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Facebooking Religion and the Technologization of the Religious Discourse: A Case Study of a Botswana-based Prophetic Church

Gabriel Faimau, Camden Behrens

Abstract

Technologization of discourse is generally conceptualized as a process of influencing people's way of thinking through the use of certain linguistic strategies. In this process, power is exercised through the use of linguistic strategies that shape the construction of identity as well as socio-religious vision. This study analyzes the ways in which certain linguistic strategies and religious discourses used in Facebook posts, reviews and comments on a religion-based Facebook page create and shape the narratives of religious authority, religious identity and religious community. Using the Facebook page of a popular prophetic Christian church in Botswana, Gospel of God's Grace (3G Ministries), as a case study, this study examines the following questions: in what ways can an active religion-based Facebook page reconfigure and provide a platform for religious practice? To what extent does the use of various linguistic strategies inform and shape religious discourses found in various Facebook postings and comments? And how does a religious Facebook page provide a venue for the discursive interpretation of religious authority, the negotiation of religious identity and the development of socio-religious vision?

Keywords

Facebook, Technologization, Religious Authority, Identity Construction, Religious Discourse, Prophetic Ministries, Botswana

1 Introduction

This article examines the extent to which Facebook has emerged as a powerful media tool used by prophetic ministries in Botswana in mediating various religious events and strategies. While focusing on the appropriation of Facebook among the prophetic ministries, particular attention is

given to the content of Facebook postings and users' comments in order to examine how religious discourses are technologized and how such technologization of discourse is used as a medium for the discursive interpretation of religious authority, religious identity and socio-religious vision.

Through the use of the Facebook page of a popular prophetic Christian church in Botswana, Gospel of God's Grace Ministries (3G Ministries), as a case study, the article addresses the following specific questions: in what ways does the development and use of a religion-based Facebook page reconfigure and provide a platform for religious practice? To what extent does the use of various linguistic strategies inform and shape religious discourses utilized in various Facebook postings, reviews and comments? And how does a religious Facebook page provide a venue for the discursive interpretation of religious authority, the negotiation of religious identity and the development of socio-religious vision?

In an attempt to address these questions, we will first provide a background to the prophetic ministries and the use of new media in Botswana. We will then provide an explanatory framework of the technologization of discourse before discussing the methodology used in the study as well as the study findings.

2 Prophetic Ministries and New Media in Botswana: An Introduction

Botswana is a landlocked country in Southern Africa and shares borders with South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Contemporary Botswana is home to hundreds of Christian denominations. Although officially a secular country, Botswana is often considered a Christian country with a predominant view that to be a Motswana¹ means to be a Christian. According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census, Christianity (79%) remains the predominant religion in Botswana followed by African Traditional Religion (4.1%) and Islam (0.74%); at least 15% of the population is not associated to any religion. The census results demonstrate an increase in the levels of religiousness in the country with Christianity levels increasing by at least 7% from the 2001 Population Census (Statistics Botswana, 2014).

Studies on Christianity in Botswana generally classify Christianity into three main families of churches: Mainline churches; Africa Independent churches; and Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic churches (Haron and Jensen, 2008). Prophetic ministries have recently begun to emerge in the religious landscape of Botswana and now form a 'new' and forth classification. Christianity in Botswana has seen a growth in the number of registered churches in the country. As

1 The term 'Motswana' refers to either a citizen of Botswana or a person from the Tswana ethnic group in Southern Africa. The plural form of Motswana is 'Batswana'.

of May 2015, Botswana had 1,936 registered churches; the majority of which are Evangelical or Pentecostal Churches, including the newly emerged prophetic ministries.²

One of the characteristics of prophetic ministries is the use of media and, in particular, new media. The use of media among prophetic ministries clearly sustains the appropriation of media in ‘mediating Gospel’ used in Pentecostal churches. In his article, Togarasei (2012) concluded that Pentecostal Churches, particularly in Zimbabwe and Botswana, have fully embraced the use of media technology to spread the Gospel faster and wider. This includes the use and appropriation of radio, television, the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, and various forms of print media.

Most, if not all, of the prophetic ministries in Botswana use at least one new media platform. This includes the use of websites, Facebook pages, twitter accounts, YouTube channels and the messenger service, WhatsApp. Among social media networking sites, Facebook is the largest and most popular. In June 2016, Facebook reported that globally there were 1.71 billion Facebook users who were active on the site on a monthly basis (Facebook, 2016). In the context of Botswana, Facebook is the most popular social media site. A recent report on internet accessibility by Nielsen Company ranked Botswana as one of the top three countries in Africa (Nielsen, 2016). With the escalation of internet accessibility, hundreds of thousands of people in Botswana have created Facebook accounts. The 2011 Botswana Population and Housing Census counted a total population of 2,024,787 while the Africa 2016 Population and Internet Users Statistics, provided by the Internet World Stats, noted that Botswana had 620,000 registered Facebook users as of November 2015.³ In its report, Nielsen Company claimed that Botswana has the highest rates of Facebook use in Africa (Nielsen, 2016). With a high rate of Facebook use, the report concluded that Botswana has become a highly socially active society.

Facebook pages dedicated to religion are some of the most popular in Botswana. For example, Social Bakers, a social media monitoring and statistics site, listed Prophet Shepherd Bushiri⁴ and TB Joshua⁵ at numbers seven and eight respectively on the list of ‘what Botswana fans like on Facebook.’ Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, for example, has 1,010,700 global fans on Facebook, of which 145,620 (14.4%) fans reside in Botswana.⁶

2 Data related to the number of churches in Botswana was provided by the Office of Registration of Societies, Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, Botswana, in 2015.

3 See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>. Accessed on 1 September 2016.

4 Prophet Shepherd Bushiri is a Malawian preacher, founder and leader of the Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG) and Shepherd Bushiri Ministries International. ECG church has its headquarters in Lilongwe the capital city of Malawi and branches across the African continent

5 T.B. Joshua is a Nigerian prophet and a televangelist. He is the General Overseer of The Synagogue, Church of All Nations (SCOAN). SCOAN is a religious organization that runs the popular Gospel tv channel ‘Emmanuel TV’ from Lagos, Nigeria.

