



Communication of Social and Task Messages on Instant Messaging Platforms: A Netnographic Study of Farmers' Whatsapp Groups in Kenya

Macharia Stephen*, Mulwo Abraham and Obuya Jared
Moi University, P.O Box 3900-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

*Corresponding author's email address: machariamwangi0@gmail.com

Abstract

Instant messaging platforms have become one of the most popular channels of communication globally. Communication of social and task messages on these platforms has attracted the interest of scholars but recent literature provides conflicting and inconclusive results about the interaction of those messages on online groups. This study aims at understanding the communication of task and social messages in farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya. It specifically aims at finding answers to two research questions: How do members of a task-oriented WhatsApp group respond to task messages on their forums? How do members of a task-oriented WhatsApp group respond to social messages on their forums? A netnographic research method was employed and purposive sampling procedure used to pick study participants. Participant observation of five farmers' WhatsApp groups was the main data generation technique of the study. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data. The results of the study show that communication of task and social messages takes place under a set of communication rules, stipulating that group conversation should be centred on task-oriented messages only. However, in spite of the clearly stated rules and regulations in favour of task-oriented messages, group members still posted social messages. The conclusion is that there is an inextricable connection between task and social messages. While it is important for communicators in work environment to focus on task-oriented communication, it is equally important to give space for social communication as the bonhomie created by such communication acts as a cog in the wheel towards accomplishment of task. The study contributes to literature on social media communication in organisational settings, specifically with regard to WhatsApp group platforms, which have become ubiquitous in both formal and informal settings. It also contributes methodologically to the advancement of netnography in the study of communication on WhatsApp groups. There is need for communication managers of WhatsApp groups to abandon the single-minded, task-oriented rule they root for, since there are other competing relational needs to be met through the communication of social messages.

Keywords: WhatsApp, Netnography, Social messages, task messages, Instant messaging

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade and more so in the context of Covid-19, people are using instant messaging platforms for task-related functions more than ever before (Oksa, Kaakinen, Savela, Ellonen, & Oksanen, 2020). A key aspect of recent scholarly focus of scholars in this area has been investigation on the environment that can lead to effective communication in those task-oriented online groups (De Cicco, Silva, & Alparone, 2021). WhatsApp messaging is one of most used platforms for communication in the world (Marjie & Sosoo, 2021). WhatsApp has a feature that enables users to form

online groups to discuss social and task oriented matters. The increased adoption of online group messaging in task-related communication has become the norm in many sectors across the world. In Kenya, farmers have joined such collectives essentially to discuss matters related to farming.

In relation to the content of messages posted, communication within mediated such groups is argued to take two forms namely task-oriented and social interaction (Keyton, 1997). Although interaction in such groups should ideally be based on matters related to task-oriented communication, more often than not, texting on WhatsApp has evolved to a much richer environment for communication where members are constantly bombarded with social messages. Understanding communication in online groups is critical to realisation of the goals of online groups.

Group communication on instant messaging platforms differs from face to face communication. Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003) affirm that unlike in interpersonal communication, virtual communication is built on constrained social cues. In the absence of social cues, which according to (Reio & Crim, 2013) increase social presence, feelings of acceptance and motivation to participate are reduced. In this study, before we provide details on the method used in the study, we provide an overview of extant literature on social and task-oriented messaging on online groups. We also provide details on the context under which the study was conducted.

Literature on social and task-oriented messages

This study 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 in literature as relational messages, affective messages, non-task or non-work related communication (Kraut, Fish, Root, & Chalfonte, 1990; Oksa et al., 2020; Walther, Bunz, & Bazarova, 2005; Yoo & Alavi, 2001). The content of communication within instant messaging groups comprises task and social messages.

