




WhatsApp, Boardroom & Beyond: Multi-Channel Deal-Making in African Business

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Abstract. The expansion of digital messaging platforms is reshaping business practices in Africa, particularly in the domain of negotiation and deal-making. This research paper analyzes the merger of formal as well as informal negotiation channels in African boardroom structures. A two-step research methodology combines a quantitative survey of negotiation experts ($n = 733$) with an interdisciplinary literature review. Empirical results highlight the geographic impact on negotiation channels. Significantly, WhatsApp serves as a dominant platform for negotiations across the continent. The discussion draws on Transaction Cost Economics, Social Network perspectives, and Corporate Governance theory to illuminate the hybridization of formal and informal negotiation ecologies. From this, implications for business practice, regulatory frameworks, and negotiation research are outlined, while also identifying future research directions in hybrid channel strategies and AI-mediated negotiation processes.

Keywords: Multi-Channel Dealmaking, WhatsApp Negotiations, Hybrid Negotiation Ecologies

1 Introduction

Applying digital communication platforms has become central to African business transactions. Especially WhatsApp stands out as the most influential messaging application by shaping negotiation processes, information flows, and transactional practices across diverse sectors and geographies [1, 2, 3]. Thus, WhatsApp as a business tool stands for digitalization, mobile penetration, and the reconfiguration of formal and informal institutional arrangements. In this setting, African negotiations are situated between the traditional formal governance structures — such as boardrooms, contracts, and regulatory frameworks — as well as informal relationships via messaging apps [4, 5, 6]. This codependency needs clarification on efficiency, trust, and legitimacy when negotiations occur simultaneously across formal settings and mobile messaging platforms. Therefore, this study concentrates on two research questions:

RQ1: *How are formal governance structures and informal digital channels such as WhatsApp integrated in African negotiations?*

RQ2: *What are the effects on transaction costs, trust, and decision-making?*

It is assumed that a management of formal and informal communication channels transforms African negotiation ecologies. Accordingly, for this investigation a mixed methodology combines quantitative survey evidence with insights drawn from an interdisciplinary literature review.

2 Literature Review

The adoption of WhatsApp has been extensively documented as part of Africa's digital transformation. The application expands across private messages to commercial transactions, politics, academia, and governance [7, 4, 8]. Research identifies that WhatsApp functions as a socio-political instrument shaping decision-making and institutional trust [5, 9]. This codependence of formal and informal exchange is a characteristic feature of African business negotiations [10, 11]. If formal communication leaves blank spaces for an exchange, this is often filled by informal messaging – thus, creating hybrid negotiation ecologies. Negotiators rely on both formal structures, such as contracts and boardrooms, and informal mechanisms, such as WhatsApp groups and personal trust networks. Thus, three theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding multi-channel negotiation practices in African contexts.

Primarily, *Transaction Cost Economics (TCE)* helps in understanding the digital impact on negotiations [12, 13]. Via digital avenues the cost for research and coordination can be lowered. Nevertheless, steering the cost impact by creating a transparency monitoring is essential to ensure transactional integrity [14].

Furthermore, under a *Social Network Perspective (SNP)*, the digitized negotiation amplifies the relationship-building capacity by deepening trust networks while opening opportunities for dealmaking. Specifically, WhatsApp can expand on impacts of the relational networks by fostering **reputation-building, and coordination** [15, 16]. This perspective highlights how digital platforms transform the social structures that underpin trust and collaboration.

Finally, *Corporate Governance (CG)* frameworks and board-level mechanisms are essential for legal integration of informal digital communication into formal organizational processes. Thereby governance structures ensure that agreements reached through platforms like WhatsApp are **legitimate, compliant, and aligned with institutional norms** [17, 18]. This perspective places emphasis on the merger between informal digital practices and formal institutional oversight.

Prior research outlined media use in Africa, however less attention has been placed on the **multi-channel nature of negotiations**. Consequently, this study addresses this gap by analyzing how African negotiators transition between WhatsApp and formal boardroom settings, and how this merger impacts **transaction costs, trust, and decision legitimacy**. Therefore, it is expected that the managed use of formal and informal channels constitutes a **structural transformation in African negotiation ecologies**.

