as well as other groups, as more and more members were removed from the group after flouting the rules against posting social messages, conversation fizzled out. There was minimal interaction with only two people engaging in dialogue. The messages posted changed from debates and conversations about poultry farming to the posting of farming-related photos, posters and advertisements of products, which did not elicit comments from members.

Similarly, in DFK, after social messages become the norm of communication in the group, some members leave the group while others make comments such as;

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DFK 12

Other messages with a similar indication of member apathy after long durations of task messages include:

Hi. Good morning. Just wondering, are the farmers in this forum fulltime farmers or what are they.??? Am asking because the participation here is too low, there is no flow of chatting & the sharing of experiences is very minimal. *Ama watu wanaogopana*(are people afraid of one another)...???

Being quiet is what will make you more scared. One should share, ask questions, get answered by experts & in the process, we all learn. That's the beauty of a forum coz those who know educate others & those who don't know to learn.(PLC 14)

At one moment in the same group, the administrator calls people by their names to ask them to participate in group debates on farming. Even after making such an effort, one person leaves the group and no-one responds. This finding indicates the withdrawal of members from the active posting of messages due to dissatisfaction with the previous messages shared. This pattern emerges in all the groups that allow members to post social messages unabated. In another group, KD, members are concerned about the inactivity in the group. One of them makes the following comment:

It's called NATO No Action Talk Only. We would rather talk less, act more. Sometimes even shooting in the dark is shooting, you may hit the bully's eye without knowing. Someone was training farmers in Kinangop and after the training was done one of the farmers stood and asked, "After all the Githungu (read English) what my business is? How will the Githungu benefit my business? We would rather do baby steps. Let's think big, start small and start now. Some proposed way forward will ensure our life span beyond our daily interactions within the group. Who will bell the cat?

Besides the pattern on member apathy, social messages are also followed by mass exits from the groups.

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After a member sends a social message promoting betting, other members express dissatisfaction with one of them stating in a message that he wishes he was a group administrator so that he could take action against the member who had posted that message. This remark indicates that if the member who posted it had powers to reprimand the other member who posted an offending message, they would do so.

This finding, therefore, suggests that task communication in an environment where no social messages are allowed can potentially discourage group members from participating through posting messages on the group. The trends in the communication of social and task messages show that enforcing rules on refraining from posting social messages points to a trend of reduced interactions on both social and task messages. Members and administrators of the two groups expressed dissatisfaction and reprimanded violators of the regulation on strict adherence to the posting of task messages. This response differed between the groups, depending on whether they enforced the regulations on content to be posted or not. To a large extent, the interviewees observed that there were more drawbacks than benefits derived from engaging in social messages.

Acceptable social messages

In light of the second research question that investigated the specific types of social messages associated with positive group outcomes?

Although posting social messages attracted the wrath of administrators and some members of the groups, some social messages elicited favourable feedback and generated a warm and friendly environment for communication. The patterns of communication we observed suggest that not all social messages elicited an unfavourable response from group members.

Humour related to the task

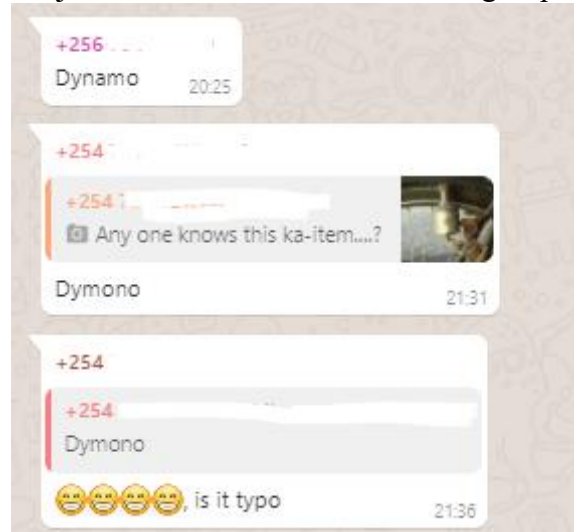
Firstly, we found humour related to the task to be a staple in the group communication. Such humour was applauded. It elicited interest and interaction from members. For instance, in the PLC group, the following message elicited interest from group members.



