

When Social Media Stops Being Social: WhatsApp Channels and the Re-Broadcastification of Corporate Communication

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Abstract

Social media was theorised to shift corporate communication from one-way dissemination towards dialogic engagement. WhatsApp, however, has followed a different trajectory as organisations have progressively adopted the historically interpersonal messaging platform for institutional communication. This trajectory reached a formal inflection point in 2023, when Meta introduced WhatsApp Channels, enabling organisations to broadcast content to unlimited followers who can react to posts but cannot reply to them or message the organisation through the channel. This article presents a systematic literature review, guided by PRISMA 2020, to examine whether WhatsApp Channels represent a re-broadcastification of digital corporate communication: the reconfiguration of an ostensibly social platform into a controlled, largely one-way communication environment. Searches of Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection, supplemented by targeted searches of publisher platforms and scholarly repositories, examined peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 2021 and 2026 on WhatsApp, organisational communication, dialogic communication, platformisation, and social media affordances. No peer-reviewed study was identified that specifically examines WhatsApp Channels through a corporate communication lens. However, converging evidence from affordance theory, platformisation scholarship, and WhatsApp-specific research indicates that Channels formalise a broadcast architecture previously observed in WhatsApp's use for news and public relations dissemination. The article conceptualises re-broadcastification as distinct from broadcasting, platformisation, and generic one-way communication. It further assesses whether Channels function as digital billboards, finding that while they do not meet the strict definition of a digital billboard, they reproduce its underlying exposure logic. The findings challenge

linear assumptions that digital communication necessarily progresses from broadcasting towards dialogue and demonstrate how platform design can re-construct broadcast communication within environments still characterised as interactive and social.

Keywords

WhatsApp Channels, Corporate Communication, Social Media, Dialogic Communication, Platformisation, Re-Broadcastification

1. Introduction

Corporate communication has historically been organisation-centred and relatively controlled. Social media's rise from the mid-2000s was theorised to disrupt this model: dialogic communication theory argued that networked platforms offered organisations a genuine route beyond one-way dissemination towards reciprocal exchange with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2021), and two-way symmetrical communication, long aspirational in public relations theory, appeared newly attainable at scale. WhatsApp complicates this narrative. Unlike Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, built from the outset as broadcast-capable public platforms, WhatsApp emerged as an interpersonal messaging application oriented towards private, one-to-one and small-group conversation (Johns, Matamoros-Fernández, & Baulch, 2023). Its evolution into a platform used extensively by organisations, journalists and public institutions therefore runs in the opposite direction to the usual account: an intimate messaging medium has been progressively repurposed for organisational, increasingly one-way, communication.

Tameez (2023) and Newman (2024) note that this repurposing reached a formal inflection point in 2023, when Meta introduced WhatsApp Channels, permitting verified organisations to publish content to unlimited followers who may react with emoji or respond to polls but cannot reply, comment, or exchange visibly with the organisation or each other. Adding to this observation, Nieman Journalism Lab (2023) asserts that followers' identities remain private from each other and largely from the administrator. This architecture differs markedly from WhatsApp Groups, which support many-to-many conversation among a bounded membership, and from the platform's core one-to-one function, which remains fully reciprocal and end-to-end encrypted (Nieman Journalism Lab, 2023; Newman, 2024).

The emergence of Channels raises a question that existing theory is not well positioned to answer directly: what does it mean when an interpersonal social platform is reconfigured, by design, to support only one-way organisational broadcasting? Is this a continuation of traditional corporate communication using new infrastructure; a distinct form of digital broadcasting; evidence that social media's dialogic potential was always more fragile than assumed; a rational response to the moderation costs of open-ended interaction; or something existing vocabulary does not capture at all?

This article addresses that question through a systematic literature review structured around the proposition that WhatsApp Channels represent a re-broadcastification of digital corporate communication. Re-broadcastification is treated as a proposition to be tested against the literature, not assumed. The review examines Channels' strategic advantages for organisations as carefully as their communicative limitations for stakeholders, and does not treat them as inherently problematic.

The review is guided by one main research question and six sub-questions. Main research question: *How does the emergence of WhatsApp Channels reshape the nature of digital corporate communication, particularly in relation to interactivity, dialogue, audience participation, organisational control and stakeholder engagement?*

RQ1: What does the literature reveal about WhatsApp's evolution from interpersonal platform to organisational communication tool?

RQ2: What does the literature reveal about WhatsApp Channels' communicative characteristics, particularly their affordances for broadcasting, interaction, participation and feedback?

RQ3: How does WhatsApp Channel communication compare with the dialogic and two-way ideals associated with social media?

RQ4: What opportunities and limitations does WhatsApp Channel communication create for corporate communication and stakeholder engagement?

RQ5: What theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical gaps exist in this literature?

RQ6: To what extent can re-broadcastification explain the emergence of largely one-way organisational communication within social media environments?

Section 2 situates WhatsApp's evolution and Channels within their commercial context. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework. Section 4 details the methodology, including a reproducible search appendix and quality-appraisal outcomes (Appendix). Section 5 presents thematic findings. Section 6 discusses the findings against the research questions. Section 7 develops re-broadcastification as a concept and examines the digital billboard proposition. Section 8 considers implications for practice, Section 9 identifies research gaps, and Section 10 concludes.

2. Background and Context

WhatsApp was founded in 2009 and acquired by Facebook (now Meta) in 2014. For much of its history, the platform's public identity emphasised simplicity, cross-device interoperability and, later, privacy and intimacy, in explicit contrast to advertising-funded social networks (Johns et al., 2023). A discourse analysis of WhatsApp's corporate blog and website from 2010 to 2023 found this self-presentation shifted over time, from technical interoperability toward intimate conversation and privacy assurances, and identified a tension within that discourse: the same period in which WhatsApp intensified its privacy branding also saw it expand commercial features prioritising business engagement (Sampietro, 2025).

