

# WHATSAPP BUSINESS AND LUXURY: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON CONSUMERS

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines the use of WhatsApp Business (WAB) in luxury retail, exploring the experience, perceived benefits, preferences, and usage intentions of luxury consumers in Italy. A quantitative survey was conducted through an online questionnaire administered to 72 respondents, the majority of whom were based in Italy. The findings indicate that WAB is perceived as an effective communication channel, capable of providing personalised interactions and facilitating online purchasing. The most valued features are text messages, photos, videos, and the product catalogue, while calls and voice messages are considered less relevant. Consumers report trust in the platform and acknowledge its usefulness in enhancing the customer experience. The study provides practical insights for companies on how to integrate WAB into marketing and sales strategies, while also highlighting methodological limitations and suggesting future cross-cultural and gender-based investigations.*

**Keywords:** WhatsApp Business (WAB), consumer research, luxury, retail

## **1. Theoretical Background and Research Questions**

In an increasingly digitalised world, intensified by the effects of COVID-19, the adoption of ‘smart technologies’ has become a necessary step to keep pace with the growing level of both consumers and firms’ innovativeness, characterizing the emergence of ‘Luxury 4.0’ or, more broadly, ‘Industry 4.0’ era (Lawry, 2023; Pantano et al., 2018; Slaton & Sponder Testa, 2023; Tarabasz, 2025; Zhang, 2024).

The rapid adoption by companies of mobile instant messaging applications (i.e., MIM or ‘mobile technologies’) is revolutionising relationship management and modes of interaction with consumers who are increasingly becoming value co-creators and ‘omnichannel shoppers’ (Lo Presti et al., 2020; Pantano et al., 2018; Rasool et al., 2020; Ruby Grace, 2024; Slaton & Sponder Testa, 2023; Zhang, 2024). According to global surveys, in January 2024, 94.7% of users aged 16 to 64 reported that their primary reason for using the internet is precisely the use of instant messaging apps, particularly WhatsApp, which was identified as the second-favourite social platform immediately after Instagram (Digital, 2024).

Even a few years earlier, additional global reports had identified interesting trends in terms of social interactions (Sixto-García et al., 2021). Notably, in 2018 - prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 - the number of mobile phone users worldwide had already surpassed the number of Internet users (Sixto-García et al., 2021). In that year, WhatsApp, launched in 2009, was already used in 133 countries and ranked as the third most relevant social technology globally, preceded only by Facebook and YouTube (Sixto-García et al., 2021). This global relevance led its creators to realise that it could represent a source of new opportunities for businesses (De, 2025; Lo Presti et al., 2020).

For this reason, in January 2018, Meta decided to launch WhatsApp Business (WAB) exclusively aimed at the professional sector, which differed from the traditional version due to its numerous features, including the product catalogue, automated messages, and the ability to create a dedicated business profile (De, 2025; Jannah, 2023; Mustafa et al., 2023; Sixto-García et al., 2021).

Initially, WAB was available only in a very limited number of countries: Italy, Indonesia, Mexico, United States, and United Kingdom (Sixto-García et al., 2021). Nevertheless, with the onset of the pandemic crisis, this tool became even more essential for all businesses, as it allowed retail sales personnel to promote purchases despite consumers being unable to visit physical stores (De, 2025; Xu et al., 2023).

It can thus be inferred that COVID-19 highlighted the necessity of introducing MIM into the business world. They have increasingly been regarded positively by companies as tools for support and enhancement, capable of both increasing customer engagement and strengthening commercialisation, thanks to their potential to boost purchase completion rates and customer loyalty (Lo Presti et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2023).

New sources of competitive advantage have increasingly emerged, namely ‘mobile conversational commerce’ as a new mode of commerce, including both mobile marketing, capable of increasing product value for producers, distributors, sellers, and consumers, and one-to-one multimedia marketing, through which companies offer greater personalisation by tailoring their offer to consumer’s specific needs, thereby inverting traditional marketing paradigms (Lo Presti et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021). Building on this, recent studies on luxury consumers have shown that these opportunities enable firms in the sector to interact more effectively and, through enhanced personalisation, generate unique customer experiences for each individual consumer, thereby increasing their level of brand loyalty (Ni & Liu, 2024).

