

Public Relations Implications of Facebook Users' Perceptions of the Osu Caste System in Igboland

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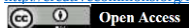
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ABSTRACT

This study, *Public Relations Implications of Facebook Users' Perceptions on the Perennial Osu Caste System in Igboland*, examined the enduring influence of the Osu caste system on marriage practices and social dynamics, alongside reactions and discussions on Facebook. Grounded in Networked Publics Theory, the research utilised a qualitative design, employing critical discourse and frame analyses on 20 responses selected through a census approach. Findings revealed three key insights: the persistent influence of Osu caste system on discrimination and exclusion, the emergence of Facebook as a powerful tool for challenging traditional norms, and a dichotomy between theological and egalitarian arguments versus traditional practices. Recommendations include enforcing anti-discrimination legislation, leveraging social media for advocacy, and promoting theological narratives of unity. The conclusion highlights the dual forces of tradition and modernity, with interpretive journalism and social media advocacy poised to redefine societal norms and pave the way for an inclusive Igbo society.

Introduction

Marriage is a universal institution that transcends time and culture, serving as a critical mechanism for societal perpetuation and cohesion. It not only unites individuals but also bridges gaps between diverse backgrounds, reinforcing social structures. However, in many contemporary societies, cultural practices often dictate marital choices, leading to a preference for endogamous unions where individuals marry within their social strata or educational backgrounds. Despite these traditions, love remains a powerful force that can alter even the most entrenched societal norms. In the case of Igbo culture, the historical complexities surrounding marriage are further complicated by the existence of Osu caste system, a traditional form of social stratification that persists to this day.

Osu caste system, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Igbo people of Nigeria, categorizes individuals as "Osu" or outcasts based on ancestral lineage. This designation not only stigmatises those labeled as Osu but also imposes significant social barriers, particularly concerning marriage and interpersonal relationships (Nwankwo, 2020). The implications of this caste system are profound, affecting the dynamics of personal relationships and social interactions within the community. Individuals classified as Osu often face discrimination that not only impacts their social standing but also their emotional well-being, leading to a pervasive cycle of stigma and exclusion.

On December 11, 2024, a noteworthy incident reported by Chidiebere Faith on Facebook brought the pervasiveness of Osu caste system into sharp focus. The incident involved a woman whose fiancé called off their impending wedding upon discovering her Osu status, which led to her emotional collapse. This event not only triggered widespread outrage but also spurred discussions about the entrenched nature of caste-based discrimination in modern relationships. The public discourse surrounding this incident illustrates the enduring influence of Osu caste system, raising critical questions about its implications in contemporary society.

The reactions of Facebook users to this incident provide an invaluable lens through which to analyse societal attitudes towards Osu caste system. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have emerged as critical arenas for public discourse, enabling users to share their opinions and personal narratives related to caste discrimination. The incident reported by Chidiebere Faith serves as a case study for understanding how social media can amplify marginalised voices while simultaneously revealing the complexities of public sentiment regarding traditional injustices (Eze, 2023). Following this incident, Facebook users expressed a spectrum of emotions ranging from anger and sympathy to disbelief and support for the victim. This diverse array of reactions accentuates the intricate nature of social media as a tool for social commentary and activism. The overwhelming response from users has prompted reflections on personal experiences with Osu caste system, catalyzing a broader societal conversation about the necessity for change and the dismantling of discriminative practices (Ibe, 2024). Such discussions are crucial in addressing the underlying cultural attitudes that perpetuate stigmatization.

The emotional repercussions of the incident extend beyond the individuals directly involved, resonating deeply within their families and communities. The bride-to-be's collapse serves as a stark reminder of the psychological toll that caste discrimination can impose on individuals, highlighting the urgent need for mental health support for those affected by social stigma and exclusion (Uche, 2024). Addressing the emotional fallout from such discrimination is essential for fostering a more inclusive society that recognizes the humanity of all its members, irrespective of their caste designation. To adequately address these issues, interpretive journalism emerges as a vital tool for unloading the convoluted layers of public perception surrounding Osu caste system as expressed on social media. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the underlying sentiments and motivations that drive user reactions, illuminating the complexities of caste-based discrimination in contemporary Igbo society. By engaging with these perceptions through an interpretive lens, researchers can uncover the latent meanings and societal implications embedded within public discourse.