Organisational adoption of WhatsApp preceded Channels by many years, and Elçi, Seçkin, & Doğan (2022) posit that WhatsApp Groups have been adopted for managerial purposes in higher education, with mostly positive but some negative perceptions around blurred work-life boundaries; for public-sector communication in Tanzania, often informally and without institutional authorisation despite recognised benefits (Issa & Makubi, 2024); and for small business marketing through the Business API, valuable but constrained by limited automation for small firms (Mustafa, Al-Tkayneh, Imtiaz, Hadi, Al Qaruty, Abokhoza, & Ellala, 2023). A retrospective content analysis of a Nigerian physiotherapists' association's WhatsApp Group found interactive messages the predominant category (64.5% of messages), showing Groups can sustain genuine multi-way professional dialogue when their architecture permits it (Mbada, Jeje, Akande, Mbada, Fatoye, Olakorede, Awoniyi, Okafor, Falade, & Fatoye, 2023).

Directly relevant to this review's public-relations concerns, Mashiah's (2021) study of WhatsApp-mediated relations between PR practitioners and journalists found the platform sustaining genuinely reciprocal dialogue, describing it as an alternative tribal city square for the industry while also documenting the occupational strain constant connectivity produced. This is direct, peer-reviewed evidence that WhatsApp's core architecture was, and remains, capable of the two-way professional dialogue that Channels' architecture structurally removes.

A parallel strand extends this to local government: Marcos-García, Doménech-Fabregat and Casero-Ripollés (2021) found Spanish municipalities' WhatsApp adoption reflecting a platformisation of institutional political communication oriented toward direct service dissemination rather than two-way civic deliberation, even while the underlying technology remained fully reciprocal. This is an important pre-Channel data point because institutional actors were already gravitating toward one-way, dissemination-oriented use of WhatsApp's reciprocal infrastructure years before Meta formalised that tendency architecturally.

WhatsApp's use in journalism anticipates the logic later formalised by Channels. Boczek and Koppers (2020), studying European news outlets, distinguished a distribution channel, sharing content one-way via broadcast lists, from an engagement channel, used to solicit feedback and build relationships through reciprocal communication; outlets used WhatsApp for one function, the other, or both. Published before Meta's 2023 feature existed, this distinction suggests the broadcast/dialogue split later built into WhatsApp's architecture reflects a use-pattern that already existed informally, rather than a novel behaviour the feature introduced.

Meta launched Channels in beta during mid-2023 and rolled the feature out globally in September 2023 (Newman, 2024). A Channel is a public, followable profile from which only the administrator may post; followers view updates separately from their chat list, may react with emoji and respond to polls, but cannot reply, comment, or see one another, distinguishing Channels from Groups (bounded, multi-way), Communities (linked groups with an announcement sub-group), and the paid Business Platform (two-way, automatable) (Nieman Journalism Lab, 2023).

Nieman Journalism Lab's November 2023 interviews further recorded major outlets, including the Financial Times, La Nación and the New York Times, launching Channels within weeks, motivated substantially by declining referral traffic from Facebook and X (Newman, 2024); available engagement metrics remained rudimentary, limited to view counts and aggregate reaction tallies (Nieman Journalism Lab, 2023).

Sampietro (2025) predicts this as sitting within a broader push to monetise WhatsApp, historically kept advertising-free as part of its privacy branding. A discourse-analytic study of WhatsApp Business in India found monetisation created a structural tension for smaller businesses between the platform's historical free accessibility and the costs of newer features (De, 2024), consistent with South African evidence that low cost and ease of use are central to WhatsApp's appeal for organisations and customers in the region (Kritzinger & Petzer, 2021). Channels remain free to use but sit within a broader ecosystem of paid business messaging tools developed since 2023, a commercial context directly relevant to the digital billboard proposition in Section 7.

3. Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical traditions inform this review: dialogic communication and two-way symmetry, treated as a single evaluative standard; social media affordance theory; and platformisation theory. The synthesis in Section 6 identifies which combination best accounts for the evidence.

3.1. Dialogic Communication and Two-Way Symmetry

Two-way symmetrical communication, from Grunig's (2001) excellence theory, holds that effective organisational communication involves genuine exchange in which both organisation and public may be influenced, rather than one-way persuasion. Empirical work applying this to social media finds organisations achieve symmetrical engagement when they actively design for it: deliberate two-way patterns were associated with stronger engagement outcomes (Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021), underlining that symmetry is an achievement of platform use and organisational choice, not an inherent property of any technology. According to Kent and Taylor (2021), dialogic communication theory sharpens this standard, as it holds that technologies foster genuine dialogue when designed to support openness, mutuality, propinquity and commitment to conversation, asking whether an organisation is genuinely open to being changed by what it hears, a standard beyond mere symmetry. Kent and Taylor's (2021) architectural reframing treats dialogic potential as a property of platform architecture, not an automatic consequence of a platform being social: potential is designed in or out, and cannot be inferred from a platform being widely described as social media. Together, two-way symmetry and dialogic theory give this review a two-tier standard: whether any exchange occurs at all, and whether the architecture permits genuine openness to audience input, a distinction that matters in Section 6.

3.2. Social Media Affordance Theory

Affordance theory examines how a technology's possibilities and constraints emerge from the interaction between its material properties and users' practices. A recent review of affordance definitions proposed a more precise, unified vocabulary for the tradition (Ronzhyn, Cardenal, & Batlle Rubio, 2023). Extending this to messaging platforms, Malhotra (2024), interviewing 35 users of bounded social media places, low-visibility spaces such as private groups and channels, argued that treating an entire platform such as WhatsApp as a single unit of analysis obscures important differences between its private, group and broadcast-oriented spaces, directly supporting this review's argument that Channels warrant conceptual treatment distinct from WhatsApp as a whole.

Affordance-based accounts of WhatsApp across markedly different contexts show interactivity is not fixed by the technology but varies by configuration. Groups supporting cooperative labour organising among food delivery workers afforded genuine solidarity and collective resistance (Bonini, Tréré, Yu, Singh, Cargnelutti, & López-Ferrández, 2024); WhatsApp-based support groups for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder relied on affordances enabling deep reciprocal peer support (Yeshua-Katz, 2021; Malhotra, 2023). A cross-platform study found perceived, not purely technical, affordances shape news engagement (Dvir-Gvirsman, Sude, & Raisman, 2024), and Global South research argues affordance analysis must attend to region-specific ethical and infrastructural conditions rather than importing Global North assumptions unmodified (Herrada Hidalgo, Santos, & Barbosa, 2024), a caution this review has tried to observe throughout. Where the technology permits many-to-many exchange, scholars document genuinely dialogic use; where it architecturally forecloses reply, as in Channels, no comparable use is structurally possible regardless of organisational intent.