Furthermore, thanks to the introduction of WAB, companies, including smaller enterprises, can adopt new strategic approaches (Lo Presti et al., 2020). Among these is the so-called ‘servitization’ strategy, understood as the provision of both services and products through the

same communication channel, thereby enriching the value proposition (Lo Presti et al., 2020). Beyond the servitization strategy, WAB also enabled firms to adopt more user-centric marketing strategies (Daoud et al., 2023).

Despite the emergence of this new scenario, as confirmed by recent academic research, studies on the advantages offered by MIM such as WAB remain limited (Ahmad & Farooqi, 2020; Lo Presti et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021). Moreover, while the adoption of such technologies may enable the implementation of new commercial approaches, both in terms of consumer marketing and as sources of competitive advantage, it can also bring new challenges, including the development of new skills by sales personnel, who, despite digitalisation, continue to play a fundamental role (Pangarkar et al., 2022). Such skills include the ability to manage two-way communication, suitability, reliability, and social CRM skills (Lo Presti et al., 2020).

Specifically, from an empirical perspective, it is necessary to broaden the knowledge by considering an increasing number of sectors adopting WAB in order to demonstrate the potential of this digital tool (Lo Presti et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021).

Building on these considerations and prioritising the luxury consumers perspective – whose purchasing behaviour is strongly shaped by their digital experiences (Ni & Liu, 2024) - this study focused on a specific domain, i.e. the luxury sector, with the objective of providing greater insight into the use of WAB as a communication and sales channel by companies and retail outlets.

The following research questions guided the entire design and structure of the study:

*RQ1: What are the experiences, perceived benefits, and preferences of luxury consumers regarding WAB?*

*RQ2: What are the attitudes and usage intentions of luxury consumers towards WAB?*

These research questions allowed for a deeper understanding of luxury consumers' perspectives regarding WAB, enabling the identification of its key strengths and weaknesses, which companies can leverage to better define their commercial and marketing strategies.

## **2. Research Methodology**

Prioritising the consumer perspective as the analytical focus, a quantitative survey was conducted using an online anonymous questionnaire, administered to a sample of 72 respondents, mainly coming from Italy (the majority, representing 95.83% of the sample). The study involved both actual customers, using a retail dataset containing over 1,000 contacts, and potential customers of a well-known Italian company: FIAM Italia, internationally renowned for its curved glass products and collaborations with prominent designers.

The questionnaire was distributed from late July 2025 to early September 2025 using three different channels: (i) Brevo Newsletter, an email marketing platform that allows targeted communication to contact lists and the monitoring of related interactions, (ii) personalised emails and (iii) WAB.

Analysis of the sample provided some interesting demographic information. In terms of education, it was observed that over 70% of the sample (precisely 72.22%) held a university degree. Specifically, 6.94% had a bachelor's degree, 50% a master's degree, and 15.28% a doctoral degree. The remaining 27.78% held a high school diploma.

In terms of geographical origin, the two largest groups were from Central Italy (44.44% of the total sample) and Northern Italy (38.89% of the overall sample).

Regarding gender, a perfect balance was observed between men and women, each group representing 48.61% of the sample, while the remaining 2.78% consisted of two individuals who preferred not to disclose this information.

To address the first research question (*RQ1*), a section of the questionnaire was created consisting of both closed-ended single-response questions and 7-point Likert scale items. In

the case of questions regarding experience with WAB, some were formulated based on the researcher’s personal experience and the methodologies used to promote the WAB channel, as well as for the items concerning preferences for content promoted through WAB. For perceived benefits, reference was made to the studies by Sixto-García (2021) (partially considered for items on preferences regarding the use of instant messaging apps), Xu et al. (2023), and Lo Presti et al. (2020).