Social messages are indicators of social presence. Greater social presence in a group is associated with higher participation (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence appreciates social cues as having a powerful influence on member participation in a group. Instant messaging communication on task-oriented groups such as those used by farmers may lead to a sense of disconnection, isolation and lack of personal attention which affects motivation for participation (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, 1999). To increase social presence in task-oriented virtual groups, members engage in posting messages that contain humour, emotions, self-disclosure, online introductions and provision of social spaces (Mokoena, 2013). This translates to an increase in participation through posting of messages by members. An indicator of community success is when interaction among course members is frequent and consistent, and course members are engaged in active reading and writing messages (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Harasim, 2002);

A challenge of communication on instant messaging (IM) groups is how members can and should maintain social ties and remains focused on the task. Although social messages may translate to an increase in task participation, online groups form norms and rules that regulate their conduct and posting behaviour. These rules constrain members in their interactions especially requiring them to post more on task and less on social communication (Uysal, 2016). These rules are set at the inception of the group or are developed as the group grows. Even in the presence of rules guiding the content to be posted, group members will sometimes post social messages in a task-oriented group. It is argued that social presence in virtual groups must make personal but purposeful relationships (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Feelings of depersonalisation may account for lower levels of satisfaction (Straus & McGrath, 1994).

Extant studies support the regulation of the type of messages posted in IM groups (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Walther et al., 2005) while other scholars, especially proponents of interaction theories of communication advocate for the integration of social messages to enhance task communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Short et al., 1976). The influence of social messages on task communication, therefore, remains an empirical gap. 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.

Within the now globally ubiquitous instant messaging groups, the format of interaction has been characterised by a blend of social and task messages. Early ideas on communication in those groups had tended to focus on the deficiency of social cues and had projected that interaction in those groups would be formal and task-oriented (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). It is worth noting that the mediated group messages then were transmitted through the telegraph which had limited capacity for sharing social messages. Later development and widespread use of these platforms has seen a shift in the type of messages transmitted through the modern-day channels.

It is in the best interest of group leaders and members to ensure that they engage in posting messages that add value to the objectives of the group through increased task participation. Understanding the nature of communication practices in these groups can inform contemporary theory in the area of mediated group communication as well as help promote effective practical utilization of these groups in agricultural extension. This study draws from and contributes to literature on communication on online groups by investigating how social and task oriented messages interplay in communication by members of farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya.

Context of the study

Existing literature points at two inconclusive and conflicting seminal positions regarding the communication of social messages in task-oriented groups. On one hand, scholars have advocated for group interaction containing task messages exclusively and devoid of any social interaction (Hercheui, 2011; Nicholson, 2016; West, 2017). An earlier study on learning groups suggested that social messages interfered with task communication in online communities (Rourke & Anderson, 2002).

On the other hand, scholars have outlined social presence, through posting social messages, as an important source of impetus for group members to post messages (Bezerra & Hirata, 2011; Ertiö, Ruoppila, & Thiel, 2016; Joksimovic, Gašević, Kovanovic, Riecke, & Hatala, 2015; Ling et al., 2005; Nov, Arazy, & Anderson, 2014; Poth, 2018; Richardson, Richardson, Swan, Lowenthal, & Ice, 2016; Zhou, Su, Zhou, & Zhang, 2016). Studies on online groups have shown that the presence of social

messages has a positive impact on task communication (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Jelfs & Whitelock, 2000; Li & Cox, 2016). Social messages are seen to be supportive of the process of interaction in a task-oriented setting. From those conflicting research findings, it is unclear whether messages in task-oriented IMs with heterogeneous membership should be task-related, socially-related, or whether both will suffice. Existing literature has given mixed findings on this and this study seeks to increase scholarly understanding of the communication of social and task messages in IMs.

Recent research on online group interaction indicates that these collectives are normally rule regulated (Klonick, 2018; Thomas & Round, 2016). Gatekeeping through content moderation rules is meant to make group members stick to task interaction and meet the expected outcomes of the group (Hercheui, 2011; West, 2017). In the face of such rules, Church and de Oliveira, (2013) are calling for studies that promote understanding of the expectations of members of IM groups regarding the content to post and read. Similar calls for more understanding of social interaction and members need fulfilment are echoed by (Karapanos, Teixeira, & Gouveia, 2016). This study intends to fill this gap in knowledge. This call for further studies in this area is reiterated by Gordon (2017) who states the need for more research on specific relational and task-related interactions, how and when they are exercised in a virtual team and how they are blended and communicated.

