



9. Digital Echoes of Caste: Social Support and Segregation in Tamil WhatsApp Communities

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Abstract:

This study explores the role of caste-based WhatsApp groups in shaping social support dynamics and reinforcing digital segregation. Through a content analysis of two organic, youth-led WhatsApp groups—one politically aligned and another regionally organized—the research identifies distinct patterns of communication and social support. The political group (Site 1) demonstrated a preference for informational and instrumental support, focusing on political narratives and caste-based mobilization, while the regional group (Site 2) leaned towards emotional bonding and local identity reinforcement. Findings reveal that caste continues to manifest in digital spaces, influencing the nature and purpose of interpersonal interactions. The study argues that these groups, while offering community and connection, also sustain and normalize caste consciousness in online discourse. It highlights the need for critical engagement with such digital ecosystems to promote inclusivity and dismantle systemic social hierarchies.

Keywords

Caste, WhatsApp groups, Digital Segregation, Social Support, Content Analysis, Political Communication

Introduction

Human society is a complex, interconnected web of individuals and institutions, bound together by shared beliefs, values, and interests. At its core, society is not necessarily built upon a single purpose but emerges from the collective will of individuals to live in unity—whether that unity is based on religion, culture, science, politics, patriotism, or empathy. People come together for a variety of reasons, and in doing so, they form communities that



offer emotional, economic, social, and psychological support. As inherently social beings, humans thrive through interaction with others: family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. The fabric of human existence is woven with relationships that help sustain individuals across all dimensions of life—physical, mental, and spiritual. Despite historical and ongoing conflicts, communities often strive toward peace, coexistence, and shared prosperity.

In an ideal society, people would support one another equally, with everyone having access to the resources and opportunities needed for a fulfilling life. However, the reality is that societies are structured through systems of inequality that stratify people based on various socio-economic and cultural factors. These hierarchies influence how people interact with one another and determine access to resources, power, and status.

Stratification and Social Inequality

Social stratification refers to the systematic categorization of individuals into hierarchical layers based on attributes such as class, caste, race, gender, and economic status. This classification influences the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and opportunities in society. Some of the key types of social stratification include:

- **Class Stratification:** Based on income, occupation, and wealth, individuals are sorted into classes such as upper, middle, and lower. This economic divide is one of the most visible forms of inequality globally.
- **Caste Stratification:** In caste systems, particularly prevalent in South Asia, individuals are born into a social group that dictates their societal roles, status, and mobility. Caste often determines access to education, employment, and even basic human dignity.
- **Racial Stratification:** Societies also stratify based on race and ethnicity, creating barriers for certain communities in terms of access to education, healthcare, housing, and political power.
- **Gender Stratification:** Gender-based hierarchies limit the roles and opportunities available to individuals, especially women and gender minorities, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and exclusion.

These forms of stratification have a direct impact on **social mobility**, which refers to the movement of individuals or groups within the social hierarchy. This movement can be



upward, downward, horizontal, or occur across generations. The various types of mobility include:

- **Vertical Mobility:** The upward or downward movement in the social ladder.
- **Upward Mobility:** Achieving a higher status due to personal effort, education, or opportunities.
- **Downward Mobility:** A fall in status, often due to unemployment, economic crises, or social exclusion.
- **Horizontal Mobility:** Movement within the same social level, such as changing professions without a change in status.
- **Intergenerational Mobility:** A change in social status from one generation to another.
- **Intragenerational Mobility:** Status change within an individual's lifetime.

High levels of social mobility are a marker of an equitable society. When people can transcend their inherited social positions through education and effort, society becomes more just and cohesive. Conversely, lack of mobility fosters resentment, alienation, and social unrest.

Caste and Discrimination in India

India presents a unique and deeply entrenched example of social stratification in the form of its caste system. Although the Indian Constitution has formally abolished untouchability and caste-based discrimination, caste continues to play a significant role in social interactions and access to opportunities. In many areas, caste identity determines one's socio-economic prospects, from education and employment to marriage and political representation.

Marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and other backward castes, often face systemic barriers that limit their social mobility. Despite affirmative action policies such as reservations in education and government jobs, the social and psychological impact of caste discrimination continues to hinder progress. Discrimination persists in both overt and subtle forms—ranging from segregation in housing and schools to exclusion from cultural and religious spaces.