To address the second research question (RQ2), questions were primarily designed with items evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). For this research question, reference was mainly made to the dimensions proposed by the UTAUT model, which is used to understand the likelihood of success and usage intentions of a new technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Some indicators of the model were considered and, compared to the original framework, adaptations were made: certain items were adjusted to account for the consumer perspective and the purchasing experience.

Additionally, a new dimension was considered, namely Trust, as proposed in various studies concerning the intention to use new technologies (e.g., Chandra, 2010; Slade, 2015; Zhang, 2024). Finally, to better understand the likelihood of purchasing a product recommended through WAB, reference was made to the test proposed in the literature regarding purchase intention (Taylor et al., 1975). In this case, a seven-point likeability scale was used (1 = Absolutely unlikely; 7 = Absolutely likely).

During the data analysis, mean values and standard deviations (SD) were calculated, in addition to absolute and percentage frequencies.

### 3. Results

Regarding the level of experience with WAB (RQ1), respondents were asked whether they had ever used this tool to communicate with a company or retail outlet. The results showed that 50% of the sample used this MIM occasionally. The remaining sample was divided as follows: 13.89% reported using it regularly; 16.67% stated they did not use it but were willing to start considering it; and 19.44% declared they were not interested. This confirms that instant messaging platforms should be considered by companies to align with consumers’ level of innovativeness (Lo Presti et al., 2020).

Among those who reported having experience, the level of use was analysed using a frequency scale (1 = very rarely; 7 = always). Observing the mean and standard deviation for both groups, it was found that:

- those who use it regularly have a mean of 4.90 and a standard deviation of 1.45;
- the mean and standard deviation of those who reported using it occasionally are 3.08 and 1.38, respectively.

Table 1: Consumers’ opinions on tools used to communicate the existence of WAB as a channel

Tools to communicate the existence of WAB as a Channel / Degree of disagreement or agreement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. A promotional email about the channel	9,72% (7)	5,56% (4)	11,11% (8)	11,11% (8)	27,78% (20)	22,22% (16)	12,50% (9)
2.The URL in the email signature of the store and sales staff	12,50% (9)	9,72% (7)	13,89% (10)	15,28% (11)	27,78% (20)	12,50% (9)	8,33% (6)
3. WhatsApp button in Facebook posts	16,67% (12)	13,89% (10)	16,67% (12)	12,50% (9)	18,06% (13)	15,28% (11)	6,94% (5)
4. Facebook contact information	19,44% (14)	12,50% (9)	11,11% (8)	22,22% (16)	9,72% (7)	18,06% (13)	6,94% (5)
5. Link featuring the WhatsApp logo within the post’s textual content	11,11% (8)	8,33% (6)	9,72% (7)	22,22% (16)	15,28% (11)	16,67% (12)	16,67% (12)
6. Instagram biography	16,67% (12)	5,56% (4)	16,67% (12)	19,44% (14)	18,06% (13)	12,50% (9)	11,11% (8)
7. Retail’s Google Business Profile	11,11% (8)	6,94% (5)	16,67% (12)	18,06% (13)	23,61% (17)	9,72% (7)	13,89% (10)
8. Retail’s Bing Place for Business	23,61% (17)	2,78% (2)	26,39% (19)	22,22% (16)	13,89% (10)	6,94% (5)	4,17% (3)
9. Facebook stories containing links to the WAB catalogue	18,06% (13)	8,33% (6)	13,89% (10)	23,61% (17)	19,44% (14)	11,11% (8)	5,56% (4)
10. Instagram stories containing links to the WAB catalogue	15,28% (11)	2,78% (2)	16,67% (12)	16,67% (12)	22,22% (16)	18,06% (13)	8,33% (6)
11.WAB button (widget) on the company website	6,94% (5)	5,56% (4)	12,50% (9)	11,11% (8)	15,28% (11)	23,61% (17)	25,00% (18)
12. Business cards distributed by retail sales staff	9,72% (7)	16,67% (12)	23,61% (17)	13,89% (10)	18,06% (13)	8,33% (6)	9,72% (7)
13. Conversation with sales staff at the physical store	6,94% (5)	8,33% (6)	13,89% (10)	8,33% (6)	19,44% (14)	20,83% (15)	22,22% (16)
14. Telephone conversation	12,50% (9)	12,50% (9)	13,89% (10)	19,44% (14)	15,28% (11)	11,11% (8)	15,28% (11)
15. Sign displayed at the entrance of the retail outlet	16,67% (12)	15,28% (11)	12,50% (9)	19,44% (14)	13,89% (10)	9,72% (7)	12,50% (9)
16. Word of mouth	11,11% (8)	11,11% (8)	18,06% (13)	12,50% (9)	20,83% (15)	6,94% (5)	19,44% (14)