IM platforms such as WhatsApp allow members to form groups to facilitate communication. Membership criteria and composition of WhatsApp groups characterize the qualities and dynamics of communication between participants (Lambton et al., 2019). In that regard, farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya are unique as they are composed of a heterogeneous membership, comprising of participants with different interests, levels of education and age among other demographics. Contemporary scholars indicate that group composition has an effect on communication (Yang, Luo, & Sun, 2020; Yaylaçlı & Beauvais, 2017), suggesting that the unique composition of farmers' WhatsApp groups has a bearing on the messages posted on their forums.

Communication of task and social messages has recently been investigated with studies associating communication of social messages with better outcomes in task related communication (Oksa et al., 2020; Syrek, Kuhnel, Vahle-Hinz, & De Bloom, 2018; Van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018). However, no research has been found that surveyed those studies have not singled out the type of social messages that would lead to such outcomes, especially in groups comprising of a non-homogenous membership. Existing studies do not take the type of task messages posted into account. (Oksa et al., 2020) have called for the need for more thorough investigation and concentration on nonwork-related social media communication in a work context.

In view of the highlighted issues from extant literature, this study seeks to obtain data that will help address existing research gaps relating to the interplay of social and task-oriented messages. Specifically, the study answers the following research questions: (1). How do members of a task-oriented WhatsApp group respond to task messages on their forums? 2. How do members of a task-oriented WhatsApp group respond to social messages on their forums?

METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, a netnography was undertaken. Netnography is a way to research social media that is flexible and contextualized and comes with a *specific set of research practices related to data collection, analysis, ethics and data presentation* (Kozinets, 2015, 2020). Netnography involves the application of ethnographic methods to advance insider knowledge about an online community, and the use of the information obtained to answer research questions (Alang & Fomotar, 2015). This method has been used in investigating the practice of communication on online platforms in a growing number of studies. These include studies on family communication pattern on kinkeeper (Apriliani & Irwansyah, 2017); observing and interacting with celebrity in the digital world (Logan, 2015); understanding communication among parents and teachers (Mayangsari & Aprianti, 2017) and rhetorical sensitivity on IM communication (Saudiah & Salamah, 2017) among others. This is testament to the fact that netnography is mainly a method for the study of internet-mediated human communication and has gained popularity as an approach for understanding such interaction. This study followed the steps of a netnography (Kozinets, 2010) as indicated below:

The study relied on a purposively chosen sample of five WhatsApp groups for farmers in Kenya. As the most often used sampling procedure in qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Given, 2008; Silverman, 2005), purposive sampling in this study involved selecting participants on the basis that they meet criteria that have been predetermined by the researchers as relevant to addressing the research questions (Given, 2008). The choice of the five groups was informed by the relevant qualities they possessed in relation to the research questions. These qualities include being information-rich through constant communication by group members through posting task and social messages.

Data was collected through participant observation. Participant observation provides a researcher with a first-hand experience of how group members were respond to messages (Fernández-Planells, Figueras-Maz, & Pampols, 2014). The collectives selected for this study were closed groups, meaning that only an existing member could read and send messages. To establish credibility and trust among the group members whose messages were studied, groups where one of the co-researchers in this study was already an existing member were chosen.

Collecting data through participant observation posed some ethical conundrums. While there are well-established ethical consideration that we considered, in a netnography issues of informed consent, privacy and anonymity arise (Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope, 2017). Particularly, Mkono, (2012) observes that obtaining informed consent is the main ethical dilemma in online studies. In this study, to ensure that we respected the privacy and anonymity of group members, we allocated random codes to anonymise groups and members who had posted messages. In regard to the issue of obtaining consent, we regarded WhatsApp groups as public spaces. Information that is treated as public data may not require obtaining informed consent (Sugiura et al., 2017, Markham & Buchanan, 2015 and Kozinets, 2015).

Thematic analysis was applied to make sense of the collected data. We classified data into thematic codes that were developed through reading and reflection. Themes that emerged from field notes collected from archived participant observation data were recorded. Each code represented a theme or idea related to each research question. Major themes were put into categories and used to report the findings of the study.

RESULTS

The scope of this research focused on observing how members of five farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya communicate social and task messages. The emerging themes led to the following observations.