6 For a comprehensive overview, see <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/botswana/>. Accessed on 1 September 2016.

The majority of the prophetic ministries in Botswana have Facebook pages. While the content of the Facebook postings on the prophetic ministries pages vary, the postings generally include biblical verses, well-formulated religious messages, words from the prophet or prophetess who leads the prophetic ministries, blogging of religious services, postings of pictures or videos, testimonies and postings of religious products.

The Gospel of God's Grace Ministries (3G Ministries) is one of the most popular prophetic ministries in Botswana. 3G Ministries, also known as Prophet Cedric Ministries, was started in 2011 with 37 members and is based in Kopong Village.⁷ It is led by Prophet Cedric Kobedi and uses the tagline 'The Grace of God is sufficient for you'. 3G Ministries currently has over 6000 regular members or followers. This prophetic church organizes a variety of public events, often at sports stadiums, which normally attract thousands of people. 3G Ministries has a website, Facebook page, twitter account, blog account and YouTube Channel. The 3G Ministries' Facebook page is registered in the name of its leader: Prophet Cedric Ministries Facebook page and is updated on a daily basis. As of August 2016, this Facebook page has over 41,000 likes and 662 reviews.⁸

3 Digital Religion and the Technologization of Discourse

Religion and its relationship with technology has been a growing area of inquiry among scholars (Newman, 1997; Noble 1997; George, 2006; Karaflogka, 2006). At the heart of this inquiry are questions related to the extent to which religion influences technology and how the secular nature of technology has an impact on religion. Examining these substantial questions, Newman (1997) presents a thought provoking proposition that as religion is a product of mankind it may, in essence, be a form of technology; and as technology is at the very center of human culture, it is also a religious endeavor (see also Karaflogka, 2006, p. 53). Within the context of religion and technology, communication technology, in particular the technology of new media, has played a crucial role in the development of religion. Drawing on the evolutionary theory of communication and culture, Ong ([1982][1988) argues that religion and religious practice has utilized communication technology through a series of stages from 'primary orality' to 'secondary orality'. The Primary orality stage refers to the pre-literacy period whereas the secondary orality stage signifies the period where culture and society is equipped with the technology of writing and printing. The presence of the

7 Kopong is a small village in the Kweneng district of Botswana. It is 27 kilometers away from Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana. Information about the Gospel of God's Grace Ministries (3G Ministries) is available on its website <http://www.3gministries.co.bw/>, accessed on 1 September 2016.

8 The official Facebook page of 3G Ministries is Prophet Cedric Ministries: <https://www.facebook.com/prophetcedricministries/?fref=ts>, accessed on 4 September 2016.

internet adds nuance to the understanding of Ong's secondary orality– the internet provides a space for religion and religion finds a platform in cyberspace.

It is then important to consider how religion presents itself in cyberspace. According to Helland (2000, 2002, 2005), religion manifests itself on the internet in two different forms: religion online and online religion. Religion online is based upon a traditional religious hierarchical structure where the internet is a tool of the top-down communication structure and is simply a tool for communication. On the other hand, online religion represents a new development of religious praxis with new forms of communication. These new forms of religious communication are characterized by unstructured, open and non-hierarchical interaction. Here, the internet offers users a form of religious expression outside the traditional religious structure and offers a space for interaction (Helland, 2000, pp. 205-233; 2002, p. 294). Hadden and Cowan (2000) modified Helland's original theoretical framework and describe religion online as a form of communication that provides information about religion and online religion as an invitation to cyberspace users to participate in religious practices via the web. Religion online provides information while online religion facilitates religious praxis among internet users (Hadden and Cowan, 2000, pp. 8-9; Dawson and Cowan, 2004, p.7).

The theoretical framework proposed by Helland can be understood in two dimensions: information and formation. On one hand, religion online provides information and on the other hand, online religion offers formation to internet users (Faimau, 2007). By providing information, religion online strives to allow internet users to gain knowledge. By offering formation, online religion allows communication with internet users for personal religious decisions, religious renewal or prayer requests.

The above explanatory framework allows us to analyze the locus of the internet between religion and the internet users and to determine to what extent the presence of the internet provides meaning for both religion and internet users. The internet creates a unique and new space that "blurs the boundary between the private and the public sphere, allowing for a new form of religious participation in the modern world" (Helland, 2000, p. 221). With the rise of the internet, control over religion and people's religious participation has been removed; both religion and people are free to choose the ways in which they express themselves. The logic behind this virtual culture is the more creative, attractive and presentable the website, the more visits or 'hits' it may expect. Employing this logic, the internet has forced religion to be more creative, attractive and presentable. This means that the internet is not simply a medium for the transmission of religious messages or a medium for information and participation in religious affairs. For both religion and the internet users, the internet also has its own message and therefore religion and the internet users arguably depend on the effects produced by the internet itself.

Helland suggests a strategy for categorizing the praxis of digital religion which focuses on how religion finds its space on the internet, and how the internet influences the religious belief as well as spiritual endeavors of internet users. This categorization is very important because it provides the basis for current Digital Religion Research. According to Campbell (2016), current Digital Religion research deals with basic topics such as “how religious communities engage with the internet to ways religiosity is expressed through digital practices and the extent to which technological engagement can be seen as a spiritual enterprise” (Campbell, 2016, p. 2). The present wave of Digital Religion research has taken, what Campbell (2016) calls, the ‘theoretical turn’ where the focus is on how internet users who are religious negotiate their online and offline lives. In this process of negotiation, religious internet users rely on religious discourses which circulate in both the online and offline world. These religious discourses generally include discursive formations that influence human interaction, sociability and institutional development. Moberg (2016, p. 3) notes that “discursive formations contain particular *ideational* dimensions that serve to not only encourage Christian organizations and institutions to ‘engage’ with but also to *adapt* and *conform* to new technological realities” (emphasis in original).

