

The use of WhatsApp for official communication in the University of Port Harcourt: balancing digital efficiency with professionalism, governance and institutional accountability

Introduction

Digital communication has transformed the operational landscape of universities worldwide.^{1,2} The rapid expansion of mobile technology, increasing internet penetration, and widespread smartphone ownership have made instant messaging applications indispensable tools for academic and administrative communication.^{3,4} Among these applications, WhatsApp has emerged as the most widely adopted platform because of its accessibility, affordability, ease of use, and ability to support real-time communication.⁵⁻⁸

Within the University of Port Harcourt, WhatsApp has become deeply integrated into institutional life. Faculty Boards, Departments, Colleges, Senate Committees, Examination Committees, postgraduate supervision teams, research groups, professional associations, and student bodies routinely employ WhatsApp to disseminate information, coordinate activities, circulate documents, and facilitate decision-making. What initially served as an informal communication platform has gradually evolved into an important operational tool.

This transformation reflects a broader global trend towards digital workplaces.^{1,2-15} Nevertheless, as universities increasingly rely on consumer messaging applications for official communication, important questions arise regarding professionalism, confidentiality, legal accountability, institutional record keeping, governance, employee welfare, and digital ethics.^{4,9,10,14,16} These issues deserve careful consideration if institutions are to maximize the benefits of digital communication without compromising established administrative standards.

Factors that explain the popularity of WhatsApp within Nigerian universities.

Firstly, it enables instantaneous communication among large groups irrespective of geographical location. Information previously requiring printed memoranda or multiple telephone calls

now reaches hundreds of staff members simultaneously.

Secondly, the platform substantially reduces institutional communication costs. Paper correspondence, courier services and bulk SMS notifications are increasingly replaced by internet-based messaging.

Thirdly, WhatsApp promotes collaborative working. Committee members can review documents before meetings supervisors can communicate with postgraduate students and departments can coordinate teaching activities more efficiently.

Fourthly, during emergencies including the COVID-19 pandemic WhatsApp and other online platforms such as Zoom ensured continuity of academic and administrative activities when conventional meetings were impossible.^{1,15}

These advantages have significantly improved institutional responsiveness and administrative efficiency.

Emerging challenges

The growing dependence on WhatsApp for official communication has created new institutional challenges and these include the following areas:

Professionalism

Unlike official university communication channels, WhatsApp is primarily a social messaging application. Important institutional directives frequently appear alongside greetings, congratulatory messages, advertisements, jokes and unrelated discussions. This mixture diminishes the professional character of official communication and increases the likelihood that important information may be overlooked.

Professional communication within a university should reflect the dignity of the institution. Administrators and staff should therefore exercise restraint, maintain decorum and avoid

unnecessary informal exchanges within official groups.

Institutional record keeping

Universities depend on accurate documentation.^{17,18} Senate decisions, Faculty resolutions, examination approvals, disciplinary proceedings and financial authorizations require permanent institutional records.

WhatsApp messages are not designed to function as official archives. Messages may be deleted accidentally, lost when devices are replaced, or become inaccessible after changes in group administration. Consequently, important institutional history may disappear.

Official decisions should therefore continue to be documented through approved university channels irrespective of whether they were initially communicated through WhatsApp.

Confidentiality and data protection

Universities routinely process sensitive information relating to students, staff, finances, examinations, research and personnel management.

Although WhatsApp employs end-to-end encryption, confidentiality extends beyond encryption. Screenshots, forwarded messages, compromised devices and unauthorized group membership remain significant risks.

The Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023 places obligations upon institutions regarding responsible handling of personal information.^{9,19} University employees should therefore exercise caution when sharing confidential documents through messaging applications.

Legal considerations

Official communication within universities carries legal implications. Appointments, disciplinary actions, examination decisions and administrative approvals may become subjects of litigation. While electronic communication is increasingly recognized as evidence under Nigerian law, formal institutional decisions should continue to follow established statutory procedures.^{10,11,17,18}

WhatsApp should supplement, not replace official memoranda, Senate resolutions, signed letters and institutional emails.

Work-life balance

One unintended consequence of WhatsApp communication is the expectation of constant availability. Staff members frequently receive official messages late at night, during weekends, annual leave and public holidays. Continuous digital engagement contributes to stress, fatigue and burnout.

Universities should recognize employees' legitimate expectations of personal time while ensuring that genuine emergencies receive appropriate attention.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Authority and authenticity

Another challenge concerns the authenticity of official directives. Not every message posted by an administrator necessarily represents institutional policy. Ambiguity regarding authority may create confusion, particularly where conflicting instructions emerge from different sources.

Clear communication protocols should specify who may issue official directives on behalf of departments, faculties and the University.^{12,17,18}

WhatsApp should complement not replace official communication

The debate is not whether WhatsApp should be used. Rather, the question is how it should be used responsibly.

The University of Port Harcourt should continue embracing digital innovation while preserving the administrative integrity that characterizes well-governed universities.

WhatsApp should primarily function as a notification platform; coordination tool; meeting reminder; collaborative workspace; and an emergency communication channel.

Official university decisions should continue to be communicated through approved institutional mechanisms.

Table 1: Appropriate and inappropriate uses of WhatsApp for official university communication

Appropriate Uses	Inappropriate Uses
Meeting reminders	Issuing disciplinary decisions
Emergency notifications	Official appointment letters
Committee coordination	Senate resolutions
Sharing meeting agendas	Examination malpractice rulings
Circulation of draft documents	Confidential personnel matters
Academic collaboration	Financial authorizations without documentation
Research discussions	Permanent institutional records

Looking ahead

Digital transformation is irreversible. Artificial intelligence, cloud collaboration, electronic document management systems and enterprise communication platforms will increasingly redefine university administration.

Future universities are unlikely to rely solely on consumer messaging applications. Rather, integrated institutional communication systems combining secure messaging, document management, identity verification and archival functionality will become the norm.

The University of Port Harcourt has an opportunity to position itself as a leader in digital governance by establishing comprehensive institutional standards that balance technological innovation with administrative accountability.^{2,14,15}

CONCLUSION

WhatsApp has become an indispensable component of communication within the University of Port Harcourt. Its speed,

accessibility, affordability and collaborative potential have significantly enhanced institutional efficiency. However, convenience should never supersede professionalism.

The increasing reliance on WhatsApp for official communication demands a thoughtful institutional response grounded in governance, accountability, confidentiality and legal compliance.

Developing a comprehensive Digital Communication Policy will enable the University to harness the advantages of modern communication technology while preserving the administrative standards expected of a leading institution of higher learning.

Universities exist not merely to transmit knowledge but also to model excellence in governance. As communication technologies continue to evolve, institutional policies must evolve accordingly, ensuring that digital innovation strengthens rather than weakens the values of transparency, professionalism, integrity and accountability upon which academic excellence depends.

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