The group members were excited by the misspelling of the word 'fleas'. Although humour from that expression was not deliberate, it elicited positive comments and stirred the group

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into action as they jokingly interrogated whether the member who posted was interested in 'fleece' or 'fleas'. A similar joke was celebrated in two other groups.



The posts above stirred the group into a frenzied mood as they sent emojis to express excitement over the misspellings of the words *ontouched* (*untouched*), *dymono* (*dynamo*) and *sucks* (*sacks*). The context of the misspelling of '*ontouched*' brought out the humour, since it was posted by a scammer who masqueraded as a serious investor and yet he could not express himself in properly spelt English words. The second one '*dynamo*' was humorous since the misspelling referred to a 'demon' in local vernacular. This type of humour was received without any resistance from group members and administrators.

In some instances, when humour was not related to the task, members would find a way of making it fit into the required content and avoid the wrath of the other members and the gatekeeper. In one instance, one member posts a story about baboons and monkeys that heard rumours that a man who used to chase them away from a maize field had died. The story ended with a conclusion that although the animals celebrated the death of the man, maize was not planted the following year hence they died of starvation. The narrator of the story had to make it suit the context of the group by stating that maize farmers in the country are in the same situation at the moment.

Another instance of humour was posted on the KD platform at the centre of a debate on dairy farming. It was received warmly and the debate on farming continued when the celebration of the humorous post was over as shown below:

Well to be perfectly honest, in my humble opinion, of course without offending anyone who thinks differently from my point of view, but also by looking into this matter in a different perspective and without being condemning of one's view and by trying to make it objectified, and by considering each and everyone's valid opinion, I honestly believe that I completely forgot what I was going to say. (KD 16)

Good humour but spot on. (KD 17)

KD group was focused on posting social messages and emphasized on following that cardinal rule. Nevertheless, a humorous post still found its way into the conversations and received a positive response from group members. Posting at a time when sugar in Kenya was said to be contaminated with mercury, one member posted a humorous message indicating that if one

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felt weird each time temperature changed, it was the mercury they had consumed that was adjusting to the new temperature in their bodies. The group members applauded that humorous statement and described it as creative humour.

The strict posting policy in the KD group notwithstanding, their administrator sent a humorous goodwill message during the Christmas period and it received overwhelming applause from the group as indicated below.

As a Co-Admin of this group virtue of the powers vested on me, according to section 3 subsection 5 of Article A subsection 2 chapter 7a paragraph 9 of Whatsapp and Social Media Act of 2012, read together with constitutional amendment 4 of 2013, section 6 of paragraph 8, and as supported by the already submitted primary evidence V11 Forms, I humbly hereby Wish you ALL a Merry Christmas and a Fruitful 2019. (KD 12)

Hahahahahaa, Dr XYZ, learned friend, thank you so much for the message of goodwill. Well received your honours. (KD 13)

Inspirational messages

In addition to humour, inspirational messages related to the task or success in farming were also accommodated. For instance, in the PLC group, a member shared daily newspapers in pdf format on the group platform. The group administrator was opposed to sharing such content since it is not related to farming. The following statements demonstrate the response of other group members to posting of a newspaper on the group platform:

It's just ridiculous that a newspaper can elicit a reaction as this. That's weird and unfortunate. Sending a newspaper has no harm whatsoever. (PLC 14)

Information is power! Irrespective of the headlines on newspapers, deep inside lies so much information one can learn from. (PLC 15)

Information is power! Irrespective of the headlines on newspapers, deep inside lies so much information one can learn from. (PLC 16)

This message is followed by a thread of posts celebrating and acknowledging the pleasure of reading the posted newspapers.

Social messages posted with a disclaimer

Furthermore, social messages are acceptable to group members and administrators if the member posting issues a disclaimer. In PLC group, a member posted a poster, sensitizing members about a medical camp but accompanied it with a disclaimer, followed by a response from the gatekeeper that gave the member a green light to post whatever information he wanted to post. Moreover, social messages on security warnings, accidents and avoiding risks are acceptable within the groups. For instance, when Kenya was attacked by terrorists at Dusit II hotel, the groups under study took time to warn members about their safety and this was acceptable across the groups. More warnings about impending flooding and other natural calamities were accepted by members and tolerated.