This brings us to the notion of technologization of discourse. The phrase technologization of discourse was first coined by Fairclough (1992; 2013) who, himself, was influenced by Foucault’s analysis of knowledge, power and discourse. According to Fairclough (2013, p. 137), technologization of discourse is “the process of intervention in the sphere of discourse practices with the objective of constructing a new hegemony...”. In a more practical sense, technologization of discourse can be defined as the process of influencing people’s way of thinking through the use of certain linguistic strategies (Smirnova, 2011, p. 38; see also Moberg, 2016). In this process, power is exercised through the use of linguistic strategies that shape identity construction as well as socio-religious vision. The common linguistic strategies in the technologization of discourse include: metaphorical expressions, contrastive technique, and repetition.⁹ These strategies are normally used not only to engage an interlocutor but also to define and redefine the relationship between the interlocutors involved in a certain conversation. Norton (1997), for example, argued that when speakers engage in a conversation, they are not only “exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton, 1997, p. 409). In this sense, technologization of discourse establishes “a close connection between knowledge about language and discourse, and power” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 216). As a result, the process is designed to ensure that the choice and use of linguistic strategies within the realm of discursive practice affects or has effects on publics and/or audience. This includes the use of different techniques such as persuasion, thought-control and even

9 Our data analysis in the following section will show how these strategies are used.

manipulation. What is important here is not the actual linguistic strategies used in various utterances but rather the intended effect of the discourses.

Smirnova (2011) highlights three levels of technologization of discourse. The first level involves the use of technological syntax that relies on the production of rhythm and rhyme through careful choice and selection of words. The main purpose of this strategy is to magnify the effect of the message and meaning that ‘a technological expert’ wants to convey as well as provide a horizon for public imagination that takes into account the audience’s experiences and feelings. The second level of technologization focuses on developing a “technological chain...to exploit archetypal meanings and culturally established interpretations” (Smirnova, 2011, p. 43). At this level, the known context or the reality is examined to generate new meanings and introduce a new order that will replace the current reality. The third level of technologization refers the audience to events or objects that they are familiar with. Such events or objects are used as points of reference through which new meanings are imposed on the audience.

While we have highlighted the relationship between religion and the internet more generally, this study focuses specifically on the use of the online social media site, Facebook. In an online world, including the Facebook world, texts and images are posted (Wilson, Gosling and Graham, 2012; Miller, Munday and Hill, 2013). The process of constructing texts and images for distribution on Facebook includes the process of technologization of discourse, as already explained. This is because the postings made on Facebook pages most often pay particular attention to the choice of linguistic strategies and the expected effect generated through the use of such linguistic strategies. In this context, Facebook postings are discursive techniques designed to maximize the effectiveness, and affectiveness, of communication and comments that are posted in the context of social relationships with a strong interpersonal function (Johnson, 2014). It is within this explanatory framework that this case study analysis will be situated.

4 Digital Ethnography: A Methodological Approach

This study focuses on the Facebook page created and maintained by the 3G Ministries registered under the name Prophet Cedric Ministries. As a specific Facebook page is our focus of research, we assume Facebook to be our research field and have, therefore, employed a digital ethnography approach to gather data in response to our research questions.

Scholars generally argued that “ethnography is about telling social stories” (Murthy, 2008, p. 838). Although an ethnographic approach has many characteristics, observation and participation are central to ethnographic studies. Using digital ethnography as a methodological approach, we

develop new understandings of ‘observation’ and ‘participation’ as we engage in a digital research fieldwork (Markham, 2013). Our observation includes archiving reviews as well as posts and comments placed on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page during the period December 2015 to May 2016. After archiving the reviews, posts and comments, we categorized the data using pre-coded themes that assist us in the process of analysis in response to the research questions. ‘Digital participation’ encompasses engaging and following closely all posts and comments made on Facebook pages. This includes noting down how the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page provides venues for religious events and how Facebook users engage in religious events through various posts and comments placed on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page.

Our digital fieldwork was conducted from December 2015 to June 2016. During the fieldwork, we archived over 100 Facebook posts, over 200 reviews, and over 2,000 comments which were placed as responses to the reviews and posts. Each post on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page is normally accompanied by a picture selected and posted by the Facebook page admin.

Neither of the two researchers is a member or follower of 3G Ministries. While the Facebook page for the church is an open page where anybody can read and participate, we did not participate in posting comments. Nevertheless, we participated in the sense that we closely followed the dynamics of the Facebook posts and comments. We consider the 3G ministries’ Facebook page a public environment because the page is available for all Facebook users and registration is not required for the reading of posts, comments and reviews (Peuronen, 2011). Informed consent was therefore not sought from Facebook users who posted reviews and comments on the page. While posts placed on the Facebook page are easily available to the public, we will use the initials of those whose real names are mentioned on posts in this case study.¹⁰ We did, however, receive permission from 3G Ministries to include the Gospel of God’s Grace Ministries in our research fieldwork in relation to our umbrella research project, *New Media and Cultural Application on Religion*.¹¹

One of the major challenges when studying observational data, including data generated from Facebook, is assessing the impact of potential ‘hidden biases’ as well as drawing conclusions that are free from bias (Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov and Stillwell, 2015, p. 548). With reference to this challenge, we employ framing analysis to determine the technologization of discourse in the posts, reviews, and comments. Framing analysis has become popular when analyzing news and media discourse, including new media discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Al-Rawi, 2016). To facilitate the framing analysis, we implemented three stages of data

10 See Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov and Stillwell (2015) for explanation concerning boundaries of individual consent when Facebook is used as a research field.

11 This study is funded by the Nagel Institute with generous support from the John Templeton Foundation in the U.S.A. Information regarding the study can be seen here: <http://www.cascafrica.org/social-content.php?cid=25/>, accessed on 4 September 2016.

coding: open, axial and selective coding (Strauss, 1987; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Boeije, 2010; Al-Rawi, 2016). Through open coding, we explored, divided and grouped our data into different categories based on the themes and content of each Facebook post, review and comment. In the axial coding phase, we increased the level of conceptual abstraction and determined the relevance of the categories for our analysis. Using this strategy, we developed a number of main categories guided by the study questions. The third phase, selective coding, involved identifying “connections between the categories in order to make sense of what is happening in the field” (Boeije, 2010, p. 114). Through the coding process, four related categories or themes were identified: reconfiguration of religious authority; construction and negotiation of religious identity; formation of a virtual religious community; and, religious product attachment.

