

# Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online

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# Chapter 27

## “Type Amen” or Perish! Religious Deception on Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines religious discourse on Facebook and brings to the fore the recurrent deceptive requests that have given rise to new forms of religious extremism and radicalism. Many Christians have turned to social media as a medium where their faith can be practiced and with the intention of enforcing it on others. One major avenue through which this ensues is in the inherent ideological requests on Facebook where members are threatened to either type “Amen” or be afflicted with curses as punishment. These misleading requests usually attract instantaneous thousands of “likes” and consenting responses that depict underlying fear. An awareness of these extremist inclinations against the backdrop of religion is crucial to the understanding and interpretation of the semiotic realities within such Facebook posts.*

### INTRODUCTION

The present information age is marked by the urge for people to share their beliefs and world views with others especially in limitless and porous spaces as provided by the Internet (Hjarvard, 2011); in turn, the internet has been saturated with propagation of beliefs that are not completely true, leading up to the dissemination of deceptive information. For instance, Mejias and Vokuev (2017) observe that in state politics citizens are active participants in their own disenfranchisement by using the social media to generate, consume or distribute false information, thereby legitimizing disinformation. Deceptive information in this study refers to all forms of disinformation and misinformation that are geared towards dissimulation, propaganda or distraction. Religion is one of the social domains that has suffered major hit by this flawed information trend (Campbell, 2013). Being the “opium of the people” as observed by Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>, religion affords people the opportunity to freely and persuasively propagate both shared and individual beliefs on the efficacy of the supernatural, however, this freedom sometimes metamorphose

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into the use of subtle verbal or written ideologically saturated threat, patterned after specific religious dogma, to enforce ones view on others without recourse to facts. According to Kumar and Geethakumari (2014), the birth of social networks has made every user a self-publisher with no editing, checking for factual accuracy and clearly with no accountability. They are also of the opinion that the truthfulness of a post is certified once such post is seen by millions of users on their computer screen. Agreeably, it must be acknowledge at this earliest point that many propagators of deceptive religious information on the internet do not often see any harm in their practice, rather they perceive it as a way of evangelising their doctrines.

Consequently, with the extension of religious practices to an online platform, many have turned to the social media as a medium where their faith can be practised and enforced on others. One major avenue through which this forced participation ensues is in the inherent ideological requests on Facebook where members are threatened to either type ‘Amen’ or be afflicted with curses as punishment. These persuasive requests usually attract thousands of ‘likes’ and responses such that one wonders at the motives behinds the posts and responses and on whose authority are such posts endorsed (*see Caspi & Gorsky, 2006*).

The study examines an emerging ideological threat on Facebook in order to bring to fore the subtle deceptive acts that are embedded in them. The deception in them are presented as graphic posts with various afflicted individuals, objects and renowned personalities, requesting readers to “type amen” or be afflicted or even “perish”. To achieve this objective, the study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the semiotic patterns used in ‘Type Amen’ texts on Facebook?
2. How do such semiotic pattern express deceptive persuasion?

## **BACKGROUND: DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media is a computer and Internet-based technology that expedites the sharing of information, ideas and thoughts through the building of virtual networks and communities. It enables people to quickly share contents such as videos, photos, documents and other personal information via their computer, tablet or smartphone (Newman, 2011). The social media was created as a fast and easier way to find, connect and interact with family and friends. It has also been embraced by businesses as a faster way to reach customers (Qualman, 2010). Global Digital Statshot Q3 2017 puts the number of active social media users at over 3 billion, with over 90% of users being young people between the ages of 18 and 29 (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

Table 1 shows the top ten popular social media networks worldwide and ranked by the number of active accounts as at January, 2019. Facebook which is the first to hit 1 billion active subscribers maintains its position as the leading social media network. Facebook was created by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard University and launched as FaceMash in July 2003 but later became TheFacebook on Febuary 4, 2004. Although access to the website was initially limited to the United States and Canada, by September 2006, everyone with a valid email address and 13 years and above was allowed to join the Facebook community (Ellison, *et al.* 2007).

While social media has many advantages, especially in terms of making business connections easier and faster, a lot of disadvantages still trail its use; one of which is social media being a conduit for dis-

*Table 1. Top ten most popular social media websites as at January, 2019*

| SN  | Social Media       | Number of Users |
|-----|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1.  | Facebook           | 2.27 billion    |
| 2.  | YouTube            | 1.9 billion     |
| 3.  | WhatsApp           | 1.5 billion     |
| 4.  | Facebook Messenger | 1.3 billion     |
| 5.  | WeChat             | 1.08 billion    |
| 6.  | Instagram          | 1 billion       |
| 7.  | QQ                 | 803 million     |
| 8.  | Qzone              | 531 million     |
| 9.  | Douyin/Tik Tok     | 500 million     |
| 10. | Sino Weibo         | 446 million     |

Source: Statista, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

information and misinformation (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014). In other words, social media allows for the quick spread of uncensored and false contents into public domain. Although misinformation and disinformation may be used interchangeably to denote false information, they differ in the sense that while misinformation refer to an unmotivated inaccuracy (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016), disinformation is an intentional lie motivated by the intention to mislead and confuse (Jack, 2017). The proliferation of false information is therefore part of the contemporary social media system where varying degree of information sources contend for attention. Kumar & Geethakumari (2014) put it succinctly, noting that as the usage of social networks increased, the abuse of the media to spread disinformation and misinformation also increased many fold. In other words, anyone with access to the Internet is always a click away from becoming an active distributor of false information.

