**'Bushirified': New media as 'alternative' spaces for performing religious identities online**

**Motilola Akinfemisoye-Adejare**

**Abstract**

*While it is no news that new media technologies continue to permeate various aspects of life on the continent, it is useful to examine what the adoption and appropriation of these technologies, particularly social media platforms, by religious leaders and their followers might mean for the performance of religion online. As pastors and churches go online, there seems to be the creation of a 'new community', a subculture, who not only worship and satisfy religious appetite on these spaces but also appropriate the identities of religious leaders and express these as part of their online identities. This study takes its root in Campbell's (2010) Religious -Social Shaping of Technology approach, to interrogate how religious communities negotiate and contest their appropriation of social media as a site of religious expressions of identity, and in this case the 'Bushirified' identity. The study deploys 'Bushirified' as an anchor through which it interrogates how online members of religious communities use these spaces as platforms for expressing dissent towards 'unsupportive' authorities and support for their religious leader through this renaming on social media, as well as what these might mean for the performance of religious identity online. Using a combination of digital ethnography of the pages of Shepherd Bushiri's ministry on Facebook and Critical Discourse Analysis of the comments of 'Bushirified' members on the page, the study finds that the creative appropriation of new digital technologies is giving rise not only to congregations without 'borders' but also shaping identity formation online, one click at a time.*

## Introduction

When news broke on the 1st of February 2019 that Prophet Shepherd Bushiri together with his wife Prophetess Mary Bushiri had been arrested by South Africa's Directorate for Priority Investigations (HAWKS), it was Prophet Bushiri's Facebook page that became an important site and source for the announcement to go public. The BBC in reporting the arrest noted that "[c]ontroversial Malawian self-styled prophet Shepherd Bushiri has been arrested with his wife Mary in South Africa, according to his church's Facebook page" (BBC, 2019). The message itself on the Shepherd Bushiri's Facebook page reads:

> Important Notice: To all our members and followers

> This morning, around 07:00hrs in the morning officers of the Directorate for Priority Investigations (HAWKS) have arrested **our parents** in Pretoria, South Africa. A pending court appearance has been confirmed for Monday.
>
> As you were with **our parents** in prayer during this week of the stampede hearing, we ask you to continue in the same spirit as this too shall come to pass.
>
> We will keep you updated on our official media platforms
>
> (Facebook post, Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, 1st February, 2019, emphasis mine).

The post above, with its reference to Prophet Bushiri and his wife as 'our parents', exemplifies how followers of Bushiri-styled churches refer to their leaders. Beyond these labels is the emerging creation of online identities where followers add the names of their religious leaders to their online identities.

While the creative appropriation of new media technologies and the resultant social media platforms by Pentecostal pastors and parishioners alike continue to rise, it is useful to examine how these platforms are necessarily becoming sites for creating new religious identities, marked by affiliation to particular Pentecostal leaders. New media technologies continue to be appropriated in ways that shape how various spheres of life, including religion are practiced and performed in Africa. As of November 2019, Social bakers, a website which tracks and monitors social media statistics, ranked Prophet Bushiri's Facebook page in first place in Malawi. This not only shows how popular Bushiri's page is but also makes it a useful site for unpacking what this page means both as a celebrity and religious satisfaction space. This paper interrogates how new media technologies which make social media platforms possible, provide spaces for the performance of religion online. It begins with an introduction to set the scene and goes on to speak on the theoretical framework that the paper is anchored upon, before providing a note on methodology. It then discusses the preliminary findings of the study and provides a discussion of what these findings might mean for the performance of religion online.

As pastors and churches appropriate new media technologies, there is the creation of a 'new community' which not only worships online but also negotiates religious identity in interesting ways. This study focuses on Bushiri's appropriation of Facebook and the emerging 'Bushirified' community on Facebook which performs religious identity online. Scholars writing on the religious appropriation of technology in Africa have observed that churches, and in particular, prophetic ministries, are increasingly adopting new media technologies. As Faimau and Behrens (2016:68) observe, "one of the characteristics of prophetic ministries is the use of media and, in particular, new media".

