

Social Media and The Sustainability of Indigenous Culture in Akwa Ibom State: *Ekpo Festival* Aksufest in Review

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Abstract:

This study investigates the role of social media in promoting the sustainability of indigenous culture. Focusing on the Nnanake Ekeke's *Ekpo Festival* in Akwa Ibom State University Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST) 2024 edition, the vibrant celebration of the rich cultural heritage of the Annang and Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria is highlighted. This study examines to use of social media platforms to enhance visibility, engagement, and participation in traditional cultural events which is poorly projected to the global community. This study deploys qualitative data collection techniques, in engaging Participants Observation and Key Informants interviews to draw content analysis of social media interactions related to the festival. The study identifies key social media platforms utilised during the festival, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter, and assesses their effectiveness in promoting culturally themed productions during the AKSUFEST and beyond. The study reveals that, when harnessed effectively, social media can serve as a powerful ally in the promotion and revitalisation of cultural heritage, ensuring that traditional practices like the *Ekpo Festival* continue to thrive in an increasingly globalised world. In recommendation, it will be creating engaging content by using high-quality images, videos, and live streams to showcase cultural events, performances, and traditions. This helps create a deeper connection with the audience and nurtures interest. It will encourage user-generating content for their online groups and channels. This not only promotes the event but also increases our socio-cultural relevance in the global community.

Keywords: AKSUFEST, Cultural Sustainability, Digital Heritage, *Ekpo Festival*, Social Media.

Introduction

Indigenous festivals take centre stage in the African theatre ontology, serving as a repository of culture, beliefs, collective memory and identity. The emergence of social media as a dominant mode of socialization has significantly created a cultural shift which presents a risk (of extinction) and new opportunities to expand the reach of our indigenous events. Akwa Ibom State, is culturally rich and diverse state in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, it is a home to a plethora of tradition, customs, and values. The cultural landscape of Akwa Ibom is characterised by a unique blend of ethnic groups, each with its dialect and nuances of cultural heritage. However, this cultural diversity is facing imminent challenges, including: cultural erosion, lack of documentation and under-promotion and the diversion of attention from traditional performances to the use of social media platforms for entertainment. "In the twenty-first century, global theatre practice is taking

account of the technological discoveries of the digital age and examines how theatre can deploy such innovations to improve its art-making processes and products, thereby winning more patronage for the theatre" (Aniebiet Mbede et. al. 135). From the point of view, it becomes almost impracticable to visualise the effectiveness of promotion and preservation of cultural values without leveraging social media.

From the communal need for information exchange, to the development of means of communication; the various types of social media platforms present an effective strategy for cultural sustainability in all frontiers of cultural engagements. The emergence of social media channels such as: Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube have revolutionised how we communicate, socialise and share information and as well influenced the promotion and sustenance of the cultural heritage of the people.

Cruz- Saco, in his book, *Promoting Social Integration: Economic, Social, and Political Dimensions*, states that, “sustainable development cannot occur without the integration of the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of life” (342). This democratisation of content creation allows for underrepresented voices to share their traditions and narratives, thereby fostering a greater appreciation for cultural diversity. The interactive nature of social media also encourages dialogue between creators and their audiences, enriching the understanding of various cultures through direct engagement (Uford et al., 2022).

MacBride Peil et. al. in his book, *Reporting in a Bi- Cultural Society*, posits that, “social media is a cultural instrument which supplies the cultural fare and shapes the cultural experience of many people in the modern world” (65). Muyima Shoremi is of the opinion that culture began when man as an articulate symbol-using primate began because culture is easily and readily transmitted from one human organism to another due to its symbolic character. Shoremi therefore agrees that “culture is symbolic, continuous, cumulative and progressive in nature” (88). Consequently, the concept of culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts of a particular group or society. It is the collective expression of a group’s identity and is shaped by history, language, religion, traditions, and social interactions. Aniebiet Mbede argues that, “In the light of the evident global shift, it becomes essential for theatre practitioners to reinvent the mode and modalities for publicity and production participation through the integration of socially driven electronic devices to enhance the reach and output of theatrical productions” (Mbede et. al. 96). It is evident that socially driven devices in applications have seemingly removed the barriers of distance and has made the cultural trends of other tribes and ethnic groups more accessible, enabling people identify with and learn about cultures not geographically proxy to them.

