

Sustainability and Equity in Inclusive Digital Work through Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

The pervasive integration of instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp into professional communication has reshaped global work patterns, offering opportunities and challenges for sustainable development and digital equity. This study examines WhatsApp's impact on workplace productivity, work–life balance, and data security, assessing its implications for social well-being, ethical governance, and equitable access to digital tools. Guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) notably SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) the research draws on a narrative literature review of peer-reviewed sources, books, and industry reports published between 2007 and 2024. Findings reveal that while WhatsApp fosters efficient communication and collaboration, it contributes to blurred boundaries between work and personal life, information overload, and heightened data security risks. To advance sustainability and equity in digital work, the study recommends the adoption of structured communication protocols, equitable access to secure digital infrastructure, and workforce training in safe and ethical online practices. These measures can mitigate digital divides, strengthen organisational resilience, and promote inclusive, sustainable work environments in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: inclusive digital work, sustainability, equity, social platforms, work–life balance, data security.

JEL Classification: J80, O33, Q01, 015.

Introduction

The global digitalisation of work has transformed how organisations and societies operate, offering unprecedented development opportunities and presenting new challenges to sustainability and equity. Digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Slack, designed initially for personal use, have become integral to professional environments worldwide. While these tools enhance connectivity and real-time collaboration, their pervasive and often unmanaged use raises complex questions about social well-being, the sustainability of work-life boundaries, and exacerbating or mitigating the global digital divide.

Integrating social media into work processes extends beyond organisational challenges; it has broad societal implications that affect populations' mental health, social cohesion, and equitable access to technology. Unregulated use may deepen inequalities by privileging those with digital literacy and secure access while undermining vulnerable groups' privacy and psychological safety rights. This creates an urgent need to understand the systemic impacts of these platforms on inclusive, sustainable digital work ecosystems globally.

Despite WhatsApp's increasing prevalence in professional contexts, there remains a significant gap in comprehensively understanding its broader socio-technical effects within social sustainability and digital equity. This paper contributes to filling this gap by analysing WhatsApp's role in shaping responsible technology governance, equitable access, and sustainable communication practices at work. The study aims to inform policymakers, organisations, and researchers on creating frameworks that balance innovation with ethical and inclusive digital transformation by situating the discussion within global sustainability goals.

1. Literature Review

The accelerated adoption of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp in professional settings reflects the broader global trend of digital transformation reshaping work, society, and human interaction (Daft & Lengel, 1986). These platforms enable faster, more flexible communication, which has become indispensable in distributed and remote work environments (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). However, the digitalisation of work introduces complex challenges for human well-being and social sustainability, raising concerns that extend beyond organisational boundaries to societal and ethical dimensions (SDG 3, SDG 8).

Research increasingly highlights the impacts of digital communication on mental health and burnout, phenomena understood as significant societal costs threatening human capital sustainability (Abdul Aziz et al., 2024; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013). The constant connectivity enabled by platforms like WhatsApp contributes to blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, fuelling work-life imbalance and digital exhaustion (Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart, 2017). This "always-on" culture exacerbates cognitive overload and technostress, impeding productivity and overall well-being (Kasim et al., 2022). Theories of sustainable digital habits and resilient digital citizenship call for cultivating awareness and practices that protect mental health while maintaining communication efficiency (Coté & Pybus, 2007).

Ethical concerns surrounding the use of social media in the workplace intersect with broader debates on digital governance, data sovereignty, and ethical AI, particularly in contexts with vulnerable or marginalised populations (SDG 9; SDG 16). WhatsApp's informal communication channels challenge enforcing data privacy, consent, and auditability issues in developing countries where regulatory frameworks may be nascent or inconsistently applied (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lam et al., 2024). Building trust in digital infrastructure thus requires transparent policies, ethical leadership, and robust protection of personal and corporate data, aligning with calls for accountable institutions and inclusive technology governance (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Uneven access to digital tools like WhatsApp is a crucial factor perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities worldwide (SDG 10). The "digital divide" affects not only technological access but also digital literacy and secure connectivity, limiting the participation of disadvantaged groups in the digital economy (Hilbert, 2011). Literature on social sustainability and human development stresses that equitable access to communication technologies is critical for inclusive growth and reducing inequalities (Sen, 1999). WhatsApp's prevalence in low-resource settings demonstrates its potential as a democratizing tool, yet its benefits remain contingent on overcoming infrastructural and educational barriers.