By contextualising experiences and sentiments shared on platforms like Facebook, journalists bridge the gap between traditional practices and contemporary social realities. This approach enables a deeper examination of how societal attitudes toward Osu caste system are shaped and reshaped through ongoing discourse, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of caste dynamics within Igbo culture. Moreover, the interplay between social media and traditional cultural practices presents a unique opportunity for scholars to analyze how digital platforms can facilitate social change. As users engage with and challenge the norms surrounding Osu caste system, social media becomes a potent catalyst for dialogue and reflection. This dynamic underscores the potential for social media to not only amplify marginalized voices but also to serve as a space for collective healing and advocacy.

Statement of the Problem

Osu caste system in Igbo society represents a significant social issue, particularly affecting marriage and personal relationships, as it designates certain individuals as "Osu," or outcasts, based on ancestral lineage, leading to widespread discrimination and stigma. Numerous concrete situations illustrate the precarious nature of this caste system: engagements and marriages are often disrupted upon the revelation of an individual's Osu status, resulting in emotional distress and public humiliation; individuals labeled as Osu frequently face social exclusion, families of Osu individuals endure shame and ostracisation, impacting their social standing; economic disadvantages arise as job opportunities are limited due to societal bias; cultural narratives and traditional proverbs reinforce the stigma associated with Osu status. Public outrage often follows incidents where weddings are called off due to Osu status, highlighting the need for dialogue on caste discrimination; younger generations increasingly challenge the norms of Osu system, creating tension with older relatives; social movements advocating for Osu

rights gain traction on platforms like Facebook, though they face pushback from conservative factions; the emotional toll of caste discrimination leads to hopelessness among Osu individuals; the stigma alters the marriage market, perpetuating cycles of loneliness; social media discourse reveals a blend of support and condemnation regarding Osu caste system. These instances underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive examination of Osu caste system and its implications for marriage and social dynamics.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this research was to analyze the implications of Osu caste system on marriage practices within Igbo society, as well as the reactions and discussions surrounding it on social media platforms through the lens of interpretive journalism. The specific objectives were to:

1. analyse how the Osu caste system influences contemporary marriage practices and social dynamics in Igboland.
2. examine the role of Facebook as a platform for challenging traditional norms and promoting awareness about caste-based discrimination.
3. explore the divergent perspectives of Facebook users on the practice of Osu system

Research Questions

1. How does the Osu caste system continue to shape marriage practices in Igboland, as reflected in Facebook users' perceptions?
2. In what ways do Facebook users utilize the platform to challenge or reinforce traditional norms associated with the Osu caste system?
3. What are the dominant themes in Facebook discourse regarding the Osu caste system?

Literature Review

Digital Socialisation and Communicative Power

Facebook, developed in 2004 by Zuckerberg, Moskovitz, Saverin, and Hughes, has transformed from a campus-exclusive network into the world's most influential social media platform. It enables users to construct personal profiles, establish connections, and disseminate textual, visual, and multimedia content. Scholars such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), and Boulianne (2015) agree that Facebook functions not merely as a digital utility but as a profound social instrument. Its functions stretch beyond interaction to include identity formation, civic engagement, and community solidarity (Okhueigbe, 2025). For marginalized populations, Facebook offers a tool for circumventing traditional media gatekeeping, granting space for expressive and political agency (Graham and Wright, 2015; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Its relevance to African societies lies in its ability to reshape traditional kinship interactions and allow diasporic communities to maintain cultural continuity virtually (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Miller and Madianou, 2011).