This is true for Prophet Shepherd Bushiri and his Enlightened Christian Gathering. His verified Facebook page, as of the time of conducting this study in March 2019 has over 3.7million likes. This study therefore uses this Facebook page as a site of inquiry. The study takes its root in Campbell's (2010) Religious-Social Shaping of Technology which focuses on studying how religious communities negotiate their uses of technology and media for their own purposes. What does this mean for the expression of identity in an online environment like Facebook? The Religious-Social Shaping of Technology allows us to "understand how religious users shape and negotiate the Internet for their purposes… [and] sets the stage for considering how religious users shape technology for their goals and desire" (Campbell, 2005: 2). To interrogate how prophets like Bushiri appropriate social media, particularly Facebook, and how followers construct their self-identity, it is useful to approach the technology from a non-technological deterministic perspective. In light of this, the paper adopts a media sociological perspective which allows us to focus not on the medium itself but on the content of the posts on Facebook. Following Campbell (2005:5), it may be argued that there is need for "special consideration [to] be given to how religious users shape technologies towards their own ends to meet specific needs or desires". In this case, how not only Bushiri appropriates Facebook but also how his followers and indeed the 'Bushirifieds' use their self-identification on Facebook to further propagate their 'Bushiriness'. The point needs to be made here that those who do not self-identify as being 'Bushirified' on Facebook are not necessarily categorised as non-followers. Rather, the focus of this paper is on those who have taken on the label 'Bushirified' as part of their profile identification on Facebook.

**Methodology**

The proliferation of new digital technologies which make social media possible is permeating several facets of life on the continent to the point where it is becoming indispensable with Facebook being one of the most popular. It is therefore pertinent that researchers harness these online spaces as a lot of 'social life' now exists 'online'. Scholars generally agree that ethnography affords telling the stories and lived experiences of a group people.

Digital ethnography as a method of data gathering enables the researcher to observe how users and individuals interact in a virtual space and platform (Delia, 2017; Murthy, 2008). For ethnographers and anthropologists, what constitutes the 'field' in the 'digital era' continues to be the subject of debates. Dalsgaard (2016:96) notes that "scholars theorising about social media have convincingly argued that online sites are by now so integrated into many people's

lives that it makes little sense to maintain a clear-cut distinction between online and offline." While scholars such as Hine (2000) suggested that the 'virtual space' is different from the 'traditional' or offline space, further studies (Baker, 2013; Dalsgaard, 2016; Delia, 2017 Murthy, 2008) have shown that this is no longer the case.

The lines between 'offline' and 'online' are becoming blurred even as what happens online often mirrors the offline. It is in this light therefore, that this study uses a digital ethnography of Prophet Shepherd Bushiri's Facebook page to interrogate how the online performance of religious identity, particularly in Africa is taking place. It also uses a Critical Discourse Analysis of a selection of comments by 'Bushirified' individuals on Facebook to show how these online spaces afford the creation and performance of online religious identity. 'Bushirified' within the context of this paper is defined not simply as those who follow Prophet Shepherd Bushiri online and offline, but also those who add this name badge to their profiles online. The focus here is on those who use this as their profile identity on Facebook. The digital fieldwork for this study began in February 2019 following news of Prophet Bushiri's arrest and is currently ongoing and part of a larger study on how African religious users adopt and appropriate new media technologies.

Prophet Bushiri's Facebook page is an open page and the researcher is neither a member of ECG nor a Facebook follower. Nevertheless, the researcher's participation was to the extent that she read the post and comments, made notes and analysed these for the purpose of an academic research. The question of whether it is ethical for researchers to use information found in online spaces has been the subject of debate among scholars (see Taylor and Pagliari 2018,Munson et al., 2013). There are, however, those who argue that if data is voluntarily available on a social media platform like Facebook, then the need for informed consent before the researcher conducts the study might no longer be necessary (see for example Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel 2003). One such scholar Wills, (2019:1) argues that "there are at least two ways [in which] informed consent could be waived in research; first if the data are public, and second if the data are textual." There is also the question of whether data mined online is private or public information (Markham, 2012). Beyond the binary of whether or not information online is private or public, this paper sides with those who are more concerned with the actual content of the post and ensure that anonymity is preferred and guaranteed those who posted the comments analysed in this paper. For the purpose of this paper, these are simply referred to as posts but quote verbatim. The only exception to this is Bushiri's page and the content gleaned from his Facebook page. This is because his Facebook page describes him as a 'public figure'