From the perspective of Ekpenyong Stephen in the book, *Understanding Nigerian People and Culture*; he submits that; “Culture is a broad concept, which is essential in analysing the ways human beings relate to others. It is a concept common in many disciplines

including Anthropology, Sociology, Humanities, Biology and the Medical Sciences. In ordinary language, culture has some emotive connotation. It is common for example, to describe some people as cultured while others are seen and described as uncultured. This is an indication of whether or not such persons are socially integrated or are social misfits or cultural deviants within a given social organization or setting” (22).

One of the most significant cultural festivals in Akwa Ibom State is the *Ekpo Festival*, this study focuses on Nnanake Ekeke’s found space performance in the AKSUFEST 2024 edition titled *Ekpo Festival and Traditional African Mystery*. The performance was hosted in Akwa Ibom State University by the 100-level students of the Department of Performing Arts as a practical expression of Traditional African and Festival Theatre. In the African society, *The Ekpo Festival*, a centuries-old tradition that showcases the state’s unique cultural heritage is a vital part of the state’s cultural identity, and its promotion and preservation are crucial. This is where media comes in as a powerful tool for cultural documentation, promotion, preservation and transmission of cultural values and performance traditions through digital platforms.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts the Technological Determinism and Social Media Engagement Theory. Technological determinism, is a reductionist theory in assuming that a society’s technology progresses by following its own internal logic of efficiency, while determining the development of the social structure and cultural values. The term is originated from Thorstein Veblen, an American sociologist and economist. The technological determinism supports the creative inventiveness rests on the use of technology by practitioners, as a tool to advance the course of theatre practice in their age and time and create magical presentations.

Social Media Engagement Theory

Social Media Engagement Theory propounded by Paul M. Di Gangi and Molly Wasko opines that, individuals engage with content on social media platforms through active participation and interaction.

This can include likes, comments, shares, and other forms of engagement that allow users to express their reactions and opinions about the content they encounter. “One key aspect of social media engagement theory is the idea that users have a sense of social presence or “connectedness” to the content and other users on the platform. This can lead to a sense of community and belonging among users, and can also foster a sense of trust and credibility in the information being shared” (Di Gangi and Wasko 1).

Another important aspect of social media engagement theory is the role of social influence. This is reflected in the phenomenon where individuals are more likely to engage with content that is popular or has been shared by others they trust. There are other factors that can influence individual level engagement on social media. These can include the platform itself (e.g. Facebook vs. Twitter), the type of content being shared (e.g. text, images, video), and the user’s personal characteristics and motivations (e.g. age, gender, interests). The application of technology to theatre improves the aesthetic and communicative value of live theatre productions, thereby engineering contemporary audiences towards patronising traditional arts forms made possible by cultural displays.

AKSUFEST: A Tool for Cultural Promotion and Sustainability

Akwa Ibom State University Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST) presents an annual platform for the showcasing of dances, drama, films and other theatrical displays. The festival is one of the most attractive and distinctive features in practical

learning and engagement of the cultural heritage of the people in an educational milieu. It is a festival, that is hosted as an umbrella for the season of productions in the Department of Performing Arts, Akwa Ibom State University. In 2024, the theme; *Theatrepreneurship, Interactivity and Survival in a Globally Recessed Economy*, lasted from May 20th – 24th, 2024. Through the festival, highlights of events include: culture display, heritage, arts exhibition, songs, drama, and seminars, presented to create a festive atmosphere and a sense of communal ensemble. However, promoting the culture through this festival takes intense planning, marketing, and management to ensure that the event satisfies the organisers and the audience. AKSUFEST as an initiative designed to celebrate and promote theatre-preneur skills and cultural diversity, by bringing together performers, scholars, and audiences, with the sole aim of creating a deeper understanding and appreciation of performances from different levels in the department, during the season of production.