5 Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The four related themes that emerged during the digital ethnographic study will be discussed in more detail. These include: reconfiguration of religious authority, construction and negotiation of religious identity, formation of virtual religious community, and religious product attachment. Before such a discussion, it is necessary to consider the structure of the posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page.

5.1 Structure of Posts

The 3G Ministries Facebook posts are updated by the 3G Ministries Facebook admin. All posts can therefore be considered official posts of 3G Ministries. Although the editing process of each post is unknown to both researchers, one would assume that like any institution, official positions normally go through various stages of approval before a final “Facebook status” is posted. Facebook users do not have the option of posting directly onto the page. They are only allowed to comment on the posts. Based on this, it would be fair to suggest that there is a certain degree of control as well as a top-down approach as far as updating posts on the 3G Ministries Facebook page is concerned. It is, however, important to note that comments posted by Facebook users in response to each post seem to be allowed without an internal system of censorship. A number of criticisms towards 3G Ministries and its prophet, for example, are left on both the review and comment sections without being deleted. We also noticed through our digital observation that the admin normally did not respond to comments or reviews by Facebook users.

The 3G Ministries updates its Facebook page on a daily basis. When there is a church event or service, the page is regularly updated by 3G Ministries with posts focusing on the main highlights of the event or service. The Gospel of God's Grace Ministries has a church service every Friday evening and Sunday from 06:00hrs to 18:00hrs. We observed that 3G Ministries uses its Facebook page as a platform for 'live blogging' where summaries of the actual events are posted during church services predominately for those who cannot attend the service. Our examination of the various posts placed on the 3G Ministries' Facebook page during the period of the study determined that the posts, generally, addressed four core aspects: allowing the public to participate in a church event or service and a summary of the event; a message from the prophet which normally highlights core messages, summarized from the sermon; testimonial narratives from church attendants; and welcoming of visitors to the 3G Ministries' service.

Allowing the public to participate in a church event or service usually takes the form of an invitation that emphasizes the value of participating in the service and what one should do in order to benefit from the service. A post placed on 17 January 2016 highlights this idea: "Brethren, welcome to the Gospel of God's Grace Ministries Sunday Service where all things are possible for he who believes. Wherever you are, prepare your heart, soul and Spirit to encounter Christ Jesus today. Remember that when you meet Him, Your dream will be reborn and He will strengthen you to realize it in Jesus' name." The use of the phrase 'wherever you are' underlines the fact that Facebook is used as a medium to reach those who physically cannot attend the Sunday Service. Moreover, in welcoming Facebook users to participate virtually in the service, the ministry encourages the virtual movement and participation of Facebook users. This participation can be seen as controlled by 3G Ministries. The element of virtual thought-control or even manipulation can be seen, for example, in appealing statements such as "your dream will be reborn". A summary of the event or service is normally posted after a service or a religious event emphasizing the message delivered by the prophet and how that message may function in one's life. The main message of the Friday Service on 8 January 2016, delivered by Prophet Cedric, was "Christians are not supposed to be mere dreamers". A Facebook post after the service depicts this message: "We have come to the end of the Friday service; we believe that the word that you have received has energized your spirit and encouraged you to pursue your dreams. Remember as a Christian you are not supposed to be a mere dreamer for you have faith at your disposal which is an instrument to realize every dream."

The second type of posting focuses on the message delivered by Prophet Cedric Kobedi and includes some selected quotations from what he delivered during the sermon and service. Using various rhetorical techniques and devices such as repetition, antithesis, metaphor or semantic move, the selected quotations are drafted and framed to create a profound impact on the audience. The following message posted on 18 February 2016 is an example: "The world around you may be dark

but you shall never be dark because your dream shall light up your world. It shall light up your finances, your career, your marriage, your health and your spirituality in Jesus name.” This post applies two related linguistic strategies: contrastive strategy and metaphoric expression. In the first part of the first statement, a contrastive strategy is applied with a binary appeal of dark versus light where light is set to overcome the darkness. The second part employs a metaphoric expression by using and linking “dream” and “light” while stating the role of “dream” in “lighting up” one’s world. The term “world” itself is also used metaphorically. Here, the term “world” is related to practical issues such as finances, career, marriage, health and spirituality.

Testimonies are very central in the tradition of Pentecostal movements and thus posts related to faith or religious testimonies are very prominent on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. This tradition of testimonies is maintained by the current prophetic ministries in Botswana and it is fair to say that there is no church service without testimony. Giving testimony is a core value in Pentecostalism because it is regarded as the best way to express the good that God has done for an individual. Given the importance of giving testimony in the prophetic ministries circle, it is logical that the posting of testimonies is considered one of the best ways to attract people to the Christian faith. Although the content of testimonies varies, the framing of the Facebook posts based on these testimonies highlights the following key aspects: the problem faced by an individual, what God has done to help the individual through the hands of the prophet and through 3G ministries, confirmation of the prophet’s power, confirmation of the benefits of attending religious events organized by 3G Ministries, and confirmation of the influencing power of religious products such as Living Water and Living Sticker.¹²

In every church service, 3G Ministries allocates time to welcome those who are visiting 3G Ministries. A portion of the seating inside the church is dedicated to the visitors. Some visitors are also given a name tag that clearly identifies them as visitors. When the service is over, the media team of 3G Ministries usually approaches visitors for an interview. The interview is later summarized and uploaded on 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. The visitors’ Facebook posts focus on their impression of 3G Ministries, the message of the Prophet and what they expect from the church. An interview posted on 3G Ministries Facebook page underlines the focus that we have just indicated. On 17 January 2016, Mr T.H. visited 3G Ministries from Lesotho. He said: “I wish a ministry like this was there in my country Lesotho, I intend to invite my family to come and experience Christ the same way I did”. The interviews with visitors play a role in ‘marketing’ 3G Ministries to others. As the above quote demonstrates, visitors play an important role in voicing

12 Living Water and Living sticker are two religious products offered and sold by 3G Ministries. Those who purchase both products are believed to be protected from evil by God. Living sticker contains the following message: “Be conscious of your dream”. Those who have the sticker normally attach it to the bumper of their cars or the doors of their houses.

what the church has to offer and why it differs from other churches. In effect, Facebook becomes an avenue for extending the influence and reach of the ministry through the voices of visitors.