and it is believed that whatever goes on the page is done with intent and awareness that it can be publicly consumed and mined. As such, in analysing Bushiri's Facebook the paper quotes his post and includes his name.

**Analysis and Discussions**

In the course of the digital ethnographic immersion and in analysing the data using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA),a number of interrelated themes emerged : reinvigorated religious authority of the prophet in naming strategies employed on Facebook; the use of the Prophet's Facebook and his associated website as preferred 'alternative' challenge to (negative) mainstream media representation; Prophet's Facebook page as 'product placement' platform and how followers, particularly the 'Bushirified' worship of the prophet.

**What is in a name? Strengthening religious authority through naming and identity strategies on Facebook**

Naming strategies employed, whether online or offline are far from innocent but are laden with deep meanings. As Richardson (2007) observes, "the manner in which social actors are named identifies not only the group(s) that they are associated with; it can also signal the relationship between the namer and the named". The post announcing Bushiri's arrest as of March 11 2019, had over 9 thousand comments. The following comments on the post of the arrest are illustrative of the mood and reaction of the followers:

> "Mara, South Africa what did the man do to you? Honestly this is not humanly right and whoever is behind these shameful acts [sic] towards God's Prophet and his work for the Lord shall not be left unpunished. But if it be for God's glory it is well. **PAPA** once said for the work of his Boss Jesus he is not scared of anything and is willing and ready for the Gospel.... **Mom, Dad I love you and I pray for you**. Jesus, your servants needs you now."(emphasis mine).

> "**Sons and Daughters of major 1**, the devil has no rest, he never get tired. We are in a Prophetic church everything happened God already see a way because He allow it to happen. This not the time to be sharken [sic](shaken) nor argue with the devil. God hear us in the heavenly language which is prayer. Let us pray to God as our father and stand as one in prayer. Every prophecy my father prophecy about his persecution he was

preparing us not the world. Saint let stop the noise and pray.[sic] **Our Father and Mom need our prayers**. Let's interceed [sic](intercede) on their behalf. Shalom."(empasis mine)

These comments are from those whom Facebook identifies as 'Top Fans' since they regularly comment and engage with content on the page. According to Facebook for Media (2018), "Top Fans [is] a feature that highlights a creator's most loyal fans by displaying a badge next to their name." The badge is earned "by being one of the most active people on a Page, which can include watching the Page's videos and reacting to, commenting on or sharing its content" (Facebook for Media, 2018).

The comments above show that Bushiri and his wife are viewed and regarded as 'parents' despite been only 36 years old at the time of the arrest. There is a sense in which these comments call on other followers to provide support as they are all *members of a family* where the parents are supposedly in trouble and need the help of the *children*. This finding also seems to corroborate Faimau and Behrens' (2016:77) observation that "the perception of the prophet [on Facebook]… is an extension of the general perception and understanding of the prophet's traditional role in an offline world". An analysis of these comments shows that the prophet, and by extension his wife, still exercise control and religious authority unlimited by what the calculator might reveal about their ages. They are not regarded as 'brethren' as one would find in the Bible but as having the same authority as 'parents' in an African setting whose authority mostly remains unquestionable. Faimau (2018: 374) aptly captures how this is taking place, not only in Botswana, which is his study's focus, but also relatable elsewhere on the continent where "Facebook posts and comments on the official Facebook pages [of Prophets] generally maintain a perception that a prophet has a charismatic power and his authority is divinely given".