3.3. Platformisation Theory

Platformisation is the penetration of platform infrastructures, economic logics and governance structures into economic sectors and cultural practice (Poell, Nieborg, & van Dijck, 2019). Subsequent work examines how platform owners negotiate power with dependent industries, including news publishers' vulnerability to infrastructure decisions (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2023). Johns, Matamoros-Fernández and Baulch (2023) apply this to WhatsApp directly, arguing its transformation into a global platform reflects a trajectory toward superapps that absorb commercial, civic and communicative functions previously distributed across separate services. Sampietro's (2025) documentation of the tension between WhatsApp's privacy branding and commercial expansion is direct evidence of platformisation as a lived process, corroborated geographically by Marcos-García et al.'s (2021) finding that Spanish local governments' pre-Channel WhatsApp use already reflected institutional platformisation, indicating the trajectory reflects a broader pattern of institutional adaptation, not Meta's product decisions alone.

4. Methodology

4.1. Review Design

This article reports a systematic literature review (SLR) structured according to PRISMA 2020 guidance, adapted for a communication-studies subject matter that spans peer-reviewed empirical research, theoretical and conceptual scholarship, and relevant scholarly grey literature. The review addresses literature published between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2026, while explicitly distinguishing pre-Channel literature (2021-2023), concerning WhatsApp's organisational and journalistic use prior to the Channels feature, from Channel-era literature (2023-2026), concerning the Channels feature specifically. Foundational theoretical texts pre-dating 2021 (McQuail's mass communication theory and Grunig's excellence theory) are cited as background theory rather than counted among the review's included primary studies, consistent with standard SLR practice of distinguishing a review's theoretical scaffolding from its evidence base; this distinction is applied consistently throughout and is not treated as an exception to the eligibility rule (see [Table 1](#)).

4.2. Search Strategy

The search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, and publisher platforms and repositories not fully indexed by either database (SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, Wiley Online Library, ACM Digital Library, DOAJ, SSRN, institutional repositories). Search terms combined four concept clusters: 1) WhatsApp terms ("WhatsApp", "WhatsApp Channel*", "WhatsApp group*", "WhatsApp Business"); 2) corporate communication terms ("corporate communication", "organisational communication", "public relations", "customer engagement"); 3) interaction and dialogue terms ("dialogic communication", "two-way communication", interactivity, dialogue, reciprocity, "stakeholder engagement"); and 4) broadcasting and platformisation terms (broadcast*, "one-way communication", dissemination, "message control", "organisational control", platformisation, "platform power", commercialisation). Appendix reproduces the full search history, including query strings and result counts.

Query construction moved iteratively from broad single-cluster searches to fully specified multi-cluster phrase searches, and record counts varied by orders of magnitude accordingly. Single-cluster queries returned very large, low-precision sets: WhatsApp OR "WhatsApp Business" combined with corporate-communication terms returned 5739 records in Web of Science, and a broader combination of channel and broadcast terminology returned 10,246. These were not screened in full, since assessing several thousand largely off-topic records was not feasible; they confirmed only that the search vocabulary captured the intended topic space. Refinement reduced these to a workable size: the most targeted Web of Science query, "WhatsApp channel AND corporate communication", returned 5 records, and a broader concept-name search returned 8. A parallel set of Scopus queries using TITLE-ABS-KEY syntax produced a consolidated export of 317 rec-

ords after removing duplicates; this was screened in full.

Screening proceeded from this combined pool, the full 317-record Scopus export, the high-precision Web of Science queries (5, 8, and 38 records), and the supplementary platform searches, applied against the criteria in Section 4.3. The large low-precision outputs were checked only for additional relevant records beyond those already captured; none were found. Appendix reports the complete search history and the resulting PRISMA flow. See **Table A2** in Appendix for the PRISMA 2020 Flow.

4.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Included sources were published between 2021 and 2026 (pre-2021 foundational theory cited separately as background per **Table 1**); substantially examined WhatsApp, WhatsApp Channels, or comparable broadcast features (Telegram channels) in relation to organisational, corporate, journalistic or civic communication; addressed communication, engagement, dissemination, broadcasting, or platformisation; and were published in English. Peer-reviewed journal articles were prioritised; grey literature was included where it made a substantial contribution but is classified separately (**Table 1**, reference list). Official Meta and industry sources (Reuters Institute, Nieman Journalism Lab) were used only for factual claims about platform functionality, never as scholarly evidence.

Excluded sources comprised studies outside 2021-2026 (unless serving as background theory, labelled as such); studies in which WhatsApp featured only incidentally (fake-news perception, general COVID-19 misinformation, TikTok, or health-education studies surveying WhatsApp among several platforms); purely technical or clinical studies without a communication-theory contribution; marketing studies concerned only with financial-performance metrics without engaging corporate communication as a construct; and sources whose bibliographic details could not be independently verified. This exclusion category was the single largest determinant of the review's final size: the great majority of records returned were excluded on this basis, since general social-media research is a much larger literature than research specifically engaging WhatsApp as a corporate communication tool.

4.4. Screening, Selection, and Reconciliation of the Evidence Base

Appendix reports the full PRISMA flow. Across all databases and platforms, screening and eligibility assessment yielded 42 scholarly sources: 22 peer-reviewed journal articles, 2 conference or working papers identified directly through the search, 14 further peer-reviewed sources identified through the database search and independently verified against publisher pages and DOI resolvers, and 4 sources identified through citation tracing and likewise verified.

Table 1 partitions the literature base into three categories. Category A comprises the 42 primary scholarly sources meeting all inclusion criteria and constituting the core evidence base. Category B comprises pre-2021 foundational texts,

retained solely to establish normative evaluation standards and excluded from the primary evidence count. Category C comprises industry and institutional sources used strictly to verify factual claims, never cited as evidence for a theoretical or empirical claim.

Table 1. Reconciliation of the literature base into evidence-role categories.