5.2 Facebook Posts and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority

Authority, particularly religious authority, is an emerging theme in the study of religion and new media (Campbell, 2010, 2012). Studies on digital religion suggest that with the emergence of the internet, religious authority has been challenged. Cheong (2013, p. 74) notes that “digital media are framed as corrosive and disruptive to traditional religious authority, stressing an erosion of the power of traditional institutions and leaders to define and determine the meaning of religious symbols”. Recent perspectives, however, view the presence of digital media as complementary and supportive of religious authority (Campbell, 2010, 2012; Cheong, 2013).

In the prophetic ministries circle, the presence of a prophet is the main attraction of a church or ministry. 3G Ministries and its prophet can be seen as one item as 3G Ministries cannot be understood without its prophet. Using a marketing term, one would argue that the prophet is the brand of 3G Ministries. The centrality of the prophet in the church affairs is clearly demonstrated in the Facebook posts. Throughout our digital ethnography, we noticed that all posts make mention of the prophet. The prophet is the main attraction of the church and the point of reference. Prophetic ministries maintain the Pentecostal understanding of prophecy, healing and deliverance. In an offline world, the role of the prophet includes providing prophecies, ministering the Word of God and performing healing miracles and deliverance. The presence of a prophet therefore signals the presence of prophecy, healing and deliverance (Chitando, Gunda and Kugler, 2013). Our data clearly indicated that the perception of the prophet in the virtual world is an extension of the general perception and understanding of the prophet’s traditional role in an offline world. For example, in various comments, Facebook users continue to address the prophet as “the prophet of God”, “man of God”, or “servant of God”. The same phrases are traditionally used in the offline world:

Through our digital observation, we determined that posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page are designed to enhance the authority of the prophet and, we argue, apply the traditional model of the Greek rhetoric style. This rhetoric style functions using three related appealing models: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (Demirdogen, 2010). *Ethos* refers to ethical appeal and relates to the question of credibility. Ethical appeal aims at the audience’s perception of the credibility of the prophet. The Facebook posts are structured to ensure credible story-telling on the part of the Prophet while appealing to followers or potential followers as well as Facebook users. Therefore, 3G Ministries’ Facebook posts place emphasis on how the “prayer” or “laying on of hands” or “prophetic word” of the prophet bring instant healing or how a prophecy given by the prophet always comes true. In this sense, the posts are framed or designed to offer a strong sense of the prophet’s credible authority.

Pathos relates to emotional appeal. Within the sociological domain, emotional appeal is known as discursive effect. In the discursive effect, the main focus is on the emotional appeal of the story rather than its factual accuracy. Following this logic, Facebook posts present emotional appeal that reinforces the life transformational and relational authority of the prophet. A Facebook status posted on 12 June 2016 highlights the experience of KD who attended the church service that Sunday as a visitor: “She was captivated by the teachings of the prophet and his humility”. The use of terms such as “captivated”, “teachings” and “humility” in this post provide an emotional appeal that functions as a technique to persuade the audience, including Facebook users, to listen to and follow the prophet. *Logos* refers to logical appeal. Logical appeal is not about the extent to which a statement is logical; it is the attempts to persuade the audience by making reasonable claims. Reasonable claims often influence the ways in which the audience thinks. Facebook posts are designed to persuade the Facebook users’ religious imagination to welcome the prophet’s authority through his message. The story of Mrs KT, posted on 12 June 2016, is a good example of how logical appeal is used to reinforce the prophet’s authority. “Mrs KT made all efforts to find solution to her ailment but to no avail; she sought for medical assistance and even patronised traditional doctors but all to no avail. Today she came to the church with this seven year ordeal and God did what man could not do. When she met the greatest physician of all time, Jesus Christ through His servant Prophet Cedric, Mrs KT was instantly healed of her affliction.” In this testimonial narrative, logical reasoning through the use of data such as efforts to “seek for medical assistance” and “patronize traditional doctors” is applied to narrate the prophet’s authority as a divine authority beyond “medical assistance” and “traditional healing”.

As far as discursive practice is concerned, in our view, the religious authority of the prophet in the 3G Ministries’ Facebook posts manifests in three related ways: perceived charisma with divine power, perceived life transformational coach, and perceived relational authority. We use the term “perceived” to emphasize how the prophet is perceived by Facebook users who access the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. According to Weber (1947), religious authority is normally perceived as a charisma of ‘being instilled with divine or supernatural power’. Posts on the 3G Ministries Facebook page maintained the charismatic power of the prophet and described his authority as one that was divinely given to him. This is clearly demonstrated through the use of linguistic strategies such as ‘Servant of God Prophet Cedric’, ‘the man of God Prophet Cedric’, ‘prophetic revelation from the man of God’ and ‘God’s faithful servant’. We view these phrases as “linguistic strategies” because the phrases provide religious imagination as well as a metaphoric link between their prophet, Prophet Cedric, and the biblical description of prophets. These linguistic strategies play a crucial role in maintaining and reinforcing the prophet’s charisma.

In responses to the posts uploaded onto the Facebook page, comments maintain the use of repetitive linguistic strategies including addressing the prophet as ‘prophet of God’, ‘the chosen

one', 'the vessel of God' and 'true man of God'. When a Facebook user calls upon the name of God, the prophet's name is attached to the call through the use of phrases such as 'the God of Prophet Cedric'. Again the 'divine power' of the prophet is also perceived through the use of linguistic strategies that raise the religious imagination of Facebook users. The following quote captures this point: "...just as the servant of God Prophet Cedric laid a hand on her she felt the baby moving in her uterus" (6 March 2016). For religious Facebook users, this narrative line would drive their Christian imagination to the biblical narrative written in the Gospel of Luke 1:41 where the baby [John the Baptist] leaped in the womb of Elizabeth, his mother, when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting. In using this strategy, the post does not only reinforce the prophet's authority or power. To a certain extent, the discourse is controlled and so is the Facebook users' religious imagination.