Communication of task and social messages is regulated

Firstly, in all the five groups under focus, the content of messages to be posted was regulated, ostensibly to maintain a civil environment and help the group remain focused on its main agenda. A look at the rules in those groups provided a clear picture of how the communication of social and task messages works. The regulations guide the task-oriented communication ostensibly to make the members remain focused on the substantive issues of the group.

Common among the regulations was a requirement that members should post task related messages only and avoid social conversations. From the onset, members were urged to confine their posts to matters relevant to farming, depending on the specific area of focus of the group. Farmers were primarily meant to use these groups to discuss and exchange information related to their trade. In some cases and groups, new members were furnished with the rule immediately they were recruited. For instance, in the VPE group, the administrator reposted the group rules every time a new member joined. The administrator of the group dedicated time to enforcing the group regulations and procedures. These rules included:

1. No discussion of any other thing except poultry.
2. English is the main language.
3. No posting links from other groups or forwarding articles unrelated to poultry.
4. Respect to one another. No insults or abusive language.
5. If you have to send photos don't jam the group with too many photos. A few photos are enough.
6. Let's strive to help one another. If a member seeks help please help him/her.
7. Breaking of the group's rules will warrant ejection from the group.
Be alert (VPE 1)

The first rule meant that the posting of messages was moderated and censored in favour of task-oriented messages. The third rule in that group emphasized on the first one. Another common rule among these groups stipulated the content of messages that members were supposed to share. One of the groups under study stated the main rule as follows:

This is a dairy farmer's group. Membership is restricted to people practising farming within Kenya. Members are required to post only messages that relate to dairy farming. Any member who violates this rule will be removed from the group. (KD 1)

Similarly, the other groups we studied had a similar requirement but put it across through different wording. At the beginning of activity in every group, the administrator reminds members to constantly stick to the rule. The second concern by group administrators that was common among the groups was a need to foster a communication environment that would facilitate effective interaction and cordial relationships among members of the group. This was stated in one group through a rule requiring members to respect fellow members and refrain from posting derogatory

social messages. The rule further stated that members posting such statements would be excommunicated.

It was a common practice among the groups for new group members to be inducted by being introduced to the rules of posting such as:

Josephine* welcome to the group we discuss dairy along the value chain matters only (KD 2).

Joyce* and Emma* welcome to the national dairy platform. Please stick to matters dairy only (KD 3).

That action by the group administrator to welcome new members by stating the rule on posting indicates the value that administrators and group members placed on making members stick to the rules of the groups. Both group administrators and members expressed their interest in enforcing the rules as evidenced through the following conversations, occurring after a member posted a religious message in a poultry farmer's group. There was an uproar by members with remarks such as: "Really! Is this part meant for this group? Over to admin. Let's have rules enforced".

In the KD group, there was conflict among members when one of them sent a religious message that irritated other members. The group took time to debate the conduct of that member. The group recommended that the member be reprimanded and removed from the forum. The member apologised and was allowed to remain in the group. The post made by that member made a few group members leave the forum in protest. The offending member also withdrew his remarks and deleted the post from the forum.

I wish to apologise to my Christian brothers for forwarding a message that seems to demean the Holy Bible by referring to the Bible as the black Book. I want to categorically state that it was careless, casual and insensitive of me to pass on this as a Christian and a believer of the Bible. I apologise to those who were affected and left the group because of my action and I ask for their forgiveness. I request the admin to Readmit those that left the group because of the above posting. Sorry, let's Forgive and discuss matters dairy. On that basis, I remove the posting. (KD 4)

Defying group rules came with its consequences. In most cases, defiant members were removed from the group or given a stern warning against posting offending social messages. In the VPE group as well as others we studied, members were initially categorical about posting content related to the task and violators of the rule were reprimanded. Another member who posts a message on the health benefits of garlic is courteously warned by the group administrator and urged to stick to the agenda of the group. Although garlic is related to farming, this was a dairy farmers' group and any information about this kind of farming was unacceptable. The regulations on content to be posted were put across in different ways. Encouraging members to stick to the rules was an incentive that created a warm and friendly environment in the KD group. "Tom*, the post could be helpful to our health but on the wrong platform. Thanks". (KD 4). At one moment, when a member sent a message outside farming in the KD group, the following exchange takes place:

Administrator: Jack*, I am sorry this is an uncalled-for post on this platform

Member: Forgive me, please. But is this the reality?