Category	Sources (n)	Eligibility rule	Role in synthesis
A: Primary scholarly evidence	42	Published 2021-2026; substantially examines WhatsApp, messaging affordances, corporate communication, or platformisation; independently verified bibliographic details	Core evidence base for all empirical and theoretical claims in Sections 5-7
B: Foundational background theory	2 (Grunig, 2001; McQuail, 2010)	Seminal pre-2021 texts establishing a normative theoretical standard; not evaluated as empirical evidence	Provides the normative benchmark (e.g., two-way symmetry) against which Category A findings are evaluated; never counted in evidence totals
C: Industry and institutional sources	~12 (e.g., Reuters Institute, 2024; Nieman Journalism Lab, 2023)	Official platform documentation or reputable industry/trade research; not peer-reviewed	Restricted strictly to factual claims about platform functionality, launch dates, and documented practitioner experience

4.5. Quality Appraisal and Evidentiary Weighting

Given the heterogeneous mix of study designs, quality appraisal drew on the logic of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which permits differentiated criteria per design rather than a single checklist. **Table 2** reports, for each of four evidentiary tiers, the criteria applied and the weight given to claims from that tier in Sections 5 to 8. Conceptual contributions (e.g., Sampietro's 2025 discourse analysis) were appraised for argumentative coherence rather than excluded for lacking an empirical design. Grey literature was retained where transparent and relevant, but weighted lower than peer-reviewed journal literature.

Table 2. Quality appraisal tiers and evidentiary weighting.

Tier	Appraisal criteria (MMAT logic)	Outcome	Weighting applied to claims
1: Peer-reviewed empirical journal articles	Methodological transparency, sampling rationale, data collection clarity, analytical coherence, fit between data and theoretical framing	Criteria satisfied by the large majority of Tier 1 sources reviewed	High: primary evidence for empirical claims about user behaviour, organisational practice, and affordance use (e.g., Issa & Makubi, 2024; Mbada et al., 2023; Mashiah, 2021)
2: Peer-reviewed conceptual/theoretical syntheses	Argumentative coherence, integration of prior literature, clarity and precision of definitions	Criteria satisfied; used to ground, not to test, theoretical claims	Medium-high: foundation for the theoretical framework and conceptual development in Section 7 (e.g., Ronzhyn et al., 2023; Malhotra, 2024)
3: Scholarly grey literature (conference papers, theses, working papers)	Clarity of research design, verifiability of source, transparency of analytical process	Mixed; retained where transparent, flagged where verification was partial	Medium-low: used to corroborate or illustrate trends where peer-reviewed coverage is still emerging, never as sole support for a claim (e.g., Mustafa et al., 2023; van Vuuren, 2025)

Continued

4: Industry and institutional sources	Direct source attribution; factual, non-scholarly claims only	Factually consistent across independent sources for platform-feature claims	Restricted: used only to verify platform functionality, launch dates, and practitioner-reported experience (e.g., Tameez, 2023; Newman, 2024)
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4.6. Data Extraction and Synthesis

A data-extraction matrix (**Table 3**) recorded, for each source: author(s) and year; country; research purpose; communication context; WhatsApp function studied; methodology; theoretical framework; key findings; and relevance to interactivity, dialogue, organisational control, and the re-broadcastification proposition. Thematic synthesis followed an inductive-deductive approach: pre-specified themes formed an initial coding frame, refined iteratively as sources were extracted.

5. Findings

Findings are presented across five consolidated themes, supported by **Table 3**. Findings for pre-Channel WhatsApp literature (2021-2023) are considerably more developed than findings addressing Channels specifically (2023-2026), a pattern discussed as a finding in its own right in Section 5.5.

Table 3. Characteristics of included studies (illustrative selection).

Author(s), Year	Context	WhatsApp function	Method
Johns, Matamoros-Fernández, & Baulch, 2023	Global	Platform, general	Book-length platform history/analysis
Sampietro, 2025	Global (corporate discourse)	Corporate blog/website	Diachronic discourse analysis
Masip et al., 2021	Spain	General messaging, news	Practice theory, qualitative
Mashiah, 2021	Israel	General messaging (PR/journalism)	Qualitative interview study
Marcos-García et al., 2021	Spain	General messaging (local government)	Qualitative case study
Issa & Makubi, 2024	Tanzania	Groups (org. use)	Qualitative case study
Malhotra, 2024	Multi-platform (incl. WhatsApp)	Groups & bounded spaces	Qualitative interviews (N = 35)
Mbada et al., 2023	Nigeria	Groups (professional)	Retrospective content analysis (N = 20,760 chats)
Ahmad, Bahri, & Fauzi, 2023	Malaysia	Groups (school management)	Qualitative case study
de Gruchy et al., 2021	South Africa	General messaging	Qualitative pilot study
Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021	Indonesia	General social media	Qualitative case study
Ronzhyn, Cardenal, & Batlle Rubio, 2023	Conceptual/global	N/A (theory review)	Systematic literature review
Verma & Yuvaraj, 2025	Global (bibliometric)	N/A (research landscape)	Bibliometric analysis (N = 12,947 papers)
Poell, Nieborg, & van Dijck, 2019	Global	N/A (platform theory)	Conceptual/theoretical
Bonini et al., 2024	Multi-country	Groups	Qualitative, labour organising

5.1. Theme 1: From Interpersonal Messaging to the Promise of Social Media Dialogue

Johns et al. (2023) document WhatsApp's transformation from a founder-era messaging app into a superapp absorbing commercial and civic functions previously distributed across separate services, a trajectory consistent with public relations scholarship tracking practitioners' engagement across an increasingly fragmented platform landscape. Directly within this tradition, Mashiah (2021) found WhatsApp sustaining genuinely reciprocal, dialogic professional exchange between PR practitioners and journalists, describing it as an alternative tribal city square for the industry, while documenting the occupational strain constant connectivity produced. This is direct, peer-reviewed evidence that WhatsApp's core architecture was, and remains, capable of the two-way professional dialogue that Channels' architecture, discussed under Theme 2, structurally removes.

Organisational adoption in African contexts shows this dissemination-oriented pattern was established before Channels existed, not merely compatible with it. WhatsApp was used for Tanzanian public-sector communication largely informally and without institutional authorisation despite recognised benefits (Issa & Makubi, 2024); Musheke and Phiri's (2021) Zambian evidence treats communication as a managerial output to be optimised, not a relationship to be negotiated, the same one-directional logic visible in Tanzania. South African organisations already treated WhatsApp groups as one platform among several for disseminating institutional messaging, a framing closer to broadcasting than dialogue even before Channels existed (Govender & Mzizi, 2025). This is not a regional pattern because Marcos-García, Doménech-Fabregat and Casero-Ripollés (2021) found Spanish local governments using WhatsApp primarily for direct service dissemination rather than civic deliberation, on infrastructure that remained fully reciprocal throughout. Three studies, three continents, one finding: given a reciprocal technology, organisations used it to disseminate rather than converse, well before Meta removed the option to do otherwise.