The authority of the prophet in the 3G Ministries' Facebook posts, reviews and comments is also narrated as a perceived life transformational coach (a term we developed to capture the perception of the prophet as a life coach). Through this narrative, the prophet is described as someone with an authority to transform one's life for the better. According to the Facebook posts, the transformational life coaching of the prophet occurs through the delivery of prophetic messages, divine teaching and acts of mentorship in a wide range of areas including striving for academic achievement and excellence, working for a love relationship and maintaining a faithful married life. Rather than just calling Prophet Cedric 'the prophet', Facebook users also address him as 'mentor' and 'teacher'.

Through Facebook posts and comments, religious authority is transformed into relational authority. Relational authority is characterized by an individualized relationship. Within the context of the Facebook posts, authority in relational terms is translated using family lines, particularly the parental relationship. Here the prophet is called 'spiritual father' or, more intimately, 'dad' or 'daddy'. While the use of terms such as 'father', 'papa' or 'daddy' to address the prophet signifies a personal and intimate relationship between a church attendee/Facebook user and the prophet, such constructions, in turn, foster a sense of loyalty towards the prophet. This loyalty is demonstrated through the telling of stories or providing narratives of faith using a single lens, the prophet's lens. The following quotes posted by Facebook users on the review section of the 3G Ministries' Facebook page highlights these points.

"Prophet Cedric is a true Man of God who has earnestly restored the true zeal of the people for Jesus Christ our Saviour and he has used the most basic method ever; bring hope to the hopeless."

"This is the Prophet whom God is pleased with, He is a true and real Man of God sent to heal us, deliver us, save us, rescue us, pray for us and bless us. His teachings are exceptional. I see Jesus in him".

“The Word being preached here (Gospel of God's Grace Ministries) is so powerful that it change lives. Daddy, you are truly a Man of God and we thank God for your life”.

As far as technologization of discourse is concerned, the prophet's religious authority is perceived as both transcendent and immanent. On the one hand, addressing the prophet as “man of God” suggests that the prophet's authority transcends human form of authority on the basis that he has the divine power from God. On the other hand, the immanent nature of the prophet's religious authority is bound to the relational character of the prophet when he is perceived as teacher, mentor and daddy. One would therefore argue that the participation of religious Facebook users perpetuates the authority of the prophet. This means that the online network not only introduces new forms of governing authority, as suggested by Thumma (2000) and Campbell (2010, 2012, 2013), but also offers an avenue for expanding the prophet's authority (see also Cheong, 2016). The expansion of the prophet's authority can be seen as a virtual authority as the prophet influences those who read his messages on Facebook and the healing power performed offline can be virtually extended to those who follow the miraculous process through Facebook posts. Three related aspects can be highlighted here: the prophet's authority, Facebook as a medium, and the participation of Facebook users in extending the prophet's authority. It could be argued that Facebook extends the prophet's authority beyond offline boundaries. In this context, posts and comments demonstrate a dynamic interplay between the power of the prophet and its manifested relations with followers and Facebook users.

5.3 Facebook Posts and the Construction of Religious Identity

The central role and authoritative presence of the prophet provides ‘a template’ for the construction and negotiation of identities among those whose testimonial stories are posted on the Facebook page and Facebook users who participate in the testimonial narratives by reading and responding to them. As such, testimonial stories posted on the Facebook page provide an avenue to display religious identity narratives. The Facebook users' views and perceptions of the prophet also shape the ways in which they perceive themselves. According to Bauman (2000, p. 1) identity is “the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others”. Through personal identification with the life of the prophet, the prophet clearly becomes a mirror through which Facebook users view their own identity construction.

The question is, what do these religious identity narratives tell us about the construction and negotiation of religious identity? According to Hewitt (2000), identity construction is “the process

by which an individual develops the capacity to grasp the meaning of situations in everyday life and their own position in relation to them” (Hewitt, 2000, p. 79, cited in Lovheim, 2013, p. 42). The testimonial narrative posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page consist of two main parts: autobiographical stories of the individual providing the testimony; and the description of new meaning that has shaped the past ‘autobiographical story’ following an encounter with the prophet and 3G Ministries. The first section presents a dark past identity characterized with problems, difficulties, temptations and sickness. The second section presents a new identity characterized by light, joy and happiness. The encounter with the prophet and 3G Ministries is, therefore, represented as a defining moment for the construction of a new identity. In this defining moment, the story teller is ‘a new born’, 3G Ministries is represented as a home, and the prophet is the ‘Father’ who has shaped the newborn’s identity. To illustrate this interpretation, we provide a testimonial narrative posted on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page on 20 March 2016.

“For over 15 years of her teaching career, Ms J. M. was hard-hit by limitation in progress. She only had a diploma in her field and therefore it became really hard for her to ever be promoted. As a result Ms M. decided to apply for sponsorship in order to further her studies; she applied countless times but all she got were regrets. This situation brought her a lot of distress as she wondered if she would ever progress in life. Through this dire time Ms M. had not come to the knowledge of Christ Jesus so she lived a hopeless life of drinking alcohol and satisfying all the worldly desires. There was nothing right in her life and the future looked grim for her. In November 2012, it was revealed that indeed God had plans to prosper and not to harm Ms M., plans to give her hope and a future despite all her short comings. "I had a strange vision where I saw a man telling me to stop drinking alcohol and ordered me to wash a car that we were to use in a journey" she added. In just a week she was privileged to come to the Gospel of God’s Grace Ministries and to her utter shock, she realised that the man she saw in the dream was the man of God Prophet Cedric, she suddenly got to realise that God had sent His servant to caution her on the wrong-doings she was involved in. Upon realising this, she made a heart's decision to act in accordance with what she saw in the dream; she stopped drinking alcohol, aligned her life to God’s word and began her Christian Journey through fellowship in the church.”

The above example clearly highlights the structure of testimonial narratives where a dark past was presented followed by a bright future after a defining encounter with the prophet and 3G Ministries. Although this structure is similar to that of conversion narratives, testimonial narratives generally emphasize ideas of self-discovery and self-transformation, a reinterpretation of past life and planning for the future. While conversion narratives focus on the efficacy and experience of the conversion, testimonial narratives focus on the beneficial outcome under ordinary day-to-day circumstances in a collective context because they are designed for and located before specific audiences (Westerink, 2013).