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the experience of purchasing products through WAB, no respondent reported making regular purchases using WAB, and the largest group, comprising 40.28% of the total sample, indicated to be inclined to use it for purchasing purposes. This confirms that mobile conversational commerce is an emerging practice even among Italian consumers in the luxury retail sector (Lo Presti et al., 2020).

To identify the most effective means of promoting WAB as a communication and sales channel, respondents were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), considering the channel promotion strategies implemented by the retail company and the researcher. Table 1 summarises the percentage frequencies associated with the individual responses.

Observing the mean ratings, it was found that the most effective means of promoting the channel are as follows:

- the WAB button on the website (widget), with a mean of 4.93 and a standard deviation of 1.87;
- a promotional email about the channel, with a mean and standard deviation of 4.58 and 1.79, respectively;
- a conversation with the sales staff in the physical store, with a mean of 4.76 and a standard deviation of 1.90.

The results confirm that sales staff and human interaction remain a fundamental element in the successful implementation of technology in the retail context (Pangarkar et al., 2022).

Regarding the ratings of perceived benefits of WAB, the same scale as the previous question was used. Observing the mean ratings, respondents agree that WAB:

- compared to traditional means, allows for a more intimate, confidential, and personalised conversation, thereby stimulating retail purchases. This confirms the findings in the literature (e.g., Lo Presti et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023);
- enables more immediate communication and promotes greater consistency in interaction with companies, while also serving as an excellent tool both for promoting the services offered by the store and for supporting remote purchases. This confirms contributions reported in the literature (e.g., Sixto-García et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023);
- represents a valid alternative for digital purchases (Xu et al., 2023) and can support the provision of good customer service (Sixto-García et al., 2021);
- serves as a good channel for product promotion (Lo Presti et al., 2020), especially when using the ‘catalogue’ function (Sixto-García et al., 2021).

Table 2 reports the mean values and standard deviations for the individual items.

Table 2: Perceived benefits of WAB

	M	SD
<b>PERCEIVED BENEFITS</b>		
1. Compared to traditional channels, WAB enhances the intimacy, confidentiality, and personalisation of sales-staff interactions, thereby stimulating greater in-store purchases.	4,46	1,81
2. Communication via WAB is perceived as more credible	3,90	1,75
3. Communication via WAB is more immediate	4,90	1,85
4. WAB fosters greater communication consistency with the company	4,60	1,83
5. WAB is highly effective in communicating the services offered by the retail.	4,63	1,86
6. WAB is an effective tool for supporting remote product purchases	4,83	1,86
7. Sales-staff service via WAB matches that of the physical retail.	3,93	1,87
8. WAB is a valid alternative for digital purchases	4,56	1,79
9. WAB allows me to be more engaged with the retail experience	4,07	1,87
10. Online communication via WAB encourages me to request more information from the retailer.	4,42	1,91
11. WAB can provide effective customer service	4,68	1,93
12. WAB effectively promotes products via its features, such as the catalogue	4,69	1,89

Source: Own elaboration

To assess the level of preference of luxury consumers regarding the multimedia content and features offered by WAB, table 3 summarises the mean ratings and standard deviations for the individual items.