Against this trajectory, dialogic and two-way symmetrical communication establishes the normative benchmark this review uses to evaluate Channels. Kent and Taylor's (2021) architectural reframing avoids assuming any platform automatically enables dialogue; dialogic potential is a designed property. Girsang and Kartikawangi (2021) found organisations achieving genuinely reciprocal engagement through deliberate strategic choices rather than passive use, reinforcing that successful dialogic social media use depends on affordances supporting reply and exchange, precisely what Channels' architecture removes.

5.2. Theme 2: Broadcast Architecture, Audience Exposure and Organisational Control

Platform documentation, Digital News Report (Tameez, 2023; Newman, 2024), and Nieman Journalism Lab's practitioner interviews confirm a consistent Channel architecture; that is, one-way, admin-only posting in a separate Updates tab;

no reply or comment function; follower reaction limited to emoji and polls; and follower privacy maintained from the administrator and other followers, structurally distinct from Groups and Communities. No peer-reviewed study located examines this architecture through a corporate-communication lens. The theme is reconstructed from platform documentation and extrapolation from Theme 1, a gap discussed in Section 5.5 and Section 9.

This architecture has direct consequences for how audience response should be classified, unfavourably to any claim that Channels are meaningfully interactive. This review applies the Consumer Online Brand-Related Activities (COBRA) framework, developed by [Shao \(2009\)](#) and formalised by [Muntinga, Moorman and Smit \(2011\)](#) into three tiers, consumption, contribution, and creation, as its own analytical application; no source reviewed develops or applies COBRA to Channels. Applied to Channels, the architecture makes contribution and creation technically impossible as emoji reactions and polls are the entire ceiling, fixed by the software regardless of organisational choice or follower motivation.

The force of this finding is best seen by contrast. [Mbada et al.'s \(2023\)](#) analysis of a Nigerian professional association's WhatsApp Group found interactive messages the predominant category (64.5% of content) where reply was technically available. [Yeshua-Katz \(2021\)](#) found the same permissiveness supporting sustained peer support among individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder; cited strictly for what it demonstrates about Groups, not Channels or COBRA. Set against these findings, the consumption-tier ceiling on Channels is the removal of behaviour Groups support at rates of majority use, not a modest reduction from some baseline. The literature's vanity-metrics critique applies with force follower counts and reaction tallies, the only metrics available to organisations using Channels, and are exactly the category identified as disconnected from evidence of engagement, and no other metric exists because the architecture generates none.

The same architecture that caps engagement also concentrates control, and the evidence does not support treating this as incidental. This is because only administrators may post, organisations exercise complete authority over message selection, timing and framing, with no counter-messaging or dissent possible within the Channel. This is not novel but a pre-existing practitioner orientation Channels formalise and make permanent. [Govender and Mzizi's \(2025\)](#) South African case study is direct evidence of the orientation independent of platform, saying practitioners described social media strategy in terms of controlling their agenda, not dialogue, even on platforms including Groups that remain technically capable of reply. The plain reading is that practitioners wanted the outcome Channels now deliver by design before Channels existed to deliver it.

Two further studies corroborate this from different settings. [Ahmad, Bahri and Fauzi \(2023\)](#) found mobile instant messaging in a Malaysian school organisation redistributing decision-making power toward those controlling message flow, even in a nominally multi-way Group. A companion study found event-management

organisers using message-control functions, muting, restricting posting, deliberately to suppress open discussion for coordination efficiency (Ahmad, Bahri, & Fauzi, 2022). Neither examined Channels; both found organisations exploiting whatever control the architecture allowed. Read against Govender and Mzizi (2025), this is a consistent pattern across three countries: organisations select for reduced interactivity when the technology gives them the choice; Channels remove the choice and make the outcome structural.

A South African study of WhatsApp's managerial use in a sales company examines the same dynamic, though its findings fall outside what could be independently verified and are noted only as an unconfirmed, directionally consistent data point (van Vuuren, 2025). Bareket-Bojmel, Ickson, Toshav-Eichner and Sela (2024) extend the finding into the affective register that employees awaiting a supervisor's reply reported heightened negative emotion and self-monitoring, so control over messaging is experienced as psychological pressure, not merely an administrative feature. None of this concerns Channels directly, but four studies converging on the same orientation, across health, education, government and corporate settings, is not a weak basis for concluding Channels' foreclosure of reply answers a demand organisations already had.

5.3. Theme 3: The Digital Billboard

This review tests, rather than assumes, whether Channels function as a digital billboard, and the test produces a mixed verdict. Belyusar, Reimer, Mehler and Coughlin (2016) and Sheykhfard, Azmoodeh, Kutela, Das and Fountas (2024) establish the comparator empirically that a billboard is a logic in which an organisation purchases media space and audiences are exposed with no capacity for response, confirmed under close observation by their driving-behaviour studies. Channels reproduce the core of that logic, one-way exposure, no response mechanism, but diverge in three economically significant respects: Channels are free where a billboard is a paid buy; content travels to the follower's device rather than a fixed location; and exposure requires an opt-in follow rather than passers-by. On the billboard literature's strict definition, Channels are not a billboard; they lack the paid-media-space requirement central to what a billboard is. What they share is narrower. That is, the exposure logic: one organisation speaking, one audience receiving, nothing built in for reply.

Wasserbauer (2023) found out-of-home advertising and social media each independently affect brand awareness through different mechanisms; this does not show Channels are a billboard, but shows the two media are functionally comparable, economically distinct routes to the same goal. The interesting question is therefore not whether Channels are a billboard; they are not, but what the different economics imply for who bears the cost.