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Welfare messages

In addition to that, social messages that support the welfare of individual group members were acceptable across the groups. Members appreciated social-emotional messages of goodwill directed at those who had been appointed to certain positions of leadership in their careers. In the KD group, for instance, a member who was appointed to a position in government received a barrage of congratulatory messages. These messages lit up interaction in the group. Members of that group also teamed up to mourn the death of one of them. They go to an extent of spending days paying tribute to the deceased and even organised a fundraiser to support his family. Such messages do not face or raise any criticism from the members and group gatekeepers. This is an indicator of the need for the welfare of members to be addressed through social messages in such groups. Also, motivational and inspiring messages were accepted across the groups. A motivational message such as the one below is tolerated in the strict KD group as well as others.

In numerous instances, group members expressed sympathy with certain members who had been bereaved. They offered social support through messages of hope and encouragement and even went ahead to organise fundraising activities in support of such a cause. Seasonal good-will messages that were posted during holidays and national days were also accommodated by group members. Group members across the five groups could not resist from posting social messages completely. When put to task to withdraw the messages and apologise, they would craft ways of relating the messages to farming in order to make them relevant to the group. The following cases demonstrate that trend:

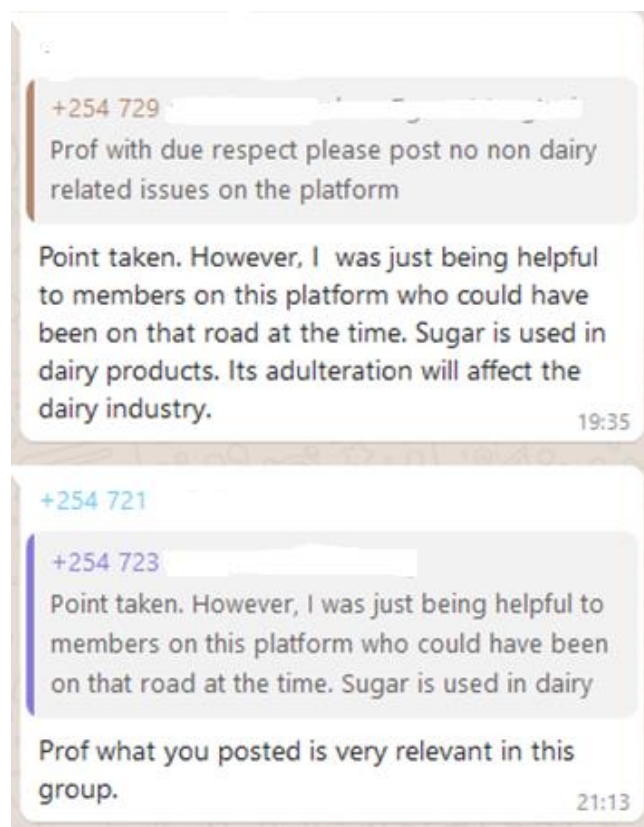
KD 17: (after posting a photo on corruption) Bwana Lazsen*, plz note that this post is not for this platform.

KD 18: (response) Corruption or ethical practice in the dairy industry can be enforced by the administration or leadership. Just the way the admin does here. You warn and punish repeated malpractice. So the buck stops with the executive. If our admin is weak or lax, we shall post every manner of material here.

KD 19: Sorry for this post but it could probably be relevant to dairy in one way or the other.

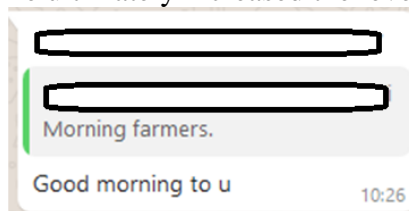
KD 19 is posted after a political message that is remotely related to farming. Another religious message receives the remark that that is a wrong forum to post such a message. To further make the gatekeepers allow social messages, a member posted a message on a lorry ferrying sugar that had overturned on a certain road and the following exchange ensued:

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Although KD group as we had pointed earlier has strictly restricted posting of social messages, group members tactfully justify almost any other message to make it relevant to the task. After a duration of time, social messages started creeping in slowly, with the group sometimes spending more time on social activity than on task. This points at the inevitability of social messages in the groups. As members engage more and more on social messages, communication on task is put on the back burner.