The *Ekpo Festival* staged in a found space in Performing Arts Department, Akwa Ibom State University, represents the traditional performance culture of the Ibibio and Annang people of South-South Nigeria. The festival encourages artistic expressions, showcasing student talents and the preservation of culture. AKSUFEST helps to elevate the student’s scope of creativity and exposing them to other performing strength. By attracting visitors and promoting artisans, AKSUFEST contributes to the economic development of the host community, the Department of Performing Arts. It provides opportunities for businesses, sponsors and craftspeople to showcase their products and services.



Plate1: Official Logo for Akwa Ibom State University Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST)
Source: Pinnacle Theatre Publicity Team.

Ekpo Festival: An Overview

The *Ekpo Festival* is a vibrant cultural celebration predominantly observed by the Efik people of Calabar in South-eastern Nigeria, serves as a significant event that encapsulates the rich traditions and social values of the community. Historically rooted in ancestral worship and the commemoration of deities, this festival typically occurs annually in December, marking the end of the year and ushering in a new one. The festival is characterized by colourful masquerades, traditional music, dance performances, and elaborate feasting. At its core, Ekpo embodies themes of unity and cultural identity among participants while reinforcing communal bonds. The masquerade component of Ekpo is particularly noteworthy as it features various groups donning intricate costumes that represent spiritual entities or ancestors. These masquerades are not merely entertainment; they play an essential role in conveying moral lessons and preserving historical narratives through performance art.



Plate 2 & 3: *Ekpo* displayed in the Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST)

Source: Pinnacle Theatre Publicity Team.

Use of Social Media for Cultural Promotion and Sustainability: Reading *Ekpo Festival*

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media has emerged as a formidable force shaping various aspects of human life, including cultural development. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and YouTube facilitate the rapid exchange of ideas, values, and practices across geographical boundaries. According to Aniebiet Mbede in her work, *Contemporary Film Marketing: Leveraging Social Media for Film Promotion in Marriage O'clock*, submits that, "Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Tik Tok, and X enables users to share content and interact in real time, making them powerful marketing tools" (Mbede 180). One of the most significant roles of social media in cultural development is its ability to stand in cultural

exchange. Social media platforms enable users from diverse backgrounds to connect, share, and engage with each other's cultures. This connectivity has been instrumental in promoting globalization, where cultural practices, ideas, and trends transcend national borders. For instance, social media allows for the sharing of music, art, cuisine, and fashion, leading to a blending of cultural elements that enriches societies. The viral nature of content on platforms like TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp exemplify this phenomenon. Trends originating from one part of the world can quickly gain traction in another, leading to the creation of hybrid cultural forms. The global popularity of "Reels" and "Status" is a prime example; through social media reels and status, a lot of country, region or state's music has gained international recognition, influencing fashion, language, and even social norms in various countries.

According to Mbede, “this practice activates citizen journalism by upholding the principle of collective intelligence, expanding democratic participation and amplifying marginalized voices, though the connection of local issues to global audiences”



(Mbede 1). This cultural exchange not only broadens individual perspectives but also fosters a sense of global citizenship, where individuals appreciate and celebrate cultural diversity.



Plates 4 & 5: *Ekpo* displayed in the Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST)

Source: Pinnacle Theatre Publicity Team.

The *Ekpo Festival* is a vibrant cultural expression that combines dance, music, and storytelling. Traditionally, it serves not only as entertainment, but also as a means of conveying moral lessons, preserving history. The masquerade festivity which is performed during significant community events, such as festivals and rites of passage features elaborately designed masks and costumes, which embody the spirits of ancestors. In AKSUFEST, it was performed to celebrate the rich culture of the Annang and Ibibio people through masks, musical displays, chants, instrumentations, costuming, songs and ritual-dances. The performance was an epic enactment with the theme, *Ekpo Festival and Traditional African Mystery*, highlighting Ekpo

culture and other cultural dances like *Ntuk Odiodio*, *Uta*, *Ekombi*, and *Nnabo*, respectively.