Nonetheless, Facebook's algorithms are designed to prioritize emotionally charged or personally resonant content, which significantly shapes users' worldviews and cognitive behavior. Pariser (2011) describes this phenomenon as the "filter bubble," where algorithmic curation leads to echo chambers that reinforce existing biases. Empirical findings by Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) also reveal the role of Facebook in propagating misinformation and fostering political polarization. As of January 2024, Facebook reports approximately 3.065 billion monthly active users, accounting for about 37.2% of the global population (Statista, 2024). India, with over 378 million users, is the largest national user base (Kemp, 2023). Demographic analysis shows a male-dominant user ratio of 56.3% to 43.7% (Statista, 2024). The age group 25–34 remains the most active, while teenage engagement continues to drop significantly (Pew Research Center, 2023). Mobile devices account for over 81% of access points (Social Media Examiner, 2023), highlighting a shift toward spontaneous, location-independent communication. Scholars like Boyd and Ellison (2007), and Van Dijck (2013) underscore that Facebook has evolved into



a tool of “networked individualism,” blurring boundaries between public and private, virtual and real, and communal and algorithmic.

Religious Origins and Social Implications of Osu Caste System

Osu caste system, primarily rooted in Igbo traditional religion, is a historically institutionalized form of social stratification that stigmatizes a segment of people based on their ancestral dedication to deities, particularly in pre-Christian Igboland. According to Ilogu (1974) and Isichei (1976), the Osu were consecrated to shrines and thus deemed the “property” of the gods, making them ritually unclean for communal integration. They were forbidden from intermarrying with the “Diala” (freeborn) and were often denied access to leadership roles, property rights, and communal rites. Agashieze (2023) notes that this classification extended to their descendants, who inherited the stigma irrespective of personal merit or piety. Osu were confined to particular spaces and could only reside in designated quarters of villages. This spatial marginalization reinforced the idea of spiritual contamination, fostering deep intergenerational trauma and systemic exclusion (Nwadike, 2020; Ubesie and Nzeako, 2021).

Despite legal frameworks such as the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which guarantees equal rights and protection under the law, Osu caste system persists informally, especially in rural communities. Human Rights Watch (2020) reported that families have canceled engagements and disowned members over Osu-related marriages as recently as 2021. This institutionalised discrimination has provoked numerous responses from civil society, religious bodies, and human rights organizations. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, in a 2009 pastoral letter, condemned Osu caste system as incompatible with Christian anthropology and human dignity. Likewise, the Methodist Church Nigeria abolished caste-based marriage restrictions in 2012 through synodal legislation. Contemporary scholarship by Aligwekwe (1991), Nwaogaidu (2015), and Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) explores the resilience of the system despite modernization, globalization, and Christianity. Even with increasing urbanisation, the stigma travels with the name, particularly via surnames and oral history (Okhueigbe & Dike, 2024). Increasingly, however, youth-led advocacy and digital activism, including awareness campaigns on Facebook and YouTube, are working to dismantle these prejudices (Okoroafor and Nnadi, 2022).

Contemporary Resistance and Prospects for Abolition

There is a growing intellectual and grassroots movement aimed at the abolition of Osu caste system, with scholars and civil society actors calling for a deconstruction of inherited prejudices. Edeh (1988) argues that the Christian evangelization in Igboland failed to adequately address the Osu question due to syncretic accommodation and reluctance to confront traditional authority systems. Nonetheless, newer theological frameworks rooted in liberation theology and inculturation (e.g., Ukpong, 1994; Oborji, 2005) advocate for a radical inclusivity in line with the Gospel. These positions have found support among Pentecostal and Catholic groups championing human dignity and spiritual equality. Psychosocial research by Oji and Ifeka (2019) indicates that Osu descendants exhibit higher levels of social anxiety and lower marital satisfaction due to fear of exposure and discrimination, even in diaspora contexts. The phenomenon is no longer local—it is now transgenerational and transnational, carried into relationships and job opportunities.

Furthermore, digital platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, have provided a powerful medium for Osu individuals and allies to challenge centuries-old norms. From hashtags such as #EndOsuCaste to live testimonies of broken engagements and stigmatization, the digital space has become a battleground for socio-cultural reform. Research by Chilwa and Ajiboye (2019) shows that Facebook groups discussing Osu system often attract both solidarity and hate speech, indicating that the issue remains deeply polarizing. However, dialogue is now happening across regional and ethnic lines, signifying a new phase in Igbo socio-religious consciousness. If this momentum continues and is

buttressed by institutional policies, education, and religious support, Osu caste system may soon shift from a sociocultural curse to a historical footnote.