Greetings, appreciation and other goodwill messages were allowed across the groups. In the morning, numerous members would send greetings and they would receive favourable responses. Such messages improved relations and enthused members to post more messages on the group platforms while ultimately increased the levels of participation.



(PLC 12)

Brief biblical or religious quotes were relatively condoned in the groups. However, quite often than not, members did not comment on such posts, indicating that although they were not infuriated by those messages, they were not interested in advancing debates on them either.

Although we have argued that some social messages were permissible even in the strictest of the groups, we observed that some of such messages were not acceptable. The prominence of scolding of people who posted such messages was an indication that group members did not perceive them as acceptable. There were instances where as a result of posting unacceptable messages the group administrator would eject the concerned members

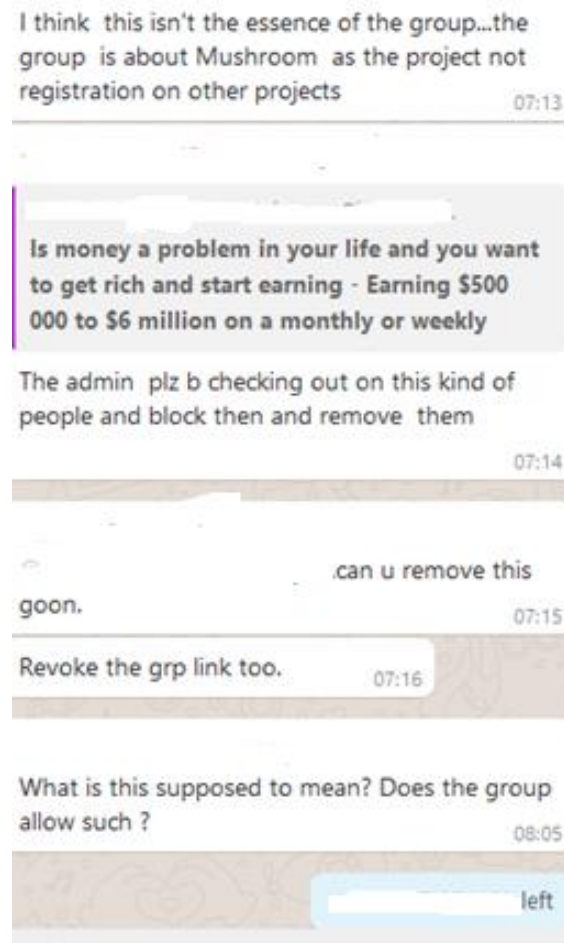
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from the group. Across the five groups, among the unacceptable social messages were those comprising of sensitive or taboo topics and some religious messages too. After a member posted religious messages a number of times, the following exchange ensued:



Promotional messages that aim at marketing products such as betting companies, bitcoin trading and merchandise that is not related to farming are not tolerated by the members of the PLC group. Members react to such messages by urging the administrators to remove the people posting such messages from the group. Some members leave the group to express their dissatisfaction with the messages sent. Below is an example of such incidence where a member quits the group while others ask the administrator to take action.

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The patterns of messages from the groups above suggest that posting social messages is inevitable even in the groups that enforce the rule on sticking to task messages. Data also suggests that some social messages are acceptable across the groups and in many instances, they fuel member participation in those groups. Nevertheless, the type or content of such messages matter.

Discussion

In groups that allow certain social messages to be posted over time, members create an environment full of warmth and a friendly environment that builds trust and motivates members to participate more in task-oriented communication. From the inevitability of social messages, we can deduce that in communicating task-messages, WhatsApp group members adapt their overall communication to mimic face to face communication where the social cues cannot be 'switched off' or regulated against. This observation is mirrored by (Fay, 2004) who observes that social messages meet the interpersonal communication needs of members.

Data suggests an inextricable connection between task and social messages in farmers' WhatsApp group communication. This is in contrast to (Hou & Wu, 2011; Yücel & Usluel, 2016) who considered posting predominantly task-oriented messages as an ingredient for better group outcomes. The findings of this study further reveal that communication of either social and task or task-oriented messages exclusively matters in the sustainability of communication within WhatsApp groups.