Although accounts of identity through religious testimonial narratives are highly personalized experiences of faith, when the narratives are presented in a post on a Facebook page the autobiographical story of an individual becomes a shared narrative. Through the posting of an individual's autobiographical narrative of identity on the Facebook page, the autobiographical story becomes a shared religious experience that gives meaning as well as shapes the identity negotiation of other Facebook users. This can be seen in the Facebook users' comments on the testimonial narratives posted on the 3G Ministries' Facebook page. The following two comments from two Facebook users illustrate this point:

“That is the work of God of my proffet”[prophet]. [I] am awaitin [awaiting] my miraculars [miraculous] transfer [transfer]. I hv [have] been waitn [waiting] 4 [for] 7 years. God tim [God's time] is the best. Whn [When] God says yes no man can say no. Heavenly father my family needs me. In Jesus name [I] am joinin [joining] my family frm [from] the testimony givn [given].”

“...promotion for one [is] promotion for all. I am not there in person but am there in spirit. I receive mine which is also long overdue in Jesus name.”

Based on the above accounts, one could argue that in relation to the formation of religious identity, a Facebook post facilitates the intersections of two stories: the story of the past and a new identity in an individual's religious autobiography and the story of the 'shared' identity where Facebook users 'align' their religious identity negotiation with the religious autobiographical story posted on the Facebook page. Facebook posts and posted comments therefore create spaces for the discovery of a 'shared identity' among Facebook users. Facebook users who commented on specific testimonial narratives posted on the Facebook page immediately aligned themselves with the autobiographical narrative of the one who shared the testimony. For a religious Facebook user, the religious identity of the person who provided the religious autobiographical narrative is now his/her 'second self' (Turkle, 1984, 1995). As a platform, Facebook therefore empowers religious Facebook users “to create and perform religious identity online” (Campbell, 2012, p. 8) and allows for religious identity performance (see also Campbell 2013). This confirms Ammerman's contention that religious identity narratives are framed by two kinds of stories: autobiographical stories of individuals and stories of shared religious experiences that shape the meaning of autobiographical stories (Ammerman, 2003; see also Clark and Dierberg, 2013, p. 147).

5.4 Facebook Posts and the Making of a Virtual Religious Community

3G Ministries welcomes the faithful in a Facebook post on its Facebook page before a church service begins. During the service, new items are posted regularly to keep the Facebook users

updated on the proceedings of the actual Church service. Events are often described in such a way that Facebook users feel they are participating in the church service. This can be clearly seen in the following statements: “The man of God is *now* at the altar to deliver the message of God”, “It is *now* time for as to get [receive] God through His word and by His Spirit”, “It is *now* time for you to hear the voice of God through His servant Prophet Cedric” (emphasis added). The linguistic tool applied in these quotations is repetition where the term “now” is repeated a number of times. The repetition of the word ‘now’ certainly offers a discursive sense, at least to the Facebook users. It not only provides a sense of urgency; it also provides a practical guide of the proceedings for Facebook users and allows them to actively participate in the service by following the live updates on Facebook. Here, Facebook is used as a space for live-blogging or live-broadcasting and allows Facebook users to virtually participate in the service. However, as the posts do not indicate a specific time frame, the term “now” is also used metaphorically to allow a sense that the church service is continuous and on-going in a virtual world. Whenever the posts are read, Facebook users believe they are participating in a religious event virtually although the actual event may be over.

The virtual active participation of Facebook users can be tracked through the linguistic strategies they use in response to the welcome invitation and live updated posts on the Facebook page. Through the use of specific linguistic strategies, the discourse of their religious practice is technologized. The following quoted comments underline this point: “Today though I won't be at church coz [because] of work, I too believe that today is my day in Jesus name. Distance is not a barrier”, “[I] am connected...distance [is] not a barrier in Jesus Name!”, “Amen distance is not a barrier in Jesus name”, “Distance is not a barrier. I tap on the grace and take it for myself”, “I'm connected by faith in Jesus name”, “I am not there in person by am there in spirit”. The choice of linguistic phrases such as ‘distance is not a barrier’, ‘I am connected’ and ‘I am not there in person but am there in spirit’ demonstrate the development of religious creative imagination to the extent that virtual presence and participation in the church service or event is considered to be as ‘real’ as the physical presence and participation in the service.

The virtual participation also provides space for virtual divine intervention when testimonial stories are told, healing and deliverance is performed and prophetic messages are delivered. Other than the use of the acclamation ‘Amen’ in response to Facebook posts, the responses of Facebook users to the posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page suggest that they too receive the divine intervention, but virtually. Phrases such as ‘I receive’, ‘I trust and believe’, ‘I receive my healing’, ‘I receive my freedom’, ‘I receive my promotion’, ‘I receive breakthrough’ and ‘I receive light’ appear hundreds of times in the responses of Facebook users to posts on the Facebook page. These responses often emphasize the uniqueness of the 3G Ministries’ virtual church. One of the Facebook users, for example, said this: “Now I know why the gospel that I receive from 3G is very unique, it comes like rain the time of draught. I dnt [don't] think I wil [will] survive without it!”

The creating of a virtual community is demonstrated through the active participation of virtual attendants in prayers. Again, the Facebook space allows Facebook users to ‘type’ their prayers as they follow the service through Facebook posts. The following prayers posted as a comment on posts uploaded onto the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page support what we have described: “I am really struggling to let go...Jesus I pray [that] u[You] break the bondage of hurt in my life”, “ Lord help me forgive my offenders in the Mighty name of Jesus Christ”, “Father forgive all my offenders and release your mercy and your favour in Jesus name”, “Lord I need your touch. See me thru [through] dis[this] misery [that] I am facing. I have put my trust in you.” These prayers in various ways have a re-enforcing effect to the extent that those who were at the service physically can ‘re-experience’ them in the virtual world when they read the Facebook posts. This extends the influence of the church.