Empirical Review

In a study titled "Osu-Caste System in Igbo Land and its Contemporary Implications: Uratta Community," Omeni-Pius & Ubonu (2024) aimed to explore the historical and cultural background of Osu caste system and its impact on contemporary marriage practices in the Uratta community of Igbo land. Anchored on conflict theory, the study employed a documentary research design, analyzing secondary data. The population consisted of community members, with a focus on those affected by the caste system. The findings revealed that Osu caste system perpetuates discrimination and social exclusion, significantly affecting marriage prospects for individuals labeled as Osu. The study concluded that the caste system poses a challenge to social justice and recommended intensified efforts from policymakers and community leaders to promote inclusivity and equity in marriage practices.

In "Understanding the nuances of the Osu caste system in Igbo culture," Nwadike (2020) explored the impact of social media on public perceptions of the Osu caste system. The study aimed to identify themes in online discourse surrounding caste discrimination. Employing content analysis of social media posts, the research found that themes of injustice and calls for equality were prevalent. The conclusion suggested that social media serves as a vital space for raising awareness and fostering discussions that challenge caste-based discrimination, recommending that activists utilize these platforms to amplify their messages.

Ibekwe, Otti and Onwunaje (2023) did a study titled Osu-caste system and the socio-cultural implications in Okija, Anambra State, Nigeria. The theoretical thrust of this paper was conflict theory of Marx. Survey design was used and the major instrument for data collection was structured questionnaire. Sample size of 150 residents, aged 20 years and above were drawn using multi-stage sampling techniques. The respondents were purposively selected from three villages in the area. The results showed amongst other things that stigmatization, abuse of fundamental human rights, bridge of friendship, and taunting were major social implications of osu-caste in the area. Again, the cultural implications of the caste were found to be denial of marital rights, denial of traditional rights, like chieftaincy titles, ostracism/rejection and seclusion of place of residence. The paper concluded that Osu-caste still exist in Okija and has divers disturbing social and cultural implications. It recommended that there is a need for a stern decree or law by the government to eliminate the idea that Osu-caste is part of culture and strictly enforce compliance by prosecuting anyone found labelling another an Osu.

Theoretical Framework

Networked Publics Theory

Introduced by Danah Boyd in 2008, Networked Publics Theory explores how social media creates new forms of public discourse and community engagement. This theory posits that online platforms facilitate the formation of "networked publics," where individuals can share information, mobilize for social causes, and engage in collective identity formation. In the context of Osu caste system, this theory is pertinent as it allows for an analysis of how Facebook serves as a space for marginalized voices to challenge caste discrimination and advocate for change. By examining the interactions and mobilization efforts within these networked publics, researchers can gain insights into how social media influences perceptions of Osu caste system and fosters a sense of community among those affected by caste-based discrimination.

Methodology

The research methodology for this study was frame analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Frame analysis was utilized to identify and examine the underlying frames that shape public perceptions and narratives surrounding Osu caste system, focusing on how these frames influence societal attitudes

and behaviors. Critical discourse analysis complemented this by scrutinizing the language and power dynamics present in these discussions, revealing how discourse constructs social identities and perpetuates stigma against Osu individuals.