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Furthermore, for the farmers' WhatsApp group members to participate in communication optimally, the group should strike a balance between posting acceptable social and task-oriented messages. The inevitability of social messages in farmers' WhatsApp groups that regulate against such messages is an indicator that both task and social messages are pertinent to all forms of group interaction. This is a position mirrored by Beck, Paskewitz, Anderson, Bourdeaux, & Mueller (2017). Viewed with this lens, social messages are chosen by group members to accomplish both task and relational goals. Certain types of social messages alongside task messages solidify group conversations by increasing member participation.

Media richness theory by Daft and Lengel (1986), which is part of the theoretical lenses that informed this study, is concerned with richness and leanness of a medium providing a basic assumption that computer-mediated communications transmit less naturalness in terms of the social cues available in interpersonal encounters. This implies that in online communication, people exhibit less or fewer of their usual group communication habits such as exchanging social messages. Richness is not so much about the medium per se but how group members use it. Users of a medium have the ability to make it richer or leaner (Ferry, Kydd, & Sawyer, 2001). The groups that stick to posting tasking messages only make their communication lean and hence the group suffer from the effects of reduced member satisfaction.

Since we have explained that not all social messages relate to motivation of members to participate, identification of the relevant social messages is crucial and a delicate issue in farmers' WhatsApp groups. These groups, owing to the wide-ranging preferences of messages by members are sensitive and as Beck, Paskewitz, Anderson, Bourdeaux, & Mueller (2017) observe, misalignment of task and social messages in delicate groups is likely to accidentally offend some members. Striking a balance between task and social messages is therefore a crucial and sensitive matter that group administrators and members need to agree on.

Task messages, which are seen by group members as essential to the accomplishment of the goals of the group are in practice compatible and can co-exist with some social messages without necessarily creating a rift among group members. The findings reveal that social messages in task-oriented WhatsApp groups undoubtedly play a critical role in motivating group members to remain engaged in communication. Coppola et al., (2004) identify a positive social atmosphere, coupled with predictable communication patterns as essential ingredients for group success. This suggests that social messages provide an important context for the communication of task messages. They appear to be critical in enhancing sustained communication in the groups through member participation. This finding is also consistent with the social presence theory which Sheer and Chen (2004) argue that it can be linked to many positive facets of communication such as quality, appropriateness, richness and accuracy. Social messages are critical to member participation as they foster an atmosphere for WhatsApp group members to make close ties that motivate them to engage in conversations.

Despite a widespread view by group administrators and members that social messages are harmful to the accomplishment of task, social messages help to maintain a working relationship through sustaining task-oriented communication. This agrees with a study by Molinari (2010) who observes that social messages create a bond between group members that gradually makes members focus on the task communication over time leading to diminishing attention on social messages. The patterns of collaboration in the groups reveal

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that one condition for successful communication is through giving members leeway to post acceptable social messages alongside task-oriented ones.

Data suggests that social messages have repercussions on communication in the WhatsApp groups in relation to whether members participate in posting messages or not, how they work together and whether they remain in the group or not. This suggests that social messages were a major contributor to the success and continuity of member interaction. Although the studies we reviewed in this study mention social messages in general, my findings identify some social messages that are acceptable to the group members and others that are not. Moreover, the analysis of data shows clearly that not all social messages are beneficial to the sustainability of task communication. Profanities, insults, jokes and hostile language receives a hostile response by members or group administrators.

On the other hand, some social messages appear to provide an impetus for group members to participate. Humour related to the task, goodwill messages such as congratulations, appreciation, and encouragement, positive feedback and greeting were acceptable and well embraced across the groups. They also lit up the group whenever there seemed to be laxity in sending messages. This finding further supports a call by Gordon (2017) for more research on specific relational and task-related interactions and how and when they are exercised in a virtual team and how they are blended and communicated.

Humour in groups has been observed to be linked to performance in teams (Lehmann & Allen, 2014). Humour related to the task triggers a positive and supportive environment for member participation in the groups. Whenever a member made humour in the groups we studied, that would act as an invitation to members, including the most passive ones to participate. As Beck and Keyton (2014) observe, humour enhances the group interaction process. As a social message, humour related to task motivates members to engage in further task communication. After a humorous post, consequent messages posted on the groups either celebrated the humour or picked the message in that humour and related it to the task. For instance, one 'cowtoon' posted had the image of a cow that resisted the owner's attempt to make load it into a lorry. The cow responds to the owner stating that it will not board the lorry. Inscriptions on the lorry showed a new government policy that farmers argued that it would reduce their earnings and make dairy farming more expensive. After a series of emojis demonstrating laughter, the 'cowtoon' ignited a new debate on the need for farmers to protest against the draft bill, citing the need for more consultations before that bill became law.