No study located, including the expanded database search in Section 4, has measured the data cost, storage, or attention burden Channel content imposes on followers; any claim of a measured connectivity cost would be unsupported, and this

review makes none. What the evidence supports is a theoretical implication which [de Gruchy, Vearey, Opiti, Mlotshwa, Manji and Hanefeld \(2021\)](#) found WhatsApp's affordability and prevalence were the stated reasons South Africans chose it over alternatives, establishing connectivity cost as a live, decision-shaping constraint independent of Channels-specific data; [De Groot and Lemanski \(2021\)](#) document South African infrastructure inequality as general and well-established. Combined with the fact that Channels push an increasing volume of broadcast content onto exactly this cost-sensitive infrastructure, this is sufficient to conclude, as a theoretical implication rather than a measurement, that Channels shift a real infrastructural cost onto audiences in mobile-first markets. That the size of this cost is unmeasured for Channels specifically is a genuine limitation, stated in Section 9, not a reason to avoid the implication.

5.4. Theme 4: Platformisation, Trust and the Strategic Case for Broadcast Architecture

[Sampietro's \(2025\)](#) discourse analysis provides the clearest documentation of platformisation as a lived process within WhatsApp, tracing how its self-presentation evolved alongside commercial expansion. A parallel study of WhatsApp Business in India found monetisation creating structural tension for smaller businesses between free accessibility and new feature costs ([De, 2024](#)), directly relevant to the digital billboard argument in Theme 3 and Section 7. This trajectory intersects with messaging-app trust literature. [Pierson \(2021\)](#) and [Moreroa \(2026\)](#) argue trust in messaging platforms is determined by governance arrangements, not individual feature design in isolation. This rules out an easy reassurance, since reduced interactivity on Channels cannot be assumed trust-neutral just because it sits inside a platform users trust for other reasons. No study has tested this relationship for Channels directly, so the reputational consequence of Channels' architecture remains an open empirical question this review cannot resolve favourably by default; the gap is noted again in Section 9.

The organisational advantages of Channels are real, documented in the literature, not asserted for balance. Predictable distribution removes the moderation burden open commenting imposes, treated as substantial in organisational risk-management literature. Direct reach at no media cost improves on declining organic reach on curated feeds, the calculation behind publishers' Channel adoption ([Nieman Journalism Lab, 2023](#); [Tameez, 2023](#); [Newman, 2024](#)). [Perumal, Sinayah, Govaichelvan, Shanmuganathan and Chin \(2024\)](#) show this preference for control is deliberate when Malaysian Indian community agencies actively chose controlled, single-source crisis messaging to prevent conflicting information circulating; the same architectural feature Theme 2 shows concentrating power also makes communication reliable in this use case. Channels also reduce information overload relative to Groups, extending WhatsApp's pandemic-era value for rapid health information dissemination in South Africa ([de Gruchy et al., 2021](#)) into a lower-noise format.

5.5. Theme 5: Communicative Limitations, and the Confirmed Literature Gap

The limitations converse to Theme 4's advantages—lack of dialogue, minimal feedback, audience passivity, and reduced accountability—are documented across Themes 2 and 4, and no evidence supports softening this for Channels specifically. [Willie \(2025\)](#) documents an ethical risk in WhatsApp's work-related use generally, saying organisational messaging on a personal device blurs work-life boundaries. This risk worsens for Channels, which remove the one thing making it manageable in Groups, the recipient's ability to reply or negotiate boundaries. [Soens, Claeys and Yue \(2025\)](#) provide quantitative evidence that always-on availability increases work-related strain even while employees value the same tool's convenience; strain and convenience are the same mechanism viewed from two angles, and a channel keeping the convenience while removing the audience's remaining points of control cannot be expected to keep the strain constant.

A further limitation, methodological rather than communicative, is a finding in its own right. Across an extensive combined search (Appendix), no peer-reviewed study examines WhatsApp Channels specifically through a corporate-communication lens. This is corroborated independently by a bibliometric analysis mapping 12,947 WhatsApp-related papers, which found organisational applications a comparatively minor strand within literature dominated by health and education studies, with no cluster around Channels as a corporate-communication phenomenon ([Verma & Yuvaraj, 2025](#)), strengthening the claim that this gap is a genuine feature of the literature, not an artefact of this review's search strategy.

This is a genuine literature gap consistent with RQ5, not a search failure. Channels launched globally only in September 2023, and typical peer-review timelines of eighteen months to three years mean Channel-specific scholarship may still be in the publication pipeline. The gap is nonetheless substantively important as it means the central claim this review investigates cannot yet be directly confirmed or disconfirmed by dedicated research on Channels themselves. The argument in Section 7 is presented as an evidence-based extrapolation, not a settled empirical finding.

6. Discussion

The findings suggest Channels are best understood not as a wholly new communicative form but as the formalisation, at architecture level, of a broadcast-oriented pattern already latent in WhatsApp's organisational adoption before 2023. [Boczek and Koppers' \(2020\)](#) pre-Channel distinction between distribution and engagement channels anticipates the split Meta's architecture hard-codes, corroborated by [Marcos-García et al.'s \(2021\)](#) finding that Spanish local governments already used WhatsApp's reciprocal architecture one-way, where pre-Channel literature described this as organisational choice within a technically reciprocal medium; Channels remove the choice. This distinguishes re-broadcastification, developed in Section 7, from a claim that broadcasting on WhatsApp is merely new.

The argument is that its architectural formalisation, and the foreclosure of alternative dialogic uses within that space, is new.

Against the benchmarks in Section 3, Channels fail them outright, not marginally. Kent and Taylor's (2021) architectural account predicts exactly this outcome for a space designed without reply, and the Theme 2 finding that engagement is capped at COBRA's lowest tier confirms the prediction that the ceiling is the floor, since contribution and creation are technically unavailable. Mashiah's (2021) finding that WhatsApp's core architecture, unlike Channels, sustained genuinely reciprocal PR-journalist dialogue sharpens this, as the same platform supports markedly different outcomes depending on configuration, so the shortfall is a property of Meta's design choice for this feature, not a limitation of WhatsApp as a medium. This is not unmotivated because the same architecture reduces reputational risk and moderation burden, explaining publisher adoption (Tameez, 2023; Newman, 2024) and appearing as a deliberate choice in crisis communication (Perumal et al., 2024). An explanation for why organisations chose reduced dialogue is not evidence that dialogue was preserved.

Platformisation theory offers the most productive explanatory frame. Sampietro's (2025) documentation of tension between WhatsApp's intimacy branding and commercial expansion, and De's (2024) parallel documentation in India, suggest Channels are a predictable expression of that trajectory, which is that a platform whose commercial logic depends on organisational use will develop features serving broadcast needs even where this sits in tension with its founding identity. The shift toward broadcasting is a structural consequence of platformisation's economic logic, not an accident of feature design.