Data Presentation and Analysis

S/N	Name of Respondent	Response
1	Cff De-lee	"But you've chop the so called Osu thing na so there for you are Osu as well. No Osu to those who are in Christ Jesus so God created human being and not OSU. Repent or you perish by recreating what God has created, thanks and be blessed."
2	Chidi Uchenn	"Please, what you don't know is above you, when considering taking a woman as a wife, also consider your unborn children too, because I know in many communities where people with Osu tag have a very larger association called: 'NNEJI'; if you dare have issue with any of them, you're gone because their members in other communities will join them to make sure you suffer. I think they are proud of who they are, and they are always successful because the gods of the land are always on their side. So, let us trade with care."
3	Tony Chuks	"I blamed the guy for not finding out earlier before now. Like my side Isiala Mbano, we make inquiries to know if the family is Osu or not before taking any step further. Even before I propose to any lady for marriage, I'll first of all find out if the family is Osu or not."
4	Richard Grant	"So after all sets and done it's now that he found out that the girl is Osu. Osu girl can make her rich overnight because they are really blessed people."
5	Timothy Awaliah Gbarnjah I	"Is it only me that doesn't know what OSU is? 🤔"
6	Chimnonso Duru	"Make I just see my kind of lady, then let me know why I will not marry her because of nonsense reasoning. My fellow humans and same tribe and culture. As in, I no just understand; I don't believe in a lot of things both church and tradition."
7	Akinrujomu Usiola Oluwabusayo	"These are the same people wey dey always shout 'bigot' online be this... for inside una tribe, freeborn dey, Osu dey 😭. Now I understand the gaslighting well."
8	Roland Keke	"He doesn't want to start what he can't finish."
9	Friday Ekoyo Justus	"This belief is barbaric and has been abolished. The man will regret his uncivilized action on the innocent girl."
10	Chinedu Eze	"The guy never loved her with his heart. How can I leave someone I truly love because of this kind talk?"
11	Queen Zara	"After you done eat and drink with her even do the doings both in the bathroom and kitchen. Anyway, God Dey."
12	Sophie Adaeze	"Wetin be Osu, my people? I'm confused."
13	Chris Nelly Vivian	"Heard it's content but Na Dem sabi."
14	Faraday Michael	"The guy no well."

15	Nnamdi Emmanuel	"And if this is true and not content, for the fact that you have slept with her, that thing you fear will kill you soon. When you dey sleep with her you don't know, e reach marriage you come get sense. Wait for vengeance! Fool!"
16	Nkem Kammelu	"Chaaaiiiiiii so painful. May God strengthen you and connect you to someone that will accept you for who you are."
17	Osain Prince	"What's OSU?"
18	Onyeka Chigbo	"What is Osu?"
19	Love Samuel	"Please, someone should explain what Osu is for me."
20	Emmanuel Peter	"What's the meaning of OSU?"

Data Analysis

The data collected reveal a complex interplay of beliefs and attitudes toward Osu caste system, significantly influencing contemporary marriage practices in Igbo society. For instance, *Cff De-lee* expresses a theological perspective, asserting that in Christ, caste distinctions are irrelevant. This response frames Osu label as a social construct that should be transcended, suggesting a potential shift towards inclusivity within marriage practices. Such sentiments highlight a counter-narrative to traditional views, where caste identity is often seen as a determining factor in marital eligibility. This perspective resonates with ongoing discussions about equality and acceptance, indicating a gradual evolution in attitudes among some community members. Conversely, responses like those from *Chidi Uchenn* and *Tony Chuks* illustrate the entrenched beliefs surrounding Osu system. *Chidi Uchenn* emphasizes the need to investigate Osu status of potential spouses, indicating that traditional practices still dictate marriage decisions. This reflects a prevailing theme of caution and social stratification, where the stigma attached to Osu individuals can lead to significant societal repercussions. Through this lens, marriage practices remain heavily influenced by caste perceptions, revealing the extent to which Osu system continues to shape personal and familial decisions. Such attitudes reinforce the caste divide, demonstrating the challenges faced by individuals labeled as Osu in seeking acceptance within the community.

Similarly, respondents like *Richard Grant* and *Timothy Awaliah* express confusion or outright rejection of Osu system, highlighting a desire for change and a questioning of traditional norms. Their statements suggest a growing awareness of the discriminatory implications of the caste system, reflecting broader societal attitudes that challenge established hierarchies. This discourse signals a potential shift among younger generations, who are increasingly vocal against caste discrimination. The repeated inquiries about the meaning of Osu from respondents like *Sophie Adaeze* and *Osain Prince* indicate a desire for clarification and understanding, suggesting that the younger populace may be more open to redefining cultural narratives surrounding caste. The analysis of these responses through critical discourse and frame analysis reveals a nuanced landscape regarding Osu caste system in Igbo society. While some respondents cling to traditional beliefs that dictate marriage practices, others advocate for a reevaluation of these norms. The sentiments expressed reflect a broader societal dialogue that grapples with issues of discrimination and acceptance, suggesting that Osu caste system remains a contentious topic. As discussions continue, the potential for transformative change in attitudes and practices becomes increasingly evident, signaling a gradual move towards greater inclusivity and understanding in relationships within Igbo communities.