In South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, caste identities are deeply entrenched and actively reinforced through social, political, and even digital mechanisms. Communities such as Vanniyars, Thevars, Nadars, Gounders, and Brahmins operate within a complex



hierarchy that governs daily interactions. Practices such as endogamy and occupational segregation remain widespread, and access to resources and representation often aligns with caste identities.

Media Representation of Caste

Over the years, various media platforms have played a dual role in both challenging and reinforcing caste-based hierarchies. While the mainstream print and broadcast media have historically been dominated by upper-caste perspectives, grassroots movements and digital media have provided a counter-narrative.

In the early years of Indian journalism, upper-caste ownership and editorial control often led to the marginalization or misrepresentation of lower-caste voices. Dalits were frequently portrayed as untrustworthy, lazy, or unclean. Cinema too contributed to these stereotypes, often depicting upper-caste characters as morally upright and cultured, while relegating lower-caste characters to negative or subservient roles.

However, the emergence of social media has altered this dynamic significantly. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have allowed marginalized communities to reclaim their narratives, raise awareness, and mobilize for social justice. Citizen journalism and digital storytelling have become powerful tools for documenting and exposing caste-based atrocities and discrimination.

Despite these progressive uses, social media has also become a breeding ground for caste-based propaganda and hate speech.

Caste Dynamics on WhatsApp and Other Social Media

Among all social media platforms, WhatsApp stands out for its unique role in influencing caste consciousness due to its private and encrypted nature. Unlike public platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp allows for closed-group communication that is largely unregulated and difficult to monitor. This feature has made it an ideal medium for the formation of caste-based groups that often reinforce and perpetuate caste identities.

In many parts of India, particularly Tamil Nadu, caste-based WhatsApp groups are commonly used to share caste-centric news, celebrate caste festivals, organize events, and even discuss political strategies. These groups can become echo chambers where caste pride is nurtured and discriminatory ideologies are amplified. Content shared in these groups often includes:



- Messages glorifying a particular caste's history and achievements
- Political propaganda promoting caste-based parties or leaders
- Disparaging remarks and memes targeting other castes
- Videos or images invoking caste pride and rivalry

The anonymity and privacy offered by WhatsApp reduce accountability, making it easier to share inflammatory or misleading content. Misinformation spread through such groups has, in some cases, led to real-world violence and deepened caste divides.

However, it's important to note that the same platform can also be used to challenge caste hierarchies. Progressive groups use WhatsApp to share anti-caste literature, organize resistance movements, and educate members about constitutional rights and social justice. Thus, WhatsApp serves as a double-edged sword: a platform that can either entrench caste divisions or help dismantle them.

Objective of the Study

This research seeks to:

1. Observe and analyse the content shared in two caste-based WhatsApp groups.
2. Identify recurring themes related to caste discrimination, hierarchy, and social dynamics.
3. Understand how caste-centred WhatsApp groups influence their members' perceptions and attitudes toward other castes.
4. Evaluate the extent to which these groups propagate caste-based propaganda or foster inclusive dialogues.

This study will provide insights into how digital communication, particularly private messaging platforms, is shaping caste identities and perpetuating social inequalities in contemporary India. By examining the narratives circulating within these closed digital communities, the research aims to contribute to broader discussions on digital ethics, social harmony, and the future of caste in a digitally connected world.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how caste-related discussions manifest within WhatsApp groups. Specifically, it focuses on analysing the nature of conversations, images, and messages exchanged in selected caste-based WhatsApp groups. The goal is to understand the narratives, sentiments, and ideological constructs shared among

group members, particularly how these interactions contribute to the expression and reinforcement of caste identities and affiliations.

Methodological Approach: Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the primary method to systematically examine and interpret the textual data collected from WhatsApp messages. This method enables the researcher to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings embedded in the messages. Through this approach, the study examines how caste-related messages are propagated, and how these messages influence group dynamics and caste consciousness among young users.

Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by the principles of **Social Support Theory**, drawing from the conceptual framework of the Vijana-SMART study (Healy, 2020). This framework categorises interpersonal communication into four dimensions of support:

- **Instrumental Support:** Tangible assistance and practical aid.
- **Informational Support:** Sharing of relevant and helpful information.
- **Companionship Support:** Presence that fosters a sense of belonging.
- **Emotional Support:** Expressions of empathy, care, and comfort.