In spite of the endearing labels used to address the prophet and his wife, there are also those who sit on the opposing side of the debate as evidenced by the following comment:

"People must just leave god [sic]out of this. **Your Papa is a scam**. HAWKS issue a statement saying they have a strong case of fraud and money laundering" (emphasis mine). One, therefore, finds that appropriating Facebook also exposes the prophet and his brand to attacks such as in the comment above, which might only be possible in an online environment.

The digital ethnographic immersion afforded the researcher an opportunity to unpack how Bushiri exercises religious authority online to the admiration of his followers. The post below highlights this:

> "I prophesy two weeks from now a great testimony over your life in Jesus name! Don't forget Jesus is Lord" (Bushiri's post 28th February 2019).

Rather than diminish his religious authority as some studies on digital religion suggest (See Cheong, 2013), Bushiri in his appropriation of Facebook reinforces this authority in creative ways as exemplified in this post. As indicated elsewhere (Akinfemisoye, 2018), prophesies remain important aspects of the Facebook posts of many prophets and pastors. Not only do they take the form of 'prophetic declarations', but are mostly written from a position of authority with the use of 'I', suggesting the religious leader's absolute authority over the post and the prophecy contained therein or perhaps a way of convincing the followers of the *authenticity* of the prophecy. Such 'prophetic' posts, as in the example above, exemplify how these pastors appropriate new media technologies, in the case of this analysis, Facebook, to reinforce traditional hierarchies and positions of authority, as well as "strengthen and expand their communities and to gain public recognition for their organisations" (Hackett and Soares, 2015: 2).

**'The media won't tell you this': Online platforms as 'alternative' media spaces for sharing news**

There is a sense in which Bushiri uses his Facebook page and the ECG website as preferred platforms for disseminating 'news' about himself, his church and his activities. The post below is an example of how Bushiri's appropriation of new media technologies seems to circumvent traditional mainstream media in providing his followers with news about his ministry:

> "Alex fire shack victims pour their hearts out to Bushiri"
>
> (Post from Bushiri's Facebook page, 7th March 2019)

This post is rather short compared to other posts. It only has this headline with a link to the full story on the ECG website which doubles as a 'news' outlet. While the story itself is about a charity donation by Bushiri and his church to fire victims in Alexandra Township in South Africa, the concern here is more about how he links the ECG website to this post. This perhaps

is a clever way of pointing his followers, and indeed anyone interested in following updates about happenings in the church. The comments by some of his fans beneath this Facebook post further shed lights on how Bushiri creatively uses this website as a 'news' outlet:

> "I know the media wont [sic] say anything about this"
>
> "Why can't all SA newspapers and social media capture these great positive news about the great prophet"[sic]

By calling out the media for supposedly ignoring such 'positive' news, there is a sense in which Bushiri uses the opportunity that the Internet affords, in the form of his church's website to tell his own stories on his own terms, and ignoring the mainstream media, who then have to play catch-up.

**The prophet's Facebook page as religious product placements site**

The appropriation of Facebook by religious leaders again highlights how these online spaces are becoming sites for the marketization of religious products. The post below from Bushiri's Facebook page exemplifies how this is done:

> "Do you have [sic] feel hard-pressed with the pains of everyday's [sic] living? Well, if you are, then this song by my son Gwamba is for you. The song encourages you to stand against all odds for the promise of eternity is true and unquestionable. Download and share" (Bushiri's post 27th February 2019).

There is therefore a sense in which Bushiri's appropriation of Facebook as an online communicative space engenders what Musa and Ibrahim (2012) refer to as "brandversations" which in turn "generate cultural capital in the religious marketplace of ideas"(Cheong, 2017:27). One therefore sees, through the above post, how the prophet's page becomes not only a site for advertising this song and the 'service' that can be obtained by listening to the song, but also how the prophet validates the song by referring to the singer as 'my son'. This is therefore not only about the song but about a song composed and sung by 'a son of the prophet' thereby connoting more symbolic importance of both the song and the advertiser. Faimau and Behrens, writing about the marketisation of religious products, note that "religious products play an important role in the presence of religion on the internet" (2016:84). Bushiri, through posts such as the one above, presents himself not just as a prophet but also as a social

media influencer who uses his 'celebrity status' and self-branding strategies to advertise not only himself but other related products and services (see Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017).