Administrator: You know well that this is a spelling mistake. You can also do the same...but how is this impacting on the dairy industry! (KD 5)

Likewise, at the VPE group, members protested the posting of a photo whose contents are outside the scope of the objectives of the group.

Group member: We have rules here. I am really pissed up by some posts. Why on earth can someone decide to share this photo on our group? How is that

useful to a poultry farmer? Can't we have order and respect other people? I am almost fed up with this group. (VPE 5)

The rules on the content of messages posted in these groups have helped in this study by providing an understanding of how social and task messages work and how deviating from rules shapes interaction in the WhatsApp groups. The rules across the groups insisted in members posting task messages exclusively on the forums.

Social messages, are posted in spite of the regulations

Another finding suggests that contrary to the desire and effort by group gatekeepers and members to stick to task-oriented messages, communication of social messages was unavoidable in the groups. The rules pointed out in the section above were meant to indicate the ideal expectations of the members of the groups. However, in practice, the groups demonstrated a strong tendency to defy the set rules deliberately or inadvertently. The five groups adhered to the set rules at different levels with some defying all the rules, others struck a balance between social and task communication while others managed to maintain communication of predominantly task messages. Even those that followed the rules on posting task messages only witnessed a few cases of deviation from the regulations. In one group, a member remark:

Admin, you have become too much. Even when we are working in the *shamba*(farm), we don't talk about farming all the time. Let me share a little about my weekend. We cannot have work all the time. Some little play makes Jack a happy farmer. (MKY 1)

Administrators of two groups, VPE and KD made effort to regulate the content of messages posted on the groups. They ensured that members flouting the rules were removed from the group. Nevertheless, despite constant effort to ensure that social messages were not posted, members would occasionally post some social messages to the chagrin of the administrators and members. At one moment when a member was appointed to a senior position in government, members of the KD group showered him with messages of congratulations. Such messages would not have been allowed at the beginning of the group since they do not relate to farming.

In the VPE group, the administrator was silent for a week and there was no one to curate the content. Within that period, there was an upsurge of social messages. When the administrator resumed and took action against violators of the rules on posting, participation in both social and task communication plummeted, leaving only two members discussing matters related to farming. The absence of conversation gave rise to the posting of photos and advertisement on farming implements without any debate. Any slight silence by the gatekeepers gave rise to social messages.

Member 1: What is happening? *Admin ako?*(Where is the administrator)

Member 2: This group is loosing(sic) direction. (VPE 5)

Member 3: Is this a group or a market?

Member 4: We need another administrator here. Make me one and I will discipline these fellows (VPE 6)

The group continued to experience less and less interaction on task, with members opting to send social messages. Even when rules were made explicit, members would keep deviating and the administrators of the group had to keep reprimanding them and bringing the groups back on track. After posting a social message on the benefits of garlic on a dairy farmers' group, a member was reprimanded and informed that the post could be helpful on people's health but it had been posted on the wrong platform.

In a related scenario, a member who posted messages promoting betting was castigated with some of the protesting members threatening to leave the group. In that case, the

administrator of the group was asked to take action to stem the problem of losing more members from the group. Members left the group after expressing dissatisfaction with the leniency of the administrator.

In a different group, regardless of the effort by the administrator to keep off non-farming related messages, a poster promoting a betting company was posted, prompting the group gatekeeper to remark:

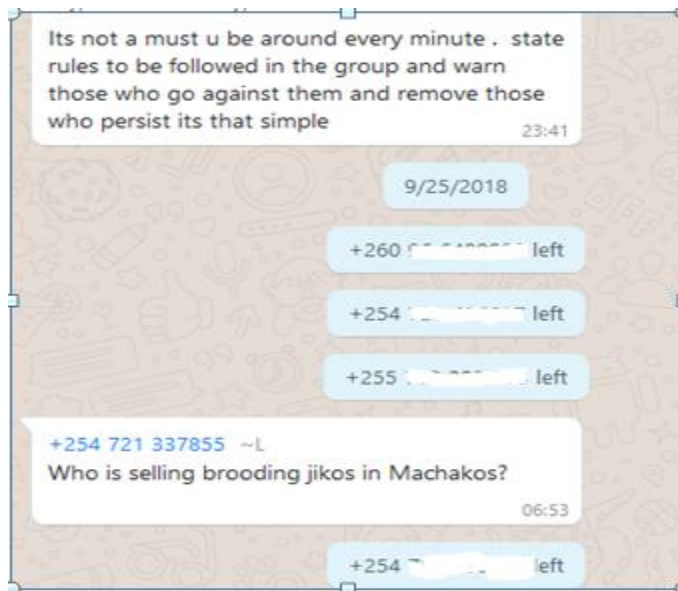
Kindly Musa*, here we are not interested with such "quick" investment and "miracle" profits. We are farmers. Farming requires patience and hard work. Kindly take your idea and explanations to another group. I believe am speaking for the majority in this forum may be except you. (MKY 3)

The member who posted the message above left the group in protest. In reaction to the same message, other member protested by stating that no advert that was unrelated to the task (poultry farming) should be posted.

We better remain just a few farmers in this group than have a 1000 jokers. You post your own things, I remove you. How hard is it to follow simple instructions for some people? I will chuck you out of the group until we have people with good manners. (VPE 8)

The episode above made the group administrator tighten the rules and ensure that anyone posting any form of social message was removed from the group. Members of this group were agitated whenever another member sent a social message. After a long lull in debating, one member sent a social message, ostensibly to reignite the conversations but was met with the following warning by the unrelenting administrator: "Out of order. Strictly poultry."(VPE 19).

Immediately after that, a member sent some offensive social message that saw more members leaving the group. The group, VPE, enforced strict adherence to the rule on posting task related messages only. The more the administrators did that, the more the members refrained from discussing and posting task messages. This underscores the importance of social messages in sustaining conversations in a task-oriented group. Discussions on task messages were rarely held as people become disinterested in further debates when the administrator enforced the rule on posting task messages. The only posts that are made at that time are fliers with advertisements of different products but no-one comments on them. The screenshot below captures the results of this disagreement on posting of social messages:



The task-related question on the subject of brooding ‘jikos’ above remained unanswered, probably out of the other group member’s pre-occupation with resolving the issue of social messages. Similarly, in the PLC group, the strong urge to post social messages continues to put the group administrator and members on a collision path. In such cases, members post social messages but rationalize by showing how such messages are still relevant to farming.

Member: I am so so excited by the response of the opposition to China loans. They are saying that the problem isn’t borrowing but that such money has ended up in the pockets of a few greedy Kenyans

Administrator: Shani*, I am warning you to stop this. Keep your political views to yourself.

Member: Admin, with all respect, allow people to breathe. What is wrong with someone saying that. This is directly related to farming since we are broke coz of this senseless borrowing. This is related to farming.

That statement underscores the struggle that group members go through in a bid to share their non-task-oriented ideas in such a controlled communication environment. It is evident that it was difficult and almost impossible to ‘switch off’ social messages.

Task messages are communicated in a formal and respectful manner while social messages are communicated in a critical and indifferent disposition.

The group messages in the groups we observed indicated varying responses by members in relation to task and social messages. Regarding task messages, responses by group members were mostly related to decision making and providing feedback on either a question that had been raised or giving a counter opinion on a message that had been posted. Task messages also involved expressions of success stories and frustrations arising from their farming-related experiences. Task messages were seen as central to realising the objectives of the group. the exchange below exemplifies task-oriented communication.

Member 1:Where can I buy lime? My soil was tested and I was told it is acidic.

Member 2: Depending on where you live, you can buy it from Athi River mining. They sell a 50kg bag at 350 bob. (MKY 6)

The above exchange indicates the direct and relevant responses that members gave and received when discussing task messages. Task messages were pertinent to all group members since they formed the core reason for most members to join and remain in the groups. The thread below shows how members responded to task messages in a different group.