This study draws on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, including social sustainability, digital sociology, and technology ethics, to analyse WhatsApp's systemic implications in work environments. Social sustainability frameworks emphasise the long-term viability of social systems, focusing on well-being, equity, and community cohesion (Dempsey et al., 2011). Digital sociology provides insights into how digital practices shape social relations and identities in contemporary societies (Marres, 2012). Technology ethics addresses the responsibilities of stakeholders in ensuring that technological adoption supports human rights and social justice (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). Together, these lenses enrich understanding beyond organisational efficiency, including digital work's ethical, social, and political dimensions.

WhatsApp's widespread adoption in professional contexts enhances communication speed and accessibility, supporting collaborative workflows (Abdelhay et al., 2024). However, research underscores significant risks including privacy breaches, data security vulnerabilities, and difficulty maintaining professional boundaries (Cavazotte et al., 2014; Mazmanian et al., 2013). The lack of formal oversight can foster inappropriate behaviours, from workplace harassment to misinformation spread, undermining organisational culture and trust (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; HR-Inspire, 2024).

Studies emphasise the need for clear organisational policies governing digital communication tools, advocating structured protocols, employee training on digital literacy, and enforcing ethical standards (Cavazotte et al., 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Compliance with data protection laws such as GDPR and POPIA is imperative to safeguard employee rights and organisational integrity (Lam et al., 2024). The right to disconnect and protection from digital overreach are critical components of ethical workplace communication, supporting sustainable work-life boundaries and employee well-being (Mazmanian et al., 2013).

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the appropriate use, challenges, ethics, and risks of using WhatsApp for professional communication. A narrative literature review was conducted, sourcing peer-reviewed articles, books, and industry reports from 2007 to 2024. The process is iterative, non-structured, and multi-layered, involving cumulative written outcomes and influenced by both official and unofficial guidance within a social context (Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2021). To gather relevant studies on digital communication, workplace ethics, and mobile technology adoption, databases like Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science were consulted (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria emphasised empirical studies and theoretical papers addressing social media use, organisational communication, and ethical frameworks within work environments. Data from the selected literature were thematically analysed to identify key patterns related to communication practices, boundary management, ethical leadership, and cybersecurity concerns (Gibbs, 2007). Themes were coded manually to connect closely with the material and ensure contextual accuracy. The limitations of this method include potential publication bias and limited generalizability beyond the context discussed in the selected studies (Fink, 2019). Nonetheless, the narrative approach offers valuable insights into evolving workplace communication practices and establishes a foundation for future empirical investigation (Grant & Booth, 2009).

2.1. Use of WhatsApp and Similar Platforms for Work

WhatsApp can be a powerful tool for communication in the workplace when used appropriately. Organisations should emphasise that their use should be confined to work-related purposes, minimising non-essential messaging during official hours (Sheer & Chen, 2004). To maintain focus, it is crucial to define clear group objectives and ensure all members understand the professional purpose of the group (Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart, 2017). Maintaining professionalism is essential when using WhatsApp or similar platforms for work communication, as improper use can lead to several key breaches, including messaging without consent, inappropriate language, breaching confidentiality, spamming group chats, and blurring the lines between work and personal life. These behaviours undermine trust, disrupt workflow, and harm relationships within teams and with clients (Van Vliet, 2024; Abdelhay et al., 2024).

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, key breaches of professionalism include initiating conversations without prior consent, sending unnecessary messages outside of work hours, using informal language or slang, disclosing confidential information, and spamming group chats. These actions can damage workplace trust, disrupt productivity, and create a hostile communication environment.

Figure 1: Examples of unprofessional WhatsApp communication for work



Healthcare professionals, in particular, face challenges in maintaining boundaries when engaging with social media, including platforms like WhatsApp. Guidance on navigating these risks is crucial for maintaining safe and effective digital engagement (Cooper & Inglehearn, 2015). To foster effective and respectful communication, clear, appropriate language must be used, privacy must be respected, and strict confidentiality must be maintained when interacting on professional messaging platforms (Van Vliet, 2024). Communication should be respectful, concise, and free of slang or overly casual language. Effective communication, both verbal and nonverbal, plays a vital role in conveying messages, building relationships, and ensuring mutual understanding, as highlighted by Addimando (2024). Even in informal settings, employees must recognise that organisational values extend to digital spaces, and sending memes, jokes, or personal opinions unrelated to work should be discouraged to maintain a productive environment. Moreover, the increasing digitalisation and remote work dynamics are reshaping how work is performed, leading to the blurring of work-life boundaries. This shift poses challenges in balancing work and personal life. Yeo & Li (2022) explore the role of developmental relationships in navigating these challenges, emphasising that technological advancements and remote working require new strategies to manage both professional and personal demands effectively.