What we have presented above supports the idea that Facebook, and Facebook posts, play a crucial role in the development of a virtual religious community (Johns, 2012; Lomborg and Ess, 2012). For many religious Facebook users, Facebook is a church. In the virtual church, Facebook users follow the same service, hear the same message, listen to the same prophet and experience the same divine intervention as physical church attendees. Following this logic, we could argue that Facebook posts bring both actual attendants and Facebook users together as they produce a new understanding to being connected to God, the prophet and the church. Facebook becomes a religio-cultural tool when interconnectedness, in the sense of being connected to one another, is redefined (Campbell, 2005, 2010; Hackett, 2006). In other words, Facebook does not only provide a venue for socio-religious interaction but also facilitates moments of configuring new understandings and meanings of the socio-religious relationship. Through the active virtual participation of Facebook users, Facebook shifts the idea of location as a space to a process of meaning-making. As a location, Facebook offers three dimensions of interpretation for Facebook users: a location for an individual to relate to his/her religious experience; a location for an individual to relate to religious meanings, practices and ‘virtual religious touch’ communicated through the participation in the religious virtual community; and a location where the power of 3G Ministries and its prophet is extended.

5.5 Facebook Posts and Religious Product Attachment

Scholarly studies have found that religious products play an important role in the presence of religion on the internet. In many cases, religious products give brands to religion and become marketing tools for religious expansion (Einstein, 2008; Bailey and Redden, 2011; Usumier and Stolz, 2014). The discursive practice in the Facebook posts of 3G Ministries perceives the world through a binary approach whereby the reality of life stands between two competing worlds: the world of darkness where human beings continually fall due to problems, difficulties and challenges,

and the world of light where human beings enjoy their freedom and happiness. Through the posts on Facebook, 3G Ministries represents itself as a church that can facilitate the cross-over from the world of darkness to the world of light. The posts also represent the prophet as a helping hand that is anointed to bring people out from the bondage of darkness to their perceived promised land. Religious products are created to facilitate the process of moving from one world to the other. On its website, 3G Ministries has called these products the 'living package'. Among others, 3G ministries offers the following: Living Water and Living Sticker.

A good number of the testimonies posted on the 3G Ministries' Facebook page include narratives of the Living Package and how it can transform one's life. Our digital observation found that narratives of the Living Package are generally related to descriptions of academic struggles. The following are two examples:

"...from a tender age, M.P. was renowned by his teachers as a well behaved and responsible student. This all disappeared into thin air as upon entering Junior School he began to mix with wrong crowds...Consequently, his marks started to deteriorate from grades A and B, to grades D and E... During his examinations, he studied hard and prayed in faith using the Living Water believing God to help him during his examinations. When the results were released, for the first time in his academic history, he had scored an overall of 38 points all to the glory of God!"

"Ms M. also ministered the Living Water in faith throughout all her examinations and by God's grace she has managed to complete her studies and even obtained seven distinctions all for the glory of Jesus Christ."

The above narratives of the use of the Living Package clearly emphasize the power of using religious products. The Facebook posts of those narratives send a single message: "The solution to these problems...is to buy something that will alleviate the fear" (Einstein, 2008, p. 11). As such, Facebook users are viewed not only as active virtual church attendees but as religious customers.

Narratives of religious products through various testimonies described in Facebook posts can be understood as a discursive strategy leading to religious product attachment. Product attachment is characterized by the connection between the self and a product. This connection is possible when meaning is attached to the product. Once meaning is attached to a product, people view themselves through the quality and value of the product to the extent that they are defined by the product they use. In the theory of product attachment, scholars highlight this connection by arguing that when people have a strong attachment to a product, they also feel attached to the groups that produce and/or attach meaning to that same product (Soloman, 1983; Zimmerman, 2009). In other words, the product becomes the bridge between the self and the group. It is within this logic that narratives

of religious products through various Facebook posts can be understood. Facebook posts facilitate the process of meaning-making in relation to various religious products as well as the attachment of followers and Facebook users to those products.

6 Conclusion

Facebook has emerged as one of the digital devices with the capacity to mediate religious behaviors, interactions and discourses. In Botswana, Facebook has attracted many active users. In order to capitalize on this use, many prophetic ministries in Botswana use Facebook as a medium for communicating religious messages online. The Facebook page of the 3G Ministries is one of the most active Facebook pages among prophetic ministries in Botswana. Posts on this Facebook page include virtual invitations to participate in church services, messages from the prophet highlighting his sermons, testimonial narratives of church attendants, and special welcoming posts for ‘visitors’ to 3G Ministries. The purpose of 3G Ministries’ Facebook page is to maximize the effectiveness and affectiveness of communication between the church and its members, as well as Facebook followers. This is clearly demonstrated through the regular postings on the Facebook page and thousands of comments or reactions posted on the page in response to various Facebook posts and reviews.

Our digital ethnographic study found that posts, reviews and comments on the Facebook page of 3G Ministries facilitate technologization of discourse through which certain linguistic strategies are used to influence people’s religious imagination, interactions and vision. This can be seen particularly in the posts of testimonial narratives on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. Within the context of our study, we argue that the process of technologization of discourse is particularly designed to enhance the religious authority of the prophet, the construction and negotiation of religious identity, particularly among Facebook users, the formation of a virtual religious community, and the expansion of religious product attachment.

For 3G Ministries, its prophet is the face or the brand of the church and the point of reference for church members and Facebook followers. Religious discourses in the posts, reviews and comments on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page translate the prophet’s authority as perceived charisma with divine power, perceived life transformational coach and perceived relational authority. The central discursive role of the prophet is to provide ‘a template’ for the construction and negotiation of identity among church members and Facebook followers. With regular updates on the page and live blogging of church services the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page offers a virtual church for Facebook followers. In this virtual church, Facebook users and physical attendees are

connected as they follow the same service, hear the same message, listen to the same prophet and experience the same divine intervention.

This study also examined the ways in which the world is perceived through the lens of Facebook posts, reviews and comments. Posts on the Facebook page of 3G Ministries depict life as a reality that stands between the world of darkness and the world of light. Through the Facebook posts, 3G Ministries represents itself as a credible church that can facilitate socio-religious vision and the cross-over from the world of darkness to the world of light. Within this context, religious products such as Living Water and Living Sticker are narrated as solutions to the fear of the dark world. Here religious meaning is attached to the product to the extent that religious disposition is defined by the use of those products. The Facebook page of 3G Ministries therefore becomes a space that encourages attachment to religious products in the hope that strong attachment to such products will lead to virtual and physical attachment to the church.

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