(PLC 13)

The responses above suggest that task messages received relevant task-related responses from the members. This indicates that the members responding to such messages were interested in solving problems related to their trade. Groups where task messages were dominant experienced no problems in determining what was admissible to be posted since task messages were acceptable to all members across the groups. Responses to social messages varied depending on the type or content of the message posted. Social messages evoked different reactions depending on their content and the group under observation. In some cases such as in the excerpt below, the group administrator responded critically against this social post.

Pliz be informed this is a wrong forum to post such information. Keep your political stands to yourself. This is a POULTRY LEARNING FORUM! (PLC 9)

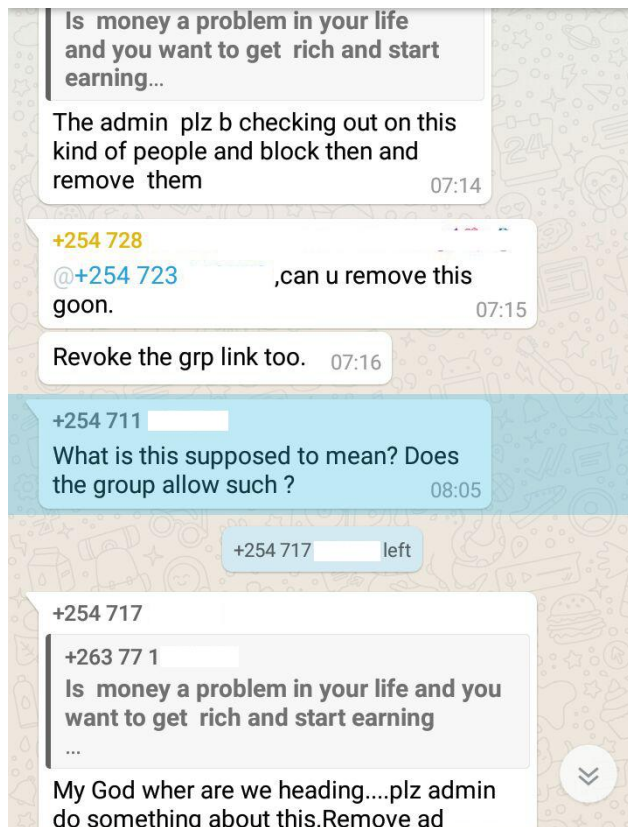
In the KD group, a member posted a religious message and received a backlash from group members that later degenerated to a verbal altercation.



KD 13

In MYK group, a member who intends to send a social message pleads with the administrator before-hand to be allowed to do so, since she is afraid of the resentful response of the administrator towards such messages. In the same group, a member posts a social message with animations wishing members a happy new year and receives the following response expressing disapproval from the group administrator. At a different moment in the same group, a member posts a message to alert fellow members of an on-going con trick that has made unsuspecting people lose money. The message also receives a resentful response from the administrator. This is a demonstration of the willingness of members to stick to the task and shun social messages.

Still in MFK group, members are irritated by social posts that introduced them to alternative ways of making money besides mushroom farming as shown on the thread below.



In conclusion, from the reaction of members to both task and social messages, it is clear that task messages elicit overt feedback. Group members provide the expected and relevant feedback to such messages. Task messages go unchallenged by members. In the case of social messages, the response from group members was unpredictable and often time associated with conflict between individuals and group members. Social messages are largely disapproved of and detested by the administrators and members of the groups.

DISCUSSION

From the analysed qualitative data, there were three themes that emerged across the groups consistently: (1) Communication of task and social messages is regulated (2) Social messages, are posted in spite of the regulations (3) Task messages are communicated in a formal and respectful manner while social messages are communicated in a critical and indifferent disposition.

The findings of the study reveal that communication of social and task-oriented messages in the groups under study was regulated by group administrators and members. This supports the idea of Hasibuan (2018) that online groups must control the behaviour of group members. Central to understanding the communication of social and task-oriented messages in farmers' WhatsApp groups is the need to understand the rules that regulate the posting of such messages. It is of interest to compare this finding with Walther et al., (2005) who explain that investigating the rules of group communication provides a basis for understanding how deviation and sticking to rules on posting messages affects group communication. Also, (Ersoz, 2019) explains that

different online groups develop a selection of norms or rules that are specific to the objectives of each group.