Data confidentiality is another critical component of appropriate use. Organisations must remind employees that sensitive information such as client data, financial records, or internal strategies should not be shared over unsecured platforms unless appropriate encryption and controls are in place (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Secure alternatives or approved channels should be provided when sensitive information needs to be communicated. Group management practices must be adopted to prevent information overload in digital communication environments. Overly large groups, frequent off-topic messaging, and the absence of a clear communication protocol can dilute the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a

business tool (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Leonardi, 2014).

As group size increases, the volume of messages escalates, making it increasingly difficult for employees to discern relevant information, thereby intensifying the issue of information overload. The systematic review by Arnold, Goldschmitt, and Rigotti (2023) identifies several interventions to prevent and mitigate this overload, emphasising behavioural and structural measures. These include work design approaches at the levels of information and communication technology, teamwork, and organisational regulations, although the effectiveness of these interventions is supported by mixed evidence. Additionally, the lack of structure in communication can lead to the sharing of irrelevant content, which detracts from the platform's primary purpose, reducing productivity and increasing cognitive strain (Cavazotte et al., 2014). Therefore, implementing clear guidelines and structured communication protocols is essential to ensure that WhatsApp remains an effective and efficient tool for business communication. Assigning a group administrator responsible for ensuring the group's focus can help address these issues and promote responsible usage (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Challenges

One of the primary challenges in using WhatsApp for work is the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life, which can significantly affect employees' well-being. Often, employees feel compelled to respond to work-related messages after official working hours, leading to work-life imbalance, stress, and potential burnout (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013). Organisations must recognise that unrestricted after-hours communication can foster employee dissatisfaction and diminish long-term productivity. As the issue of burnout continues to gain attention globally, new legislation in places like Kenya and Ontario has emerged, aiming to protect workers' right to disconnect after work hours. These laws reflect growing concerns over the negative impact of blurred work-life boundaries, particularly during the pandemic (Cerullo, 2023). The study by Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, Butts, & Becker (2016) further emphasises the challenges of after-hours electronic communication, exploring both its positive and negative effects on work-life balance. Their research provides practical guidance for organisations, managers, and employees on effectively managing the increasing connectivity enabled by technology. They stress the need for organisations to adopt strategies that help employees navigate the complexities of balancing work and personal life in an increasingly digital world, especially as technological advancements continue to reshape the workplace.

Additionally, the issue of information overload is significant. Kim & Chon (2022) found that after-hours communication through technology contributes to increased employee burnout and negative extra-role behaviours, such as counterproductive work behaviour and negative word-of-mouth, with emotional exhaustion as a partial mediator in this relationship. The constant influx of messages can overwhelm employees, causing critical information to become lost in the noise, leading to miscommunication and inefficiencies (Leonardi, 2014). Employees spend considerable time sifting through irrelevant messages, which detract from their core work tasks and heighten cognitive load. Another critical concern is data security. The informal use of platforms like WhatsApp for work-related communication can expose organisations to significant risks, particularly regarding sharing confidential or sensitive information. Without proper safeguards, organisations face the potential for data breaches,

legal repercussions, and a loss of stakeholder trust (Cavazotte et al., 2014). These risks highlight the need for organisations to implement secure communication protocols and clearly define the boundaries of acceptable use for technology in the workplace.

One significant aspect of workplace communication is employees' autonomy to disconnect from work-related tasks outside official hours, unless specified in their contracts. Mazmanian et al. (2013) noted that employees should not be compelled to communicate after-hours, as this can lead to labour rights violations and contribute to a toxic work culture. Consent is crucial in this context, particularly when using personal devices and private messaging applications for professional purposes. Linder (2021) argues that employees should be able to make informed decisions about their participation in work-related communication outside official work platforms, safeguarding their privacy and preventing coercion to use personal devices for professional tasks. This emphasises the critical need to address the ethical challenges in digital communication and the importance of ongoing professional development to ensure employees can effectively manage these issues.