3 Methodology

Through a semi-structured survey of **733 international negotiation experts**, including **38 respondents from Africa (6%) data was collected for this research study** [19]. The sample consisted of negotiation experts from Europe (63%), Asia (13%), North America (9%), South America (4%), and the Middle East (4%). The average age of respondents was 42 years, 24% identified as female, and the mean negotiation experience was 15 years. Accordingly, descriptive, exploratory, and comparative analyses were conducted, focusing on variables such as gender, age, professional experience, industry, organizational size, and geographic location. The focus was placed on the African sub-sample to identify region-specific patterns in communication channel use and negotiation practices. Additionally, **this study reviewed relevant academic papers** across multiple disciplines. The review identified themes, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches, which were subsequently organized into conceptual clusters: **digital negotiations, institutional hybridity, transaction costs, social networks, and corporate governance**.

4 Results

4.1 Nationality Effects

Analysis revealed significant nationality-based differences in channel use during negotiations. Negotiators from African contexts reported a **substantially lower reliance on email** compared to their counterparts elsewhere ($\Phi = .17$, standardized residual = 2.7). In contrast, the use of **messaging platforms far exceeded expectations**, occurring at more than double the anticipated frequency (standardized residual = 3.0) with an overall moderate effect size ($\Phi = .28$; $p < .001$), indicating that nationality systematically influenced the choice of communication channels. The results show how African negotiators diverge from globally dominant patterns of email-centric negotiation, instead privileging more immediate and relationally oriented platforms.

Table 1: Distribution of Quoted and Not Quoted Messaging by Nationality

Nationality	Not Quoted	Quoted	Total
Africa	21	17	38
North America	52	6	58
Northern Europe	42	13	55
Western Europe	250	46	296
Total	491	138	629

Note. Frequencies represent observed counts of quoted and not quoted messaging behavior by nationality see Table 1. Adapted from *The Leverage Effect of Strategic Behavioral Dimensions in Multi-Channel Negotiations* (p. 337), by S. Moinuddin-Huber, 2024, Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag. Copyright 2024 by Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag.

Table 2: Chi-Square Tests of Nationality and Messaging Channel Use

Test	χ^2	df	<i>p</i>
Pearson chi-square	49.41	9	< .001
Likelihood ratio	44.49	9	< .001
Linear-by-linear association	19.63	1	< .001

Note. $N = 629$. Expected cell frequencies met chi-square test assumptions, see Table 2. Adapted from *The Leverage Effect of Strategic Behavioral Dimensions in Multi-Channel Negotiations* (p. 338), by S. Moinuddin-Huber, 2024, Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag. Copyright 2024 by Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag.

Table 3: Effect Size Measures for Nationality and Messaging Channel Use

Measure	Value	<i>p</i>
Phi (ϕ)	.28	< .001
Cramér's V	.28	< .001

Note. $N = 629$. Effect sizes are reported for nominal variables, see Table 3. Adapted from *The Leverage Effect of Strategic Behavioral Dimensions in Multi-Channel Negotiations* (p. 338), by S. Moinuddin-Huber, 2024, Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag. Copyright 2024 by Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag.

4.2 Geographic Location Effects

Geographic location further shaped patterns of digital negotiation. African-based negotiators reported **lower use of email** ($\Phi = .15$; $p = .033$), suggesting a trend away from conventional email negotiations. Further, reduced engagement in **video conferencing during bargaining session was reported than the statistical expectation** ($\Phi = .17$; $p = .006$), reflecting possible infrastructural and contextual constraints on bandwidth-intensive communication modes. Conversely, **messaging platforms significantly exceeded expected levels of use**, with reported frequencies 115% higher than anticipated ($\Phi = .26$; $p < .001$). This effect size reinforces the importance of messaging tools to negotiation practices within African contexts.