**Being "Bushirified": 'Worshipping' Bushiri the man, the prophet on Facebook**

During the ethnographic immersion on Prophet Bushiri's Facebook page, I found a trend where the names of some of commentators ended with the suffix 'Bushirified'. While some simply added it to their Facebook profiles after their first and last names, others replaced their last names with 'Bushirified'. A Google search of the term "Bushirified" in March 2019 yielded over 8,500 results. By November 2019, a similar search yielded more than double at over 17,600 results. Although there is no doubt that not all the entries linked to this label will directly be by 'Bushirified' fans, it nonetheless shows the online popularity of the label. The post below is an example of the type of comments that the 'Bushirifieds' make on a typical post on the page:

> Sunday of No More Delays LIVE: The Grace touches Botswana
>
> A woman is located for prophecy and the Lord suprises [sic] (surprises) her with a detailed prophetic word, she will not see the demon of delay again! Major 1 picks up her business tenders in the spirit and tells her he sees food. She confirms that she deals with a tender where she suppies [supplies] breakfast, lunch and supper. She also supplies schools with stationay. [stationery] The prophet notes that there is delay in the business, worth R900,000 plus. The prophet sees her place and date of birth. He tells her of a connection that will surface in Palapye. This will change her life forever. He delivers her from delay and it is done! If God can do it for her, He will do it for you! What are you waiting for! (Bushiri's Facebook post, 10th March, 2019)

A comment beneath this post reads:

> "I am not waiting for anything I am HIJACKING... Daddy next Sunday it will be us spiritual hijackers giving big big [sic] testimonies. Save this post"
>
> (Comment from a 'Bushirified' follower beneath Bushiri's Facebook post 10th March 2019).

Another comment reads:

> "papa we are all worshipping you we love you papa major1 #ITSA" (Comment from a 'Bushirified' follower beneath Bushiri's Facebook post 10th March 2019).

One therefore finds that posts and comments by those who express their identities as 'Bushirified' on Facebook express mostly reverence and worship for Prophet Bushiri who is almost deified. The picture below, posted by a 'Bushirified' Facebook user captures how Bushiri's deification is performed on Facebook:


This pictorial post typifies how the 'Bushirifieds' not only express and perform their online religious identities but also how Prophets, like Bushiri, who creatively appropriate new media technologies in extending online religious performance, are creating and sustaining themselves as brands who perhaps enjoy equal or more attention than the God they claim to worship.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been able to show that the appropriation of online communication spaces such as Facebook affords users, religious leaders, particularly Prophets like Bushiri and members of the "Bushirified" community an opportunity "to create and perform religious identity online" (Campbell, 2012:71). The discussions in this paper suggest that Pentecostal church leaders, including prophets, extend not only their traditional religious authorities through their use of

social media platforms, but they also create virtual families which simulate the traditional family structure. In this case however, the 'family' in spite of how large it is, only has a 'papa', the prophets or 'parents', where reference is made to the prophet and his wife, and 'children' who are referred to as 'sons and daughters of the prophet'. The prophet himself has no siblings under this 'family structure' but only children, who further take on the online 'Bushirified' identity. These Facebook posts and comments, therefore, create spaces for the negotiation and adoption of a 'Bushirified' online religious identity, a community which transcends geographical space and time. This highlights how the appropriation of these new media technologies has opened up spaces for the performance of religion, and in this case Christianity, which is performed by clicking (Akinfemisoye, 2018). There is also a growing challenge to the role of traditional media where prophets, Bushiri-style, are circumventing the traditional routines that journalists would go through to posting what they regard as news. As such, the appropriation of new media technologies by these tech-savvy prophets, and Bushiri, in particular allows worshippers to "access the divine presence on their own terms" (Nyamnjoh, 2015: vii), whatever the 'divine' means for their religious performances.

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