A study by Meng, Kim, & Reber (2022) found that many public relations professionals face ethical challenges daily, particularly due to digital practices. While a large majority have participated in communication ethics training, the fact that only a small percentage have received recent training points to a gap in timely education on digital communication ethics. This gap underscores the need for organisations to offer continuous ethics training, ensuring professionals are well-prepared to navigate the rapidly changing digital landscape. As digital communication evolves, it becomes increasingly essential to understand the shifting ethical considerations within this dynamic field. Rousi & Vakkuri (2023) explore the impact of emerging technologies on ethical practices, stressing the importance of ethical principles in communication, design, and technological development. They advocate for a comprehensive understanding of ethics in digital communication, especially as technological advancements influence workplace communication dynamics. Organisations must ensure that employees are not coerced into using personal devices for work-related purposes and instead provide formal devices or platforms specifically designed for professional communication.

In addition to respecting privacy and ensuring consent, transparency and accountability are vital when using social media in professional settings. Organisations must establish clear guidelines regarding the acceptable use of social media, ensuring that all employees understand the expectations and consequences of misuse (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). These policies must be consistently applied to maintain trust and organisational cohesion. Ethical leadership is also critical in setting the tone for responsible digital communication. Managers and senior staff must model ethical behaviour and respect professional norms, even on informal platforms. As Cavazotte et al. (2014) suggest, ethical leadership protects organisations legally and fosters a healthier workplace culture, contributing to a more effective and respectful communication environment.

One of the most significant risks associated with the use of WhatsApp in the workplace is the potential for harassment and cyberbullying. While WhatsApp is secure due to its end-to-end encryption, it still poses risks such as exposure to unsafe content, online predators, cyberbullying, and phishing attacks, particularly for children or users unaware of potential fraud. Users must understand and manage privacy settings, enable security features like two-factor authentication, and stay vigilant about online threats. Informal group chats, common in workplace settings, can also facilitate exclusion, gossip, and bullying behaviours, particularly

when boundaries around communication are unclear (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Organisations must monitor for inappropriate behaviour while respecting employees' privacy rights to mitigate these risks.

Another critical risk is the rapid spread of misinformation within WhatsApp groups. Rumours or incorrect information can quickly spread without proper moderation and checks, leading to organisational confusion and eroding employee trust (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Effective internal communication strategies, including transparent and two-way communication, have been linked to higher levels of employee engagement (Kimani, 2024). However, the study also found that challenges like information overload, language barriers, and inconsistent communication across departments hinder communication effectiveness, emphasising the need for multifaceted approaches, such as training programs and technology investments, to address these issues (Kimani, 2024). If not effectively managed, the spread of misinformation can undermine organisational unity and, in some cases, may warrant disciplinary action.

Furthermore, employers' intervention in employees' social media use is justified only when there are compelling reasons, such as the relevance of the content to the organization, the employee's role, and the potential impact on the employer's reputation, while respecting employees' rights to privacy and freedom of expression (Murto & Korpisaari, 2024). Organisations need to have clear policies on professional conduct in digital spaces to prevent reputational damage. In addition, the effectiveness of various internal communication channels, such as collaboration tools, remote work platforms, and gamification, needs further research to optimise their use in internal communications (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2024). Digital communication should also be examined from a social perspective, considering factors such as employee satisfaction and privacy concerns (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2024).

Regulatory non-compliance is a significant risk in using WhatsApp and other social media platforms for work-related communication. Sharing confidential information without adequate controls can lead to breaches of data protection laws, such as the GDPR or POPIA, depending on the jurisdiction (Cavazotte et al., 2014). Organisations must implement robust data protection practices when allowing work-related use of social media platforms. To address this, mandatory training sessions should be held to educate employees on ethical digital communication practices. These training sessions should incorporate case studies and practical exercises to reinforce learning and promote appropriate behaviour in real-world situations (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Organisations must ensure employees can access secure, official communication platforms where necessary, discouraging personal messaging apps for work-related communication to maintain confidentiality and professionalism (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Leadership commitment to ethical digital communication is crucial, as leaders must model appropriate behaviour, address violations promptly, and cultivate a workplace culture that emphasises professionalism, respect, and transparency (Cavazotte et al., 2014).