The response to social messages varied depending on the content of the message. For the social messages that were acceptable to the members such as greetings and goodwill messages, the responses include providing feedback and sharing in the emotions evoked by the message through text or emoticons. If the social message takes a direction that some or all members like, they applaud it and may begin a conversation centred towards such a message. In other cases, if some members were offended by the social post, they would leave the group. In one of the groups, a member posts, "Social messages are the reason we have quit some groups. They affect the effectiveness of a group in delivering its mandate." This finding matches with a previous study by Bouhnik, Deshen, and Gan (2014) who report that group members decided to quit a WhatsApp group because the general direction of the conversations was not to their liking and one of them only came back only when the other group members promised to act according to her expectation. It is clear from the findings that whenever group posting activity wanes, an acceptable social message reawakens members and spurs participation in both task and social messages. This is evidence that some members are motivated to participate in communicating in a group to meet social needs. Although the

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farmers we interviewed pointed task messages as the only goal they would wish to pursue in these groups, it is clear that in practice, social messages help them realise much needed social gratification. This finding also mirrors Rau, Gao and Ding (2008) argument that people join online groups to fulfil their social-emotional needs.

The tendency of members to be stimulated to participate in sending messages after a social message is a reflection of their unconscious desire to meet social needs through their farming forums. Meeting social needs through social messages is a motivator for WhatsApp group members to remain active in posting both social and task messages. An ideal group is the one where members actively participate in posting messages, hence acceptable social messages are useful in the group administrators' and members' active in posting messages. The interviewees observed that there were more drawbacks than benefits from engaging in social messages.

The finding that the acceptable social messages provide an impetus for member participation suggests that members of farmers' WhatsApp groups should generate social presence. They should do this by providing space and creating time for members to express their social-emotion messages. The findings suggest that group members in the contexts where relational messages are not allowed begin to become enthusiastic about them with time. With continued usage and interaction on the platform, group members gravitate towards accepting more social interaction within the groups.

Furthermore, social messages need to be controlled or moderated. As we have explained earlier, left without someone to moderate the exchange of social and task-oriented messages, social messages tend to dominate and the groups lean more towards posting social rather than task messages. Allowing social messages to flourish may be counterproductive to the group since members may consume much so much time that there would be no focus on posting the substantive task-oriented messages. In this study, task messages that appeared in between a heated social conversation received no feedback and that may potentially discourage some members from posting task messages as their needs are not fulfilled.

In addition to that, in groups that stick to the rules against posting social messages, the practice of posting messages wanes over time. There are few and fewer interactions on the task and most posts are characterised by posting posters and advertisement of products. Such posts do not elicit active participation of members. In groups such as KD and PLC whose messages were predominantly task-oriented, after around one year of existence, the groups would run for days without any single post, prompting the administrators to make wake up calls to members to participate by posting messages. It is until the posting rules are relaxed that members swing into action and make the group alive with discussions once more.

A single-minded, task-oriented objective that members of these groups root for is seldom the case since there are other competing relational needs to be met through group interaction. This suggests that in consistence with the argument of Sheer and Chen (2004), human communication, whether face to face or on IM platforms is goal-oriented and involves task, social and self-presentational goals. Communicators strive to meet those goals simultaneously.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we investigated communication of social messages in instant messaging (IM) groups, with a specific focus on farmers' groups on the WhatsApp platform in Kenya. In our conclusion, findings indicate that among members of Farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya, both task and certain types of social messages are necessary for continued engagement in task

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related communication. Members of farmers' WhatsApp groups and communication for development practitioners should pay more attention to setting group communication rules that encourage group members to post both acceptable social messages alongside task related messages. The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. To scholars of communication studies, the study builds on existing literature by demonstrating that certain types of social messages are associated with task related engagement among members of farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya. To practitioners in communication for development especially those involved in agribusiness, the findings demonstrate the need to create a conducive environment of communication among members of online groups in order to realise the anticipated goals of a group. Such environment can be fostered through posting the acceptable social messages alongside task messages.

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