Overall, these results demonstrate a patterned and statistically significant divergence in negotiation channel use by African negotiators. Whereas global norms often emphasize email and video conferencing as central to professional exchanges, African negotiators exhibit a clear preference for messaging platforms, reflecting both contextual conditions and evolving digital practices.

Table 4: Distribution Messaging by Geographic Location

Geographic Location	Not Quoted	Quoted	Total
Africa	17	14	31
Europe	312	62	374
North America	64	8	72
Total	513	136	649

Note. Frequencies represent observed counts of quoted and not quoted messaging behavior across geographic locations, see Table 4. Adapted from *The Leverage Effect of Strategic Behavioral Dimensions in Multi-Channel Negotiations* (p. 353), by S. Moinuddin-Huber, 2024, Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag. Copyright 2024 by Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag.

Table 5: Chi-Square Tests of Geographic Location and Messaging Channel Use

Test	χ^2	df	p
Pearson chi-square	44.48	6	.000
Likelihood ratio	38.66	6	.000
Linear-by-linear association	0.04	1	.835

Note. $N = 649$. One cell (7.1%) had an expected frequency below 5 (minimum expected frequency = 4.19), see Table 5. Adapted from *The Leverage Effect of Strategic Behavioral Dimensions in Multi-Channel Negotiations* (p. 354), by S. Moinuddin-Huber, 2024, Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag. Copyright 2024 by Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag.

Table 6: Effect Size Measures for Geographic Location and Messaging

Measure	Value	<i>p</i>
Phi (ϕ)	.26	< .001
Cramér's V	.26	< .001

Note. $N = 649$. Effect sizes are reported for nominal variables, see Table 6. Adapted from *The Leverage Effect of Strategic Behavioral Dimensions in Multi-Channel Negotiations* (p. 354), by S. Moinuddin-Huber, 2024, Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag. Copyright 2024 by Dr. Josef Kovac Wissenschaftsverlag.

4.3 WhatsApp Dominance in Africa

The messaging service WhatsApp turned into the central tool for transactions and discursive activity in Africa since 2016, see Table 7. Its accessibility, low data requirements and integration into social and professional activities are key reasons for its position. Most importantly businesses across Africa now rely on WhatsApp for everything from day-to-day coordination to concluding commercial agreements, illustrating its shift from casual chat app to transactional infrastructure [20, 21]. As messages are instant and informal, WhatsApp allows negotiators to bypass delays linked to slow bureaucratic or infrastructural systems, thereby cutting both time and monetary costs. Furthermore, WhatsApp has become a critical driver of **e-commerce and conversational commerce** [22]. Entrepreneurs and firms leverage its messaging, voice, and group functions to engage directly with clients, market goods and services, and process sales. This form of commerce blurs the boundary between social interaction and economic exchange, embedding market activity within the everyday communicative fabric of African societies. Additionally, higher education institutions use WhatsApp not only for social coordination but also for academic decision-making, showing how it bridges institutional procedures with everyday communication practices [8, 23]. University staff, administrators, and students employ WhatsApp to negotiate administrative procedures, coordinate academic activities, and resolve institutional disputes. In doing so, WhatsApp mediates between formal bureaucratic systems and the informal channels through which many African universities operate, illustrating the platform's role as a tool of institutional negotiation as well as personal communication. Finally, WhatsApp plays a prominent role in **political discourse and elite negotiations** [24, 25, 26]. Political stakeholders use WhatsApp messaging for public mobilization and for closed, high-stakes negotiations within elite circles. In some cases, WhatsApp groups serve as spaces of political deliberation, alliance-building, and deal-making that run parallel to formalized processes. While this underscores the platform's flexibility, it also raises questions about transparency, accountability, and the entrenchment of elite power in digital spaces. Viewed as a whole, these findings highlight WhatsApp's dominance not simply as a communication tool but as a multi-functional infrastructure that shapes business, academic, and political life in Africa. Its capacity to operate simultaneously across personal, institutional, and elite domains demonstrates the extent to which digital

platforms have become integral to governance and negotiation ecologies on the continent.