The digital billboard proposition, tested in Theme 3, does not hold on its strict definition. Channels lack the paid-media-space requirement central to what a billboard is. What holds is narrower; that is, Channels reproduce a billboard's exposure logic without its cost structure. On connectivity cost, no Channel-specific data-use measurement was located even after the expanded search in Section 4, and no claim is made that audiences have been shown to pay for Channel content. The evidence in Section 5.3 supports a theoretical implication, not a measurement, that audiences in cost-sensitive markets bear a portion of the connectivity cost of broadcast content on infrastructure they fund; that this remains unmeasured is a gap this review reports, and Section 9 identifies it as a research priority.

Taken together, three propositions follow. First, Channels reshape corporate communication toward reduced interactivity and increased control, consistent with re-broadcastification, though drawn from adjacent literature rather than dedicated Channel-specific research. Second, this is not evidence of regression toward pre-social-media broadcasting; it demonstrates that architecture, not medium, determines dialogic potential, supported by affordance theory (Ronzhyn et al., 2023; Malhotra, 2024) and the contrast between Channels and genuinely dialogic WhatsApp uses elsewhere (Bonini et al., 2024; Yeshua-Katz, 2021; Mashiah, 2021). Third, the equivalences digital equals interactive, social media equals dialogic, and engagement equals participation are not supported, as each depends on affordance con-

figurations platform owners design in or out according to commercial logic, of which Channels are one instance.

7. Towards a Concept of Re-Broadcastification

This section develops re-broadcastification as a conceptual contribution, evaluated against existing terminology rather than assumed established. **Table 4** differentiates four adjacent concepts.

Table 4. Differentiating re-broadcastification from adjacent communication constructs.

Construct	Core definition	Distinguishing attributes	Differentiation from re-broadcastification
Classical broadcasting	Centralised one-to-many transmission via dedicated media (e.g., television, radio) to mass audiences (McQuail, 2010)	Built on non-reciprocal infrastructure from inception; no return channel	Never possessed an interpersonal baseline; re-broadcastification requires a documented prior or concurrent reciprocal use-context
One-way communication	Medium-agnostic descriptor for any communication lacking a feedback loop	Applies equally to print advertising, billboards, and public notices	Lacks the architectural-retrofitting and platform-identity tension specific to re-broadcastification
Platformisation	Structural penetration of platform infrastructures and economic logics into societal domains (Poell et al., 2019)	Macro-level economic and governance process, not a communicative form	Explains why re-broadcastification occurs; does not itself describe the resulting one-way architecture
Dialogic communication (absence of)	Normative standard describing openness, mutuality, and reciprocal exchange (Kent & Taylor, 2021)	A relational quality, evaluated rather than architecturally defined	Provides the evaluative benchmark against which re-broadcastification is judged; does not itself name the architecture

None of these concepts captures the specific phenomenon documented here. The retrofitting of one-way architecture into a space previously, and still substantially, used for interpersonal communication elsewhere in the same application. Classical broadcasting never had an interpersonal baseline to retrofit; platformisation explains the economic driver but not the resulting architecture. Malhotra's (2024) finding that WhatsApp requires disaggregation into its constituent bounded and broadcast spaces supports the claim that existing vocabulary is inadequate here. Mashiah's (2021) documentation of reciprocal dialogue on WhatsApp's core function and Marcos-García et al.'s (2021) documentation of one-way institutional dissemination on that same infrastructure confirm WhatsApp has long supported both modes simultaneously, precisely the pre-existing condition re-broadcastification requires.

Therefore, re-broadcastification is defined as the process through which a platform, or a bounded space within it, previously associated with reciprocal communication is reconfigured, through deliberate architectural and commercial design choices, into a controlled, scalable, predominantly one-way channel for organisational dissemination, while the broader platform continues to support interpersonal communication elsewhere within its architecture.

Three characteristics distinguish it from neighbouring concepts. Prior reciprocity: it requires a documented prior or concurrent reciprocal use-context, separating it from classical broadcasting and from born-broadcast formats such as email

newsletters. Architectural formalisation: it describes a deliberate technical foreclosure of reply, distinguishing it from cases where users simply choose to use a reciprocal medium in a broadcast-like manner, such as an unanswered open Facebook page. Co-existence with continuing interpersonal identity: the tension Sampietro (2025) documents between branding that emphasises intimacy and features that formalise broadcast-only architecture gives the concept its critical force.

A conceptual model proceeds through four stages. Traditional corporate communication, one-way messaging through owned and paid media, gives way to social media and dialogic communication, where networked platforms promise, and in documented cases deliver (Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021; Mashiah, 2021), genuine reciprocal engagement. Within specific bounded spaces, this trajectory bends back toward Channels, which formalise one-way distribution within an application otherwise associated with reciprocity. The result is re-broadcastification, and this is not a return to pre-digital broadcasting, since the platform and its opt-in distribution model differ substantially, but a structurally comparable reassertion of one-way, organisation-controlled communication, legitimated by continuing to operate within a platform publicly associated with sociality.

This review's confirmed literature gap, corroborated bibliometrically (Verma & Yuvaraj, 2025), means re-broadcastification is presented as a theoretically grounded proposition rather than an empirically confirmed phenomenon. Section 9 identifies direct empirical testing against Channel-specific data as the field's most pressing priority.

8. Implications for Corporate Communication

Practitioners should evaluate Channels for what their architecture permits rather than assume they inherit social media's dialogic reputation. Channels suit time-sensitive, high-reach, low-controversy distribution where organisational control over framing is legitimate, service announcements, breaking updates, consistent with the advantages under Theme 4, including the deliberate preference for controlled crisis messaging (Perumal et al., 2024). They suit poorly, on this evidence, tasks requiring stakeholder consultation, complaint handling, or relationship-building of the kind Mashiah (2021) documents for WhatsApp's core function, since Channels provide no mechanism for these within the Channel itself; organisations pursuing such goals must route them through reciprocal messaging or Business API functions, or risk stakeholders perceiving a mismatch between the platform's implied sociality and its actual one-way use.