The *Ekpo Festival* considered the link between the living and the ancestors is structured in a rich line up of masquerades for display. The festival which is predominantly an all-male affair, started off with rehearsals for the chosen dancers and drummers. Auditions for the festival held on the 27th of February, 2024; with the director Nnanake Ekeke, a lecturer in Department of Performing Arts, Akwa Ibom State University taking the lead. Also, on the team – assistant director, Oto-obong Nkorok and choreographer, Miracle Ukpe. The rehearsal took place in the parking lot of AKSU Pinnacle Theatre.



Plate 6: *Ekpo Festival* Director, Nnanake Ekeke on the Rehearsal floor
Source: Pinnacle Theatre Media Team.

Social media has emerged as a pivotal tool for cultural promotion in the analysed study of AKSUFEST. The social media has been used as a tool to preserve and promote the indigenous language and culture of the Akwa Ibom people displayed in AKSUFEST 2024. The social media has played a significant role in promoting cultural values and human right, and a platform where people (spectators) within the environment of the displayed performance, can upload the material relevant to the culture which includes music, that was sung by the chanters, dances, displayed by the various masquerades, and their celebrations. According to Aniebiet Mbede, “The presence of clusters of people in virtual social circles especially on Facebook Live, WhatsApp links posted on X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, Snap chat and YouTube made it easy for publicly posted information to reach the target audience. This Social media facility also helped the virtual audience members to leave a comment as they followed the progress of the hybrid multimedia productions live on Facebook from different locations around”. (116)

Through these uploads on the social media, people have easy access to the social media sites, so they get this cultural information without any hurdle from anywhere in the world, through the help of hashtags, and live streaming as the case maybe. This study analyses the fact that social media plays a key role to promote national culture of different countries

around the world. Social media are the most advanced form of media which are supported by various online tools, it provides its users to interact with millions of people from hundreds of different cultural regions and locations. Here they have no limit of conversation, sharing information and new knowledge they have not gotten before without any regional, lingual, religious, racial, social and cultural barriers. In the world of social media, the tiniest of ideas can spark a masterpiece on cultural promotion causing it to go viral through mediums like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp. The benefits of successful cultural promotion through social media attracts audience members to visit the location of performance in order to see for themselves what they have been seeing online, and also partake in the cultural learning process even from a distance. One of the primary ways, the social media promotes the culture in AKSUFEST 2024 is through sharing the contents. Social media users, who were part of the festival, can post videos, images and stories that showcase their cultural practices, and art forms etc. a good example is a Facebook user called Media Boyfriend, who documented the AKSUFEST 2024 and posted videos, where over 780 comments were made. Other bloggers and content creators, shared from his upload, to post in their different channels and pages.

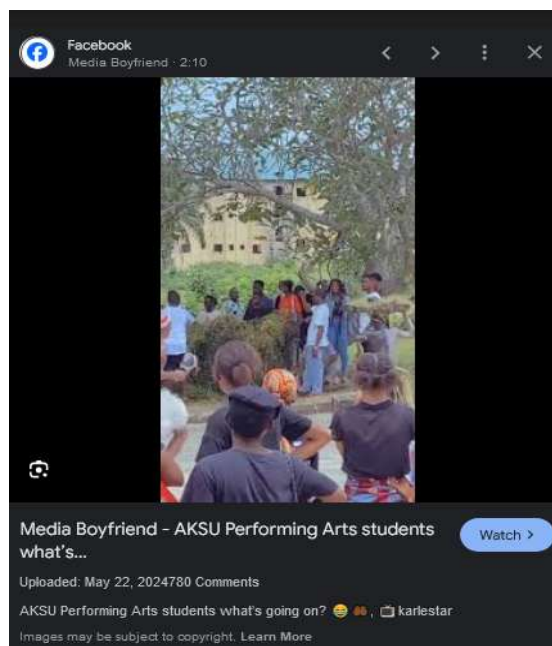


Plate 7: *Media Boyfriend* blog engaging Facebook content for *Ekpo Festival 2024*

Source: Pinnacle Theatre, AKSUFEST Media Team.

Step 1: Pre-Event Social Media Activities

Timeline: 2 Weeks Before the Festival.