The Table 1 highlights the key risks of WhatsApp use in the workplace, including harassment, misinformation, and regulatory non-compliance. It suggests mitigation strategies such as clear policies, comprehensive training, and strong leadership to ensure ethical communication practices.

Table 1: Key Risks and Mitigation Strategies for WhatsApp Use in the Workplace

Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Harassment & Cyberbullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WhatsApp can facilitate harassment, cyberbullying, and unsafe content exposure, especially for users unaware of potential scams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users should manage privacy settings, enable two-factor authentication, and remain vigilant. Organisations must monitor and address inappropriate behaviour while respecting privacy rights.
Exclusion, Gossip, & Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informal group chats can lead to exclusion, gossip, or bullying when boundaries are unclear (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisations should establish clear boundaries and guidelines for communication.
Spread of Misinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rumours or incorrect information can spread rapidly, confusing and eroding trust (Tree & Leonardi, 2013). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement moderation systems, encourage transparent communication, and provide training to prevent misinformation.
Internal Communication Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information overload, language barriers, and inconsistent communication can hinder effective internal communication (Kimani, 2024). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in training and technologies to improve communication effectiveness and reduce overload.
Employee Social Media Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers' intervention in employee social media use must be justified, balancing organisational needs and respect for privacy (Murto & Korpisaari, 2024). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish clear policies on social media use and digital communication conduct. Ensure transparency and respect for employees' rights.
Regulatory non-compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing confidential information without proper controls can lead to data protection law violations, such as GDPR or POPIA (Cavazotte et al., 2014). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisations must implement strong data protection measures and ensure secure communication channels are used.
Lack of Secure Communication Channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal messaging apps may compromise confidentiality and professionalism in work-related communication (Mazmanian et al., 2013). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage the use of secure, official communication platforms for work-related messages.
Leadership & Ethical Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders must model appropriate digital communication behaviours and address violations promptly to maintain professionalism and transparency (Cavazotte et al., 2014). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders should create a culture of respect and professionalism, ensuring appropriate communication practices are followed throughout the organisation.
Training in Ethical Digital Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of training on ethical digital communication practices can lead to inappropriate behaviour and misuse (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct mandatory training that includes case studies and practical exercises to reinforce appropriate behaviour and ethical communication practices.

2.2. Discussion

The findings of this study, when interpreted through the lenses of sustainability and equity, reveal significant implications not only for individual employees but also for broader societal well-being and the long-term viability of the workforce. Using platforms like WhatsApp to enhance workplace communication demonstrates potential benefits; however, these are contingent on clearly defined professional usage protocols and structured management frameworks. This aligns with Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart (2017), who emphasise the necessity of a clear group purpose to minimise distractions and uphold professionalism, which is crucial for maintaining productivity in digital communication channels.

From a sustainability perspective, the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional life as identified in this study and corroborated by Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates (2013) poses risks of burnout and diminished cognitive sustainability. Constant connectivity can undermine employees' mental well-being, potentially leading to increased healthcare burdens that ripple through communities, thus affecting collective well-being. This extends the impact of digital communication beyond the workplace, threatening the sustainability of human capital, which is vital to societal progress.

Moreover, as highlighted by Leonardi (2014), information overload can impair decision-making quality, affecting organisational outcomes and, by extension, the broader socio-economic fabric. Cognitive sustainability, the capacity to make sound, informed decisions over time, is essential for effective governance and social cohesion. The implications of digital communication challenges extend to systemic levels, where threats to individual privacy evolve into risks to digital trust and inclusive governance. These systemic risks may disproportionately affect underserved communities, where socio-economic and geographical disparities exacerbate digital inequities. Our literature review found differential experiences based on socio-economic status and location, underscoring equity concerns regarding the accessibility and safe adoption of digital services for work.

The necessity of secure communication platforms is reinforced by Boyd & Ellison (2008), whose work supports our findings on the importance of encrypted channels to protect sensitive information. Cavazotte et al. (2014) also stress data security risks and the imperative for formal governance frameworks to mitigate these threats. Ethical considerations emerge as a central theme, with Mazmanian et al. (2013) emphasising respect for employee privacy and transparency in policy enforcement. This is echoed by Treem & Leonardi (2013), who advocate for ethical communication standards supported by consistent leadership and clear organisational guidelines.