Table 7 Dominance of WhatsApp as Communication Platform [28, 29, 30, 31, 32].

Messaging Provider	Region	Usage	Type of Negotiation
WhatsApp	Especially West, South & East Africa	Politics, business, education, community	Pricing, business transactions, career, politics, organisation
Telegram	North Africa, urban centres	Politics, mass communication	Strategic political negotiations, coordination
Signal	Countries with restrictions (e.g. Uganda, Ethiopia), NGOs	Secure communication	Sensitive political or NGO negotiations
Facebook Messenger	North Africa, urban centres	Small commerce, community, social organisation	Pricing
WeChat	East & South Africa (Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa)	Trade with China, business networks	International business transactions, pricing

5 Discussion

The results show that African negotiators employ WhatsApp as an entry point for negotiations, followed by formalization in boardrooms or via contracts. Applying a channel sequencing reduces costs, enhances trust, and accelerates the negotiation process. Nevertheless, issues of compliance and legitimacy still need to be solved within this context.

5.1 Implications for RQ1

RQ1 asked: *How are formal governance structures and informal digital channels such as WhatsApp integrated in African negotiations?* The results underline that negotiators in Africa strategically weave WhatsApp as a into formal governance structures, creating a hybrid negotiation ecology in which informality and institutionalization are mutually constitutive. This merger is established by following certain process steps with implications not only for negotiation theory and digital governance but also for ongoing debates in African research on informality, institutional hybridity, and technological adaptation.

The **primary** concern is the mechanism of channel transition, which illustrates how WhatsApp functions as an entry point for negotiations, with discussions often moving

from digital exchanges into boardroom deliberations and contractual documentation. In African contexts — where resource constraints, infrastructural variability, and time pressures often limit extended face-to-face engagement — such transitions underscore the pragmatic flexibility of negotiators. This finding aligns with African research that labels informality not as a deficiency but as a productive mode of problem-solving and adaptation within governance systems.

A further consideration is the role of bridging actors, which highlights the relational and interpersonal dimensions of African negotiation cultures. In essence, boundaries of stakeholders are traversed from WhatsApp to formal arenas. The broader African traditions requires mediation, brokerage, and relational leadership in governance and commerce. Thus, digital negotiations in Africa cannot be understood in isolated technological terms. Digital negotiations in Africa are situated in socio-cultural norms that require trust, relational continuity, and the ability to navigate across multiple worlds. **While a third aspects** reflects decision gateways, demonstrating how informal agreements on WhatsApp are subsequently legitimized within formal governance structures. This reflects a documented approach of African governance systems, whereby informal consensus often precedes formal decision-making.

Finally, the implementation of compliance frameworks by African negotiators displays active engagement with global standards of accountability. Efforts to monitor, audit, or archive WhatsApp negotiations reveal how digital practices are formalized to comply with transparency, compliance, and institutional credibility. This dual emphasis on flexibility and accountability reflects the hybridity that characterizes many African governance arrangements. These findings reinforce the view that informality is not only a category but a force that shapes institutional processes. The African case complicates the interplay between formal and informal, showing how digital platforms like WhatsApp are not external to governance but integral to its practice. This study demonstrates how African experiences of digital negotiation offer critical insights into how institutions evolve in hybrid, resource-constrained, and relationally dense contexts.

5.2 Implications for RQ2

RQ2 proposed: *What are the effects on transaction costs, trust, and decision-making?* The results signify the merger of messaging into negotiation processes in Africa can have implications on economic efficiency, relationship-building, and institutional credibility. These implications outreach technical aspects and thereby extend unto themes of governance, power, and inclusion.

The integration of portable cash scheme like M-Pesa in WhatsApp considerably enhances the cost effectiveness of transactions. For instance mobile payments within negotiation processes avoid possible banking delays, necessary physical meetings, and bureaucratic processes [27]. These findings are in line with African research identifying digital financial innovations as influential enablers for market participation in an environment that is characterized by infrastructural constraints. While transaction costs are

lower for users of messaging, consumers without access to digital devices are excluded from financial or technological transactions.