- i. The release of the festival poster and teaser with a campaign tagged: *Ekpo Festival*
- ii. Behind the Scene clips shared across social media platforms – Facebook (Live, Feed, Story), Instagram (Story), WhatsApp (Status), TikTok (Live).
- iii. Launch of the following hashtag campaigns: *#Cultureislife* *#EkpoNnyin* *#EkaEkpo* *#TitiaEkpo* *#EkpoUboikpka* *#EkpoNtukayin*
- iv. Engage performers in a short clip video recording endorsements for the festival.
- v. Step 2: Festival Week Social Media Performance
- vi. Virtual Invitations shared across social media platforms – Facebook (Live, Feed, Story), Instagram (Story), WhatsApp (Status), TikTok (Live). Encourage live tweeting and sharing on Instagram stories via the use of the hashtag *#Cultureislife* *#EkpoNnyin*
- vii. Live sharing photographs, dress and technical rehearsal moments, cultural discussions to guide and direct audience to event toolkit across social media platforms.
- viii. Streaming the event live on Facebook and storage on YouTube for delayed views.
- ix. Step 3: Post-Festival Social Media Engagement
- x. Release of short-form content: *My Top 5 Moments from Ekpo Festival*, sharing clips on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook.
- xi. Launch “Share Your Story” contest: invite audience to upload short video about marriage expectations; winner gets a mention, prize or meet-up.
- xii. Host weekly live sessions: *Ekpo Festival: My cultural Takeaway Discussion Hour*” on Instagram Live with guests featuring cultural ambassadors, theatre practitioners and industry professionals in a follow-up community event.
- xiii. Partner with a local church (King’s Bride Family Church, Uyo on marriage workshops based on the film.
- xiv. Continue to Share photos and videos of workshop on social media.
- xv. Monitor metrics: number of views and engagements, posts with hashtag, number of toolkits downloaded, number of online views not just around the Akwa Ibom State University community but viewed across the globe

through leveraging social media platforms for its promotion.

The intentional use of social media platforms for the promotion of AKSUFEST has transformed the way the culture was displayed through the *Ekpo Festival* in AKSUFEST 2024 and promoted it on a global scale. One of which the significant aspect is the ease of access to information where people can now learn about the Akwa Ibom culture through various forms of content, such as videos, and still- photos. This accessibility allows for a broader understanding of cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions. For instance, platforms like YouTube host countless documentaries and vlogs that explore cultural festivals, traditional music, and art forms, making it easier for users to discover and appreciate diverse cultures. The role of influencers and content creators in cultural promotion is not to be overlooked. Many influencers use their platforms to highlight the Akwa Ibom cultural backgrounds and share their experiences. This not only raises awareness but also inspires others to explore and engage with the Akwa Ibom cultures. When influencers create content that celebrates their heritage, it often resonates with their followers, encouraging them to learn more and participate in cultural practices. This phenomenon can lead to a resurgence of interest in traditional arts, crafts, and culinary practices, as people seek to connect with their roots or explore new cultural experiences and this is seen through content creators like Mc Mbakara, Oga Yenne, Morgan Morgan, Laff Nation and Comedian Mouthpiece.

Another important benefit of social media is the ability to create a sense of anticipation leading up to the event. Organizers can use countdowns, sneak peeks, and behind-the-scenes content to build excitement. Engaging content, such as interviews with masquerade performers or insights into the preparation process, can generate interest and keep the audience informed. This not only increases attendance but also fosters a connection between the festival and its audience, making them feel like part of the experience even before it begins. Facebook's influence on cultural trends and behaviours cannot be ignored. This platform's algorithms can amplify the cultural content, making it more visible and influential. For example, the

trending hashtag for the festival #AKSUekpomasquerade2024, #EkpoMasqueradeFestival2024 feature highlight cultural events, news, and topics, shaping public opinion and influencing cultural discourse. Additionally, with Facebook's advertising capabilities, its usage for the festival, promote cultural products, services, and events, influencing consumer behaviour and cultural trends.

Facebook plays a significant role in promoting culture by providing a platform for individuals and organizations to share cultural content, engage with diverse communities, and fostering intercultural dialogue. As the platform continues to evolve, it is essential to harness its potential to promote cultural understanding and appreciation. By leveraging Facebook's vast reach and interactive features, individuals and organisations can create meaningful connections, celebrate cultural diversity, and contribute to a more inclusive global community.