Discussion of findings

The interplay of beliefs and attitudes revealed in the collected responses aligns with key themes and findings from the empirical review. Omeni-Pius & Ubonu (2024) found that Osu caste system

perpetuates discrimination and social exclusion, particularly in marriage. Responses like that of Chidi Uchenn echo this, as he emphasizes the necessity of investigating potential spouses' Osu status, indicating how entrenched discrimination impacts marriage decisions. Similarly, Tony Chuks highlights the traditional practice of verifying Osu status, reinforcing the stigmatization and exclusion found in the studies by Ibekwe et al. (2023). Nwadike (2020) identified themes of justice and equality in online discussions about Osu caste system. Responses from individuals like Richard Grant and Timothy Awaliah, who outrightly reject the caste system, align with these findings. Their comments indicate a growing awareness and vocal opposition to caste-based discrimination, reflecting the advocacy and mobilization fostered by social media as explored through the Networked Publics Theory. The results from Ibekwe et al. (2023) highlight denial of marital rights and ostracism as cultural implications of Osu caste. Responses like those from Tony Chuks reflect this reality, where marriage prospects are contingent upon one's caste status, thereby perpetuating cultural norms of exclusion. These responses also reflect the loss of fundamental human rights and social seclusion, as noted in the empirical findings.

While the studies focus largely on cultural and social discrimination, responses like that of Cff De-lee emphasize a theological lens, where Osu label is seen as irrelevant in Christ. This contrasts with the empirical focus on cultural and traditional dimensions, presenting a counter-narrative that leans on Christian doctrine to challenge caste distinctions. Chidi Uchenn mentions that Osu individuals are considered to have the gods of the land on their side, introducing a perspective of superiority or protection not explored in the empirical review. This view adds a layer of complexity, as it challenges the perception of Osu individuals solely as victims of discrimination. Network theory emphasizes the role of online platforms in fostering dialogue and challenging societal norms. Responses like those from Sophie Adaeze and Osain Prince, which reflect inquiries about Osu system, align with this framework. Social media's ability to create spaces for discussion and mobilization is evident, as younger respondents display openness to understanding and potentially reshaping cultural narratives. The empirical studies by Omeni-Pius & Ubonu (2024) and Ibekwe et al. (2023) apply Conflict Theory, highlighting the struggle between traditional norms and evolving societal values. Responses from individuals like Chidi Uchenn and Tony Chuks illustrate the tension between tradition and modernity, as they uphold cultural practices that conflict with calls for equality and inclusion.

Findings

1. Osu caste system continues to influence marriage practices and social dynamics, with discrimination and exclusion remaining prevalent in communities.
2. Facebook emerges as a powerful tool for challenging traditional norms and raising awareness about caste-based discrimination.
3. while some individuals challenge Osu caste system using theological and egalitarian arguments, others cling to traditional practices

Conclusion

The enduring influence of Osu caste system underscores the complexity of dismantling entrenched cultural practices. However, the rise of social media as a tool for advocacy signals a shifting tide in public perception, offering a platform for marginalized voices to challenge age-old injustices. While traditional beliefs persist, they are increasingly confronted by theological and egalitarian arguments, pointing toward a society in transition. The findings reflect a community grappling with its identity, straddling the line between cultural heritage and modernity. This tension presents both a challenge and an opportunity—a chance to redefine societal norms and build an inclusive future where caste discrimination becomes a relic of the past. The aid of interpretive journalism seems this most enviable pathways to this realization.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government should enact and enforce legislation that criminalizes caste-based discrimination, ensuring violators face substantial penalties.
2. Activists and NGOs should utilize Facebook and other social media platforms to amplify voices against caste-based discrimination, leveraging the networked public spaces to mobilize support and share success stories of caste integration.
3. Churches and traditional leaders should collaborate to promote theological arguments against Osu caste system, encouraging a narrative of unity and inclusivity grounded in faith and cultural progress.

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