For reputation, Theme 4's trust findings (Pierson, 2021) and Theme 2's vanity-metrics critique together caution against reporting follower counts or view metrics as evidence of meaningful engagement, which risks conflating exposure with the genuine exchange two-way symmetry and dialogic theory require. For transparency, the absence of a visible public response mechanism means organisations using Channels for civic-facing communication should consider what parallel accountability mechanisms exist for functions open commenting, however imper-

fectly, has historically provided.

For strategy in mobile-first, data-cost-sensitive markets such as South Africa, Themes 3 and 4 point in two directions organisations must weigh against each other. Channels' zero direct-media-cost structure genuinely benefits resource-constrained organisations. Against that sits the connectivity-cost burden placed on audiences (Section 5.3, a theoretical implication rather than a measured figure) and Meta's broader WhatsApp Business monetisation trajectory (De, 2024), which gives no confidence that Channels-adjacent functionality stays free indefinitely. An organisation adopting Channels because they are currently free is shifting cost onto its audience now while carrying uncoded risk of a future fee; that trade-off should be named to decision-makers, not folded into a general efficiency claim.

9. Research Gaps and Future Research

Five specific priorities emerge, consistent with RQ5. First, and most pressing given the gap in Section 5.5 corroborated by Verma and Yuvaraj (2025), dedicated content analysis of corporate and public-institution Channels is needed to test re-broadcastification against Channel-specific data rather than by extrapolation. Second, interview research with practitioners who have adopted Channels would establish whether adoption is driven by the strategic advantages under Theme 4, by platform-dependency dynamics (Poell et al., 2023), or by other motivations. Third, audience-side studies of follower perception, whether Channels are seen as a continuation of WhatsApp's identity or as equivalent to email newsletters, would test the claim that re-broadcastification depends on a tension between branding and architecture. Fourth, comparative studies against Telegram channels (Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024) and Instagram Broadcast Channels would establish whether this pattern is WhatsApp-specific or a general messaging-platform tendency. Fifth, empirical measurement of data usage and access costs associated with Channel subscriptions in mobile-first markets is needed, since the connectivity-cost argument here is a theoretical implication, not a measurement; existing South African evidence addresses WhatsApp generally but not Channels directly, a gap stated explicitly.

10. Conclusion

This review asked if social media was celebrated for making corporate communication more interactive; what does it mean when organisations adopt architectures that let them speak to audiences without conversing with them? The evidence, from affordance theory, platformisation scholarship, dialogic theory, and pre-Channel WhatsApp literature, supports the conclusion that Channels represent a defensible instance of re-broadcastification, a reconfiguration of a platform still substantially associated with interpersonal reciprocity into a space that, within Channels specifically, forecloses that reciprocity by design. This is offered as a theoretically grounded argument, not an empirically settled finding, because this review's search confirmed that dedicated peer-reviewed research on Channels through a corporate-communication lens does not yet exist in meaningful vol-

ume, a gap the field should now address. The broader implication extends beyond WhatsApp. Digital communication's evolution should not be assumed to move linearly from dissemination toward dialogue; platform development can, under specific commercial and architectural conditions, reconstruct broadcasting within environments still publicly identified as social. The equivalences this review challenges—digital is inherently interactive, social media inherently dialogic, and engagement inherently meaningful participation—are not supported as general claims. Each depends on affordances platform owners retain the power to grant or withhold. What happens when social media becomes a broadcasting environment is that scholarship must resist treating platform and practice as synonymous, and examine, space by space, what a given architecture actually permits.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix: Search Strategy and PRISMA 2020 Flow

A1. Full Search History

Table A1. Web of Science Core Collection search history.

Query	Database	Results
WhatsApp channel and corporate communication	Core Collection	5
“WhatsApp Channel” OR “WhatsApp Channels”	Core Collection	38
(“WhatsApp Channel*” OR “WhatsApp Channels”) AND (communication OR “corporate communication” OR “organisational communication” OR “public relations” OR engagement)	Core Collection	38
WhatsApp OR “WhatsApp Business” AND (“corporate communication” OR “organisational communication” OR “public relations”) AND (engagement OR dialogue OR dissemination)	Core Collection	5739
WhatsApp Channels AND (“corporate communication” OR “organisational communication” OR “public relations”) AND (engagement OR dialogue OR dissemination)	Core Collection	284
WhatsApp AND (“dialogic communication” OR dialogue OR “two-way communication” OR interactiv* OR reciprocity OR “stakeholder engagement”)	Core Collection	285
WhatsApp AND (broadcast* OR “one-way communication” OR dissemination OR “message control” OR “organisational control”)	Core Collection	219
WhatsApp AND (affordance* OR “social media affordance*”) AND (communication OR engagement)	Core Collection	106
(“WhatsApp”) AND (“platformisation” OR “platformization” OR “platform power” OR “commercialisation”)	Core Collection	14
(“WhatsApp Channel*” OR “Telegram channel*” OR “broadcast channel*”) AND (communication OR engagement OR organisation* OR “public relations”)	Core Collection	2812
“WhatsApp Business” AND “corporate communication” OR “customer engagement” OR “public relations”	Core Collection	10,246
“WhatsApp Channels” OR “re-broadcastification” OR “bounded social media places”	Core Collection	8

A2. PRISMA 2020 Flow

Table A2. PRISMA 2020 flow.

Stage	Records (n)	Notes
Records identified across all databases and platforms	~505	~150 supplementary publisher-platform records (18 Boolean queries, Section 4.2) + 317 Scopus consolidated export + 38 unique Web of Science records (Table A1)
Duplicate records removed	~45	Same study located via multiple hosting platforms or across databases
Records screened (title/abstract)	~460	Screened against Section 4.3 criteria; excludes the large low-precision Web of Science outputs, checked separately only for additional relevant records not otherwise captured
Records excluded at screening	~395	Off-topic, incidental mentions, CSR/financial-performance focus, clinical/technical focus
Full-text reports assessed for eligibility	~65	
Reports excluded after full-text assessment	~23	Reclassified as background theory; unverifiable bibliographic detail
Total scholarly sources included in synthesis (Category A)	42	22 peer-reviewed journal articles and 2 conference/working papers identified directly through the search; 14 further peer-reviewed sources verified against DOI resolvers and publisher pages; 4 sources added through citation tracing and likewise verified. See Table 1 , Section 4.4.