This study highlights that ethical leadership is vital for modelling appropriate digital communication behaviours and safeguarding organisational culture. Building on Millagala's (2023) advocacy, we propose a self-directed ethical framework for digital communication that promotes responsibility, transparency, and critical thinking among users. This framework can empower employees to navigate digital workspaces sustainably and equitably, mitigating risks such as harassment, misinformation, and regulatory non-compliance.

In conclusion, while WhatsApp and similar platforms can significantly boost work efficiency, their success depends on well-defined organisational policies that balance work-life boundaries, manage information overload, and address data security. Training in responsible digital communication and initiative-taking policy enforcement is essential to reduce risks and foster a secure, productive environment.

The risks identified in this study, harassment, misinformation, misconduct, and regulatory breaches, mirror those documented by Boyd & Ellison (2008) and Cavazotte et al. (2014), emphasising the urgency for visible leadership commitment and ongoing monitoring as suggested by Treem & Leonardi (2013). Our findings reinforce the critical need for organisations to act decisively to embed ethical, sustainable, and equitable digital communication practices in the increasingly digitised workplace.

3. Limitations of the Study. Recommendations

This study is not without its limitations; the research focuses primarily on the use of WhatsApp for workplace communication, which may not fully capture the diversity of digital communication platforms in contemporary work environments. As such, the findings may not directly apply to all types of digital tools used within organisations. Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may introduce response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers rather than reporting their actual experiences or behaviours. Additionally, the study's sample size and scope are limited, primarily reflecting employees' experiences within a specific region or industry. This may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or different organisational contexts. Another limitation lies in the contextual environment of the study. In particular work settings, continuous communication via platforms like WhatsApp is necessary due to the nature of the job, and there may be fewer boundaries between work and personal time, with little to no emphasis on office hours. This study did not fully account for such environments where the need for constant communication or flexible working hours is a defining feature. Furthermore, while the research addresses various aspects of digital communication ethics, it does not explore the long-term impact of these practices on organisational culture, employee well-being, or job satisfaction in depth.

The findings of this study highlight the complex challenges and opportunities presented by the integration of WhatsApp and similar digital communication platforms in professional settings. Coordinated action is required across multiple levels of governments, international organisations, platform developers, and employers to foster sustainable, equitable, and socially responsible digital work environments.

- For governments and policymakers:
 - Enact and enforce “right to disconnect” legislation to protect workers’ time and mental well-being, prevent digital burnout, and promote healthy work-life boundaries aligned with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).
 - Invest in universal digital literacy programs that equip all populations with the skills to engage safely and effectively in digital workplaces, thereby addressing the digital divide and advancing SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).
 - Develop and implement robust data governance frameworks that uphold privacy, data sovereignty, and ethical use of digital communication tools, especially in developing countries with emerging regulatory environments, advancing SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).
- For international organisations and industry bodies:
 - Promote global standards for ethical AI and responsible platform governance that encourage transparency, accountability, and respect for user rights within digital communication tools.

- Support cross-border collaborations to share best practices and technical resources, enhancing the sustainability and inclusivity of digital work ecosystems.
- For platform developers and technology providers:
 - Integrate well-being-focused features into social media and messaging platforms, such as customizable notification controls, automated prioritisation of critical communications, and tools to monitor and mitigate digital overload. These innovations align with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) by fostering responsible technological advancement.
 - Ensure platforms are designed to support equitable access, including low-bandwidth options, multi-language support, and accessibility features for diverse user groups.
- For organisations and employers:
 - Establish clear digital communication policies that balance efficiency with employee autonomy and privacy, including restrictions on after-hours messaging and expectations around response times.
 - Implement structured communication protocols to minimise information overload and enhance message relevance.
 - Prioritise data security by adopting encrypted communication tools and regularly training employees on privacy and cybersecurity best practices.

Conclusion

Integrating digital communication platforms into global work processes reshapes organisational dynamics, broader societal structures, and individual well-being. This study underscores the urgent need for a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach to managing digital communication in the workplace that simultaneously advances social sustainability, digital equity, and responsible innovation. By aligning digital work practices with global sustainability goals, stakeholders can contribute to building a just, inclusive, and resilient future for labour and society worldwide.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Willie, M. M. was primarily responsible for the conceptualization of the study, the development of the methodology, and the formal analysis of the findings. Mudara, Z. J. contributed to the comprehensive literature review, refining the manuscript through critical review, editing. Both authors collaborated closely throughout the research process, contributed intellectually to the development of the arguments, and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors, declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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