Similar to a study by Kimberley and Flak (2018), the difference between the groups we investigated lay on the deviation and compliance with those rules. While any group member may post freely on their farmers' WhatsApp platform, all the groups we studied had set rules that were meant to curate the content posted by members. This practice agrees with the observation by previous scholars (Hercheui, 2011; Klonick, 2018; West, 2017) who observe that online groups are rule regulated. Identification of regulations or norms governing the posting of messages in the WhatsApp groups provided an avenue for understanding how social and task-oriented messages work in group communication. These rules direct group members on the messages to post and messages not to post in order to have a sense of direction and focus in the group.

In spite of the existing knowledge about the rules of virtual groups, the rule against posting of social messages in the WhatsApp groups studied has not been observed in previous investigations. Walther et al. (2005) confirmed that virtual groups are rule regulated and went further to identify the dominant rules but the main rule identified in the current investigation does not feature among the ones they stipulated. Their rules expressed that communication should start immediately, members must engage in frequent communication and that work must be organised and substantive work done simultaneously among others. The main rule identified in the current investigation was that members should refrain from posting messages that are not related to the task. This regulation subordinates' social messages. The difference between the rules identified by those researchers and the ones we have cited may be attributed to the difference in the groups they studied and the membership composition of the groups. There was unanimity and uniformity among the different groups that only task messages should be shared on their platforms. A significant implication of the rules is that in the context of these groups, the messages posted by members should focus on the task, that is farming, rather than on social messages. This observation is consistent with other studies such as Yücel and Usluel (2016) and Hou and Wu (2011). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that those two studies were conducted in education related groups comprising of a homogenous membership.

WhatsApp group members and administrators who hold that the rules against posting social messages should be followed maintain high hopes that a group that dedicates itself fully to sending task messages realises better outcomes. They view avoiding social messages as a way of maintaining decency, values, focus, control and coordination which are appropriate in society. Regulating against social messages is seen as an avenue for accomplishing task-oriented communication. For this reason, in most of the groups we observed, defying the rule by posting social messages is met with resistance. Compliance and deviation from those rules come with consequences for communication within the group. Walther et al. (2005) agree with this finding and state that compliance to or deviation from rules has a stronger impact online than offline.

While social messages may motivate group members to participate and remain engaged in communication, members of the farmers' WhatsApp group we studied paid little attention to such messages or their role in community building and sustaining task-oriented interaction. The results also indicate that social messages are viewed as an avenue to derail the group members from task-oriented participation when they dominate in the group interaction. The discontent of group members with posting and accommodating social messages is consistent with Kang et al. (2017) who noted that

social messages are underemphasized both in practice and in literature. Unlike in group communication in face to face settings which cannot be devoid of social messages, communication in a farmers' WhatsApp group is constrained of social cues hence group members look for alternate ways to compensate for that deficit. Evidently then, the lack of social messages does not necessarily mean that communication is going to be task-oriented.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how members of farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya communicate social and task messages in their forums and their responses to communication of social and task messages posted on their Whatsapp group forums. Farmers' WhatsApp groups in Kenya are unique due to their membership composition that is characterised by diverse demographics. Overall, the conclusion of this study is that there is an inextricable connection between task and social messages. The findings emphasize the need for co-existence of social and task messages in task-oriented WhatsApp groups, suggesting the need for a review of the stringent rules against the posting of social messages in such groups. The current study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of communication in mediated spaces such as WhatsApp groups.

This investigation presents a methodological contribution to the literature on the study of communication in WhatsApp groups. This is particularly important since contemporary scholars (Malinen, 2015; Park et al., 2014) have pointed out that group processes demand a longitudinal approach to observe changes in communication patterns over time. In practice, such understanding will help guide administrators of task-oriented WhatsApp groups in creating and encouraging the formation of group rules and norms that foster a communication environment with the desired outcome of group interaction. Group members and administrators need to be aware of the opportunities that social messages provide to effectively support and facilitate task communication in their groups. It is necessary that when setting and implementing rules to single out acceptable and unacceptable social messages for the group.

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