In an increasingly interconnected world, the promotion of culture has taken on new dimensions, especially with the advent of digital communication platforms. Among these, WhatsApp has emerged as a powerful tool for promotion in cultural exchange, community engagement, and real-time communication. As AKSUFEST 2024 prepares to showcase a rich needlepoint of cultural expressions through its performances, leveraging WhatsApp can significantly enhance the festival's reach, participation, and overall impact.

One of the most significant advantages of WhatsApp is its ability to facilitate direct and personal communication. The organisers can create dedicated groups for different aspects of the festival, such as cultural performances, workshops, and discussions. These groups serve as platforms for participants to ask questions, share insights, and connect with one another. This direct line of communication creates a sense of community among attendees, encouraging them to engage more deeply with the festival's cultural offerings. For instance, a WhatsApp group dedicated to traditional dance workshops can allow participants to share their experiences, ask for tips, and even collaborate on routines. By creating a supportive environment, WhatsApp encourages attendees to

actively participate in cultural activities, thereby enriching the festival experience because “the waning interest of audiences continue to pose a threat to the performing arts venture as a production is not successful without the presence of an audience” (Edem and Mbede 114). The use of interactive features to invite and engage audience members as made possible through social media channels like WhatsApp.

According to Nnanake Ekeke, WhatsApp presents a versatile and effective platform for promoting culture in ab colourful masquerade display (*Ekpo Festival*) during the AKSUFEST 2024. By

facilitating direct communication, providing real-time updates, and enabling the sharing of rich cultural content, WhatsApp can significantly enhance the festival’s reach and engagement. Theatre will always remain the, “creative assemblage of human experiences to articulate an idea which conveys meaning that can influence societal behaviour” (Mbede 2). The ability to create such exhilarating experience in dances, masks display and dances will help in promoting networking opportunities, and further underscores its potential as a tool for cultural promotion



Plate 9: Colourful display of *Asian Ekpo* on display during *Ekpo Festival*

Source: Pinnacle Theatre, AKSUFEST Media Team.



Plates 10 & 11: *Akpan Ekpo* and *Udo Ekpo* on display during *Ekpo Festival*

Source: Pinnacle Theatre, AKSUFEST Media Team.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media serves as a powerful tool for cultural promotion and sustainability by providing platforms for sharing and showcasing cultural events, traditions, and practices. It allows for the dissemination of visual content, such as images and videos, which can attract a wider audience and engage people in a more dynamic way. “films have the power to challenge societal norms, provoke critical thinking, and inspire change” (Mbede 374). Through storytelling and behind-the-scenes content, social media creates anticipation and excitement around events, encouraging participation. Additionally, social media facilitates connections between organisers and their audience, creating a sense of community and belonging. It also opens doors for partnerships and sponsorships, helping to secure funding and support for cultural initiatives. Overall, social media not only enhances visibility for cultural events but also plays a crucial role in preserving and celebrating cultural heritage. Social media has proven to be an invaluable tool for cultural promotion. It enhances visibility and engagement by allowing cultural events and traditions to reach a broader audience through captivating visual content and storytelling. By promoting community connections and facilitating partnerships, social media supports the sustainability and growth of cultural initiatives and helps preserve cultural heritage among diverse audiences, making cultural experiences more accessible and inclusive.

Recommendations

Social media has proven to be an invaluable tool for cultural promotion. This research recommends the following; Creating engaging content by using high-quality images, videos, and live streams to showcase cultural events, performances, and traditions. There is also need to intensify the use social media platforms to promote culture-themed performances and also creating hashtags and content that can attract more attention and encourage sharing to build a sense of community and engage audiences. Also, the study recommends the development of digital contents all year round, such as behind-the-scenes videos, question and answer sessions with

cultural directors and audience testimonials, to deepen audience engagement before the next edition of the festival. By implementing these recommendations, *Ekpo Festival* can reach broader audiences and foster a deeper connection among the people and drive meaningful socio-cultural change in the society.

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