Table 3: Preference regarding WAB content and features

PREFERRED CONTENT/FEATURE	M	SD
1. Text messages	4,69	1,88
2. Video calls	2,67	1,75
3. Phone calls	3,01	1,90
4. Photos and videos	4,88	1,91
5. Voice messages	3,03	2,04
6. Links to the company website or other communication channels (e.g., IG, FB, email contact)	4,28	1,86
7. Automated messages, such as out-of-office notifications	3,86	2,05
8. Stories/status updates lasting up to 24 hours that promote the product	3,44	2,03
9. Catalogue browsing	4,99	1,93

Source: Own elaboration

Analysing the mean ratings, it was found that three types of content or features were preferred by the sample: text messages, photos and videos, and the WAB catalogue. Conversely, forms of communication through WAB involving video calls, voice calls, voice messages, 24-hour product promotion statuses, or links to content promoted on Instagram were not among the preferences.

From this analysis, it can be understood that not all possible content that can be produced through WAB, as mentioned in recent studies (e.g., Jannah, 2023; Sixto-García et al., 2021), should be considered effective in consumer interaction.

Regarding the second research question (RQ2), analysing the mean ratings revealed that the sample:

- stated that their intention to use WAB is not influenced by its use by friends, family, influencers, or authorities;
- considered interaction through WAB to be easy and intuitive;
- affirmed that WAB is simple to use and easy to learn;
- believed that using WAB makes purchasing faster and more efficient, and is useful for the shopping experience as it makes online purchasing more engaging;
- expected the presence of a technical support team in case of issues with WAB and that the platform should be accessible both via mobile and desktop;
- trusted the security of WAB and considered it a reliable tool.

Regarding the likelihood of purchasing products recommended via WAB (Taylor et al., 1975), the mean and standard deviation were 4.57 and 1.79, respectively. This indicates that the average rating corresponds to “fairly likely”—that is, a value of 5 on the scale—for purchasing products promoted through WAB.

#### 4. Conclusions and Implications

This study provides insights on how to manage WAB in terms of communication and sales, considering the perspective of luxury consumers both in the luxury furniture sector and in luxury retail, offering practical guidance for companies. It was found that the experience with WAB as a sales and communication channel for luxury consumers is considered a fundamental channel that companies should integrate into their sales and communication strategies. Indeed, luxury consumers are willing to adopt it for their purchases, as it is regarded as a valid alternative for digital shopping. This provides further confirmation that the

number of luxury consumers who rely on mobile tools to make their purchases is increasing, and that the enhanced interaction enabled by WAB between the brand and the consumer has a positive impact on purchasing behaviour (Azemi et al., 2022; Ni & Lu, 2024).

To promote the existence of this channel, companies should focus on specific means: the widget on the corporate website, promotional emails, and communication through sales staff. This confirms that human dimension continues to play a fundamental role (Pangarkar et al., 2022). In terms of perceived communication benefits, consumers consider interaction through WAB to be more immediate and to foster greater engagement with the company, confirming what has been reported in the literature (Daoud et al., 2023; Lo Presti et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021). The study highlights which multimedia content should be transmitted via WAB and emphasises the importance of the catalogue function offered by the platform. Furthermore, it was observed that the intention to use WAB is particularly related to purchases, as it is regarded as a facilitating and secure tool for online shopping, capable of enhancing the customer experience.

This preliminary study, presents some limitations related to the profile of the participants (mainly with a university-level education) as well as the sample size, which results in limited generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the standard deviation values, all above 1, indicate a high degree of data variability. Given that the current analysis is descriptive in nature and based on a very limited sample, which will be expanded, further development of this study will require the implementation of robust inferential analysis and the exploration of relationships between variables, such as correlations.

In addition to these methodological limitations, it is necessary to highlight a further point of weakness: the presence of researcher bias, as one of the researchers was directly involved in promoting WAB as a new luxury retail channel.

For future research, alternative data collection methods are suggested, such as telephone interviews or in-depth surveys. Additionally, it is recommended to conduct the same study by comparing perspectives across different countries to observe similarities and differences between cultural contexts, and to carry out empirical investigations based on gender to determine whether WAB is more widely adopted by women or men.

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