This framework allows for an in-depth examination of how caste-based WhatsApp groups function not only as spaces of identity assertion but also as platforms where various forms of support are offered and received. The study investigates whether these interactions foster cohesion and belonging or reinforce exclusion and caste-based hierarchy.

Social Support Theory

Social Support Theory posits that individuals derive strength and well-being from supportive social networks. These networks provide emotional, informational, instrumental, and companionship support, which collectively help individuals navigate everyday challenges and stressors. In the context of this study, the theory is used to understand how young members of caste-based WhatsApp groups offer and receive support, and whether such interactions contribute to social bonding or promote ideological rigidity. The parameters drawn from this theory also inform the coding and categorisation process during data analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected from two caste-based WhatsApp groups: *DCGP_காங்கயம் ஒன்றியம்* and *Tiruppur Kongu Family*. Informed consent for participation and data usage was obtained from the administrators of both groups, as obtaining individual consent from every member was impractical due to the high number of participants. The researcher's presence in the groups was passive; no messages were sent during the six-month observation period. At the end of this period, all messages were downloaded, and identifying details such as phone numbers and names were anonymised. The cleaned data were stored in document form for analysis.

Data Analysis

The WhatsApp messages were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Each message was categorised based on the type of support it represented:

- **Instrumental Support:** Offers of tangible help or services.
- **Informational Support:** Sharing news, caste-related history, or advice.
- **Companionship Support:** Friendly interactions or shared identity symbols.
- **Emotional Support:** Empathetic messages, affirmations, or moral encouragement.

This categorisation enabled the identification of patterns in how caste-based emotions and ideologies are shared and sustained. The findings offer insights into the ways in which caste pride, solidarity, and exclusionary practices are communicated and reinforced within these digital spaces.

Limitations

- **Emotional Interpretation:** Emotions vary greatly across individuals and contexts, making it challenging to infer members' emotional responses solely from text-based interactions.
- **Privacy and Ethics:** Balancing ethical concerns with the need for sufficient data poses limitations in the extent of personal information that can be analysed.
- **Caste Variability:** The caste system in India is highly complex and varies across regions, making it difficult to generalise findings beyond the specific groups studied.
- **Contextual Interpretation:** Understanding the layered meanings of caste-related messages requires cultural sensitivity and awareness of localised caste dynamics.

- **Volume of Data:** The large quantity of messages necessitates efficient and systematic approaches to ensure comprehensive analysis without data loss or oversight.

This study examined the types of social support expressed in two caste-based WhatsApp groups through content analysis. The chats were categorized into four social support domains: **Companionship, Instrumental, Informational, and Emotional.**

Group Overview

S. No	Facility	Group	Members	Messages	Valid Messages
1	Site 1 (Political Group)	Group 1	256	553	136
2	Site 2 (Regional Group)	Group 2	198	295	127