Another dimension that is shaped by WhatsApp negotiations in Africa is **trust-building** which can be both enhanced or even negatively influenced. Positive factors are enhanced transparency, visibility, and relational accountability [10]. Thereby, negotiators can use the leverage effect of social capital to enforce informal norms and transfer these into the formal negotiation structure. In contrast, elite gatekeeping can be strengthened by power expansions in influential networks. From this, a negative effect could be exclusion of networks within African political and business environments. African interdisciplinary research labels this messaging informality as a tool to support trust-building and inclusion yet also identifies it as a contextual frame for inequality and elite capture.

As a closing argument **decision legitimacy** is shaped by the formal merger of digital communication into institutional governance structures. Whereas WhatsApp supports fast exchange and consensus, boards and committees necessitate official records to ensure compliance with governance norms [18]. This process of ratification implies institutional legitimacy on agreements created in digital spaces. This scenario reflects a trend in African governance toward hybrid institutionalization, where informal and digital practices are validated through their incorporation into formal decision-making.

In summary these results visualize the reduction of costs through messaging negotiations as well as the enhancement of trust and legitimacy. Nevertheless, underneath these factors the questions regarding inequality of access to technological devices and elite power dynamics remain. WhatsApp clearly innovates negotiations across sectors by reshaping governance and legitimacy beyond the African continent.

6 Implications for Practice and Research

Ideally, organizations in Africa integrate WhatsApp into negotiation strategies while maintaining compliance with governance and regulatory frameworks. Thereby, the selection of negotiation channels matches contextual variables such as geography, industry, and organizational size. This study introduces the tandem concept of hybrid negotiation ecologies, where formal meets informal channels. Future studies should analyze how this hybridity affects efficiency, inclusivity, and power dynamics. Regulators must acknowledge the role of WhatsApp in African business while ensuring that transparency, data protection, and accountability are maintained. To prevent misuse in hybrid settings the development of ethical guidelines for digital negotiations is necessary.

7 Limitations and Future Research

This research presents valuable insights however few limitations need to be addressed. A limitation on Africa inhibits the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, the

question persists is if this diverse continent can be framed into a singular view on negotiation innovation. **In addition**, the rapidly shifting media environment challenges temporal validity. Platforms evolve faster than research cycles, meaning the findings should be read as provisional snapshots rather than lasting generalizations. **Moreover**, the collected data is aggregated on a continental-level masking national variations in infrastructure, regulation, and culture. Thereby critical contextual variations might be overlooked. Additionally, self-reported survey data introduces biases of memory, desirability, and framing. Acknowledging these limitations underscores the importance of methodological variations, longitudinal studies, and further analysis of local contexts. Further research can examine the combination of artificial intelligence (AI) and chatbot functionalities into digital negotiations. In this setting the effects on trust and power dynamics can be explored while including the impact on the legitimacy of negotiation processes. At business and sectoral levels the creation of hybrid channel strategies can be explored. Since organizations increasingly combine face-to-face, digital, and asynchronous modes, comparative studies across industries could reveal best practices as well as sector-specific risks. Furthermore, tracking outcomes for prolonged periods can yield an understanding of the durability of agreements, the development of trust, and adaptive capacities in dynamic environments. Finally, **a further factor** is the role of national variations. Country-level analyses could uncover how institutional frameworks, cultural norms, and technological infrastructures shape negotiation practices in ways that broader regional studies may obscure. **In sum, these findings highlight** the need for methodological diversity and comparative research to gain a deep understanding of digital negotiations.

8 Conclusion

The messaging provider WhatsApp has become central to multi-channel deal-making in Africa. This development transforms negotiation practices across business, academia, and politics. In this research the bridging of informal and formal negotiation channels is introduced. Aspects such as cost reduction, the enhancement of trust in a legitimate frame still face compliance challenges. The hybridization of negotiation ecologies in Africa provides valuable lessons for global business practice, offering a framework for future research into digital transformation, governance, and negotiation.

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