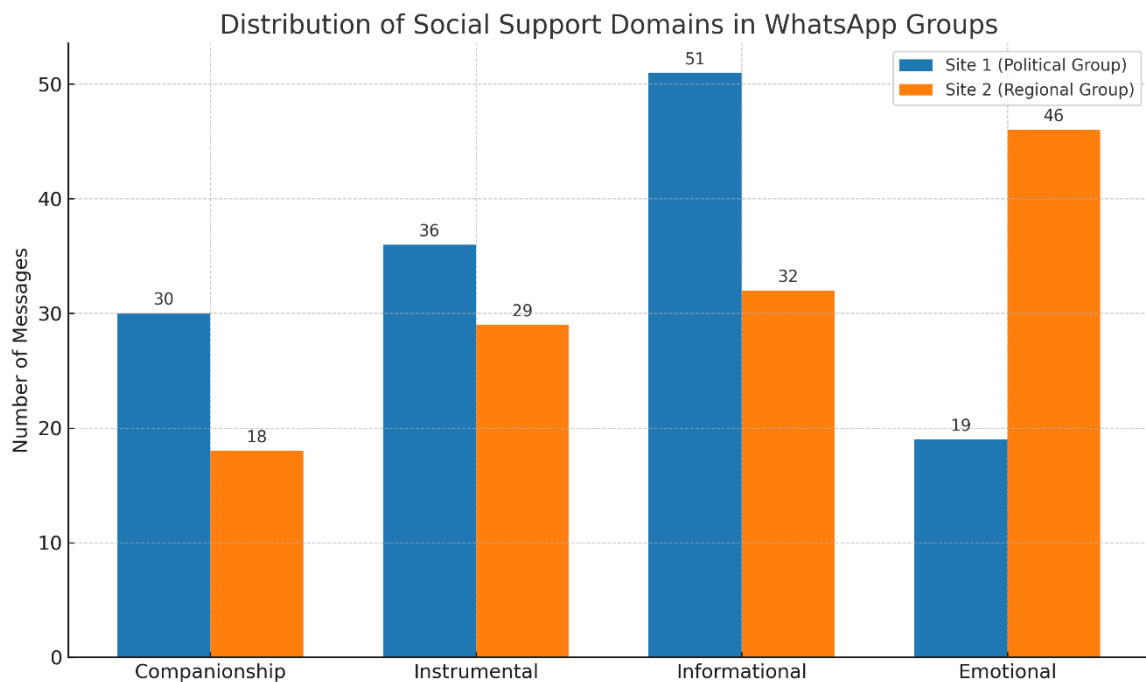


Chart 1: Social Support Domains in WhatsApp Messages

Analysis – Site 1 (Political Group)



- **Highest:** *Informational (51)*

This group emphasizes sharing articles, historical data, and political updates concerning caste-based issues. The dominant use of informative messaging reflects an intention to mobilize political awareness and engagement.

- **Lowest:** *Emotional (19)*

Emotional content is limited, as the group prioritizes fact-based discussions. Emotional expression is possibly perceived as ineffective in achieving political objectives or sustaining engagement.

Interpretation

The group appears to function as a platform for political activism and mobilization, where sharing verifiable information and calls to action are seen as more valuable than emotional support.

Analysis – Site 2 (Regional Group)

- **Highest:** *Emotional (46)*

Emotional messages dominate, creating a space for members to bond over shared experiences and local traditions. This fosters a sense of belonging and cultural solidarity.

- **Lowest:** *Companionship (18)*

Since members likely know each other personally, there is less emphasis on building companionship through digital interaction. The emotional closeness already exists offline, reducing the need to establish it online.

Interpretation

Regional identity and existing offline ties make this group more conducive to emotional engagement. The group serves to reinforce cultural heritage and communal bonding rather than promote action-oriented agendas.

Content Codes and Examples

S. No	Content Code	Site 1	Site 2	Example Summary
1	Political	32	27	Strong opinions on political manipulation and caste-based injustice.

S. No	Content Code	Site 1	Site 2	Example Summary
2	Internal Affairs	30	21	Updates related to leaders from within the caste.
3	Spiritual	29	21	Religious stories and mythological references.
4	Local Information	18	29	Health, agriculture, or cattle-related updates.
5	Current Affairs	13	21	Law enforcement updates, safety notices.
6	Multiple Content	11	06	Hybrid posts containing both informational and emotional appeals.

Key Findings

- The Political Group (Site 1) exhibits higher levels of *informational* and *instrumental* support. The conversations are centered on rational discourse, fact-sharing, and political awareness, with minimal emotional expression.
- The Regional Group (Site 2) leans heavily on *emotional* support. Messages are more personal, culturally grounded, and resonate with shared local experiences and beliefs.
- Informational messages dominate in Site 1 because they align with the group's broader goal of political mobilization.
- Emotional messages dominate in Site 2 due to pre-existing social bonds and shared regional identity.

Conclusion

The study highlights the diverse roles caste-based WhatsApp groups play in shaping digital caste discourse. While the political group (Site 1) functions as a hub for strategic information-sharing and collective political action, the regional group (Site 2) nurtures emotional ties and fosters community belonging through culturally resonant content.

These distinctions underscore the need for differentiated approaches when addressing caste dynamics in digital spaces:



- For activists and policymakers, understanding these differences allows for the creation of targeted interventions—whether through promoting digital literacy, challenging discriminatory narratives, or supporting inclusive community-building.
- For researchers, this study provides a framework to explore how emotional vs. informational content influences digital caste identities.
- Ultimately, acknowledging the dual roles of rational discourse and emotional solidarity is key to addressing casteism and building equitable online communities.

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