According to Shin, *et al*, (2018), individuals are likely to believe any dubious statement that match their [beliefs] than one that counters them. Thus, with the move of religious activities to an online platform, and the lack of accountability and verifiability, proliferators of religious deceit have larger vulnerable audience that would either consume the false contents or further facilitate the spread of such contents. Religious misinformation and disinformation is used here to refer to every undeliberate and deliberate misrepresentation of religious doctrine and deceit propagated on the social media; in this case, Facebook, the website this study draws its data.

Members of Facebook community are vulnerable to deception from varied forms of dubious extremists. One of such recurrent trick is the persuasive request for viewers to either ‘like’ or type ‘amen’ against fictitious posts . Failure to comply with such request often promises punishment of evil tidings to the viewer. It is therefore not surprising to find tens of thousands of ‘likes’ and ‘amen’ against such posts as shown in the sampled data. The perpetrators of such posts are often people not conferred with any form of religious authority; many of them impersonate popular Christian Pentecostal leaders, or hide under the umbrella of ‘apostle of mercy’ (*see Whitehead, 2015*) to perpetrate their nefarious acts. Consequently, interactions on the social media, especially Facebook, are culpable for underlying treats through false information (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014).

## **Framing Religion on the Internet: Cyber, Online and Digital Religion**

Several scholars have noted the impact and implications of NM on communication in general and religion in particular, using specific conceptual framings to describe the interaction between religion and the Internet. The term “cyber-religion” was introduced in the mid-1990s to define the move of religion to cyberspace; leading to the birth of a virtual religious community (Dawson, 2000; Brasher, 2004; Hojsgaard, 2005). However, the term was perceived to evoke an incomplete and false form of religiosity (Campbell, 2013:2). In an attempt to distinguish the different patterns of religious use of the Internet, Helland (2000) introduced the concepts of “religion online and “online religion” and asserts that religion-online is the self-conscious use of the online context by religious organisations or movements for the purpose of publicity, education, outreach, proselytization etc., while online-religion is the online context becoming or being used as a locus of religious, spiritual or other similar practices (Helland 2000:207; Hoover & Park, 2005: 122).

However, it is observed that worship via the Internet among Christians combines features of both religion online and online religion when compared to the description of both terms (Chiluwa 2012). Many Pentecostal Churches design their websites in such a way that they provide information about their history, mission/vision, doctrine and church activities. This is in addition to providing opportunities for practical involvement and participation in online worship via prayer, praise/worship, and teaching (Hadden & Cowan, 2001). Visitors to the websites can also fully participate in religious rituals such as feet washing, communion, blood of sprinkling, anointing, etc.

Recently, another conceptual frame, digital religion has been introduced to describe the contribution of digital technology to religion. Campbell (2014) describes it as the religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures, with its attendant online and offline implications. In other words, digital religion explains the integration of offline and online religion spheres, and requires new logic and distinct form of meaning-making.

The Internet church is used by some worshippers as a supplementary avenue to exercise their faith alongside their offline churches. Thus, (Hadden & Cowen, *ibid*) is of the opinion that online worship significantly supplements offline church membership and participation. Whereas, there are some others online worshippers who may be referred to as ‘digital worshippers’. They use online religion platform as their sole avenue of worship, in place of any offline place of worship and are more susceptible to deception and divided loyalty (Chiluwa, 2012). This set of members usually claims to experience the same spiritual effects online as they do offline.

Although the practice of religion on social media is still relatively new to many Pentecostal Churches (*see Rice, 1984*), some church planters around the globe use it as a legitimate means of communication. For instance, Shaun King of the Courageous Church, Atlanta is very active in incorporating multichannel communication across the media; Eugene Cho, the pastor of Quest Church in Seattle, has made blogging part of his daily routine through which people outside of his community get a holistic view of who he is, and of what his community looks like<sup>2</sup>. Some churches have Internet campuses that they use as broadcast medium even though not yet as a conversational one. It would appear that one of the major reasons churches do not yet conduct full blown conversational services on the social media is because of the concern of religious authority. This is examined in the following section.

## **Online Religious Authority**

Among all the revolutionary changes brought about by the Internet, especially as it concerns religion, one innovation that poses a socio-political threat in its practice is the way it is transforming our understanding and exercise of authority by creating new positions of power, reducing traditional hierarchies and providing new avenues that give voice to the voiceless. Although Campbell and Teusner (2011) assert that “this ability of the Internet to challenge traditional political, social and religious authority has become an accepted assumption (Campbell and Teusner *ibid*: 59), there is still a need to revisit the extent to which religious authority has been arrested on the Internet, especially on social media. For instance, there is the question of impersonation of religious leaders, and threats intertwined with psychological violence on the social media for fraudulent reasons, as in the posts where some people use old pictures to create false stories on Facebook and request that readers should ‘Like’ and type ‘Amen’.

Thus, arises the questions: Is the Internet allowing for the emergence of new religious leaders with new theological interpretations, ideas and instructions? Are online texts re-framing traditional religious texts or mirror them? Is online religion transforming people’s understanding of commonly held Christian teaching, or of a specific group’s religious identity?

Dawson (2001:43-44) expresses this fear of authority hijack with the view that the Internet will result in the “proliferation of misinformation and disinformation” by opponents of particular religious groups or disgruntled insiders, the “loss of control over religious materials” by religious organizations, and provide “new opportunities for grassroots forms of witnessing” that encourage the rise of unofficial or alternative voices to traditional discourses Campbell and Teusner (*ibid*). They also underscore the Internet’s potential to enable users to transcend time, geography, and traditional channels of protocol, which may encourage practices and discourses that bypass or subvert the authority of accepted religious structures or leaders [p.62]. The fear that the moderator of an online group may become identified and treated as a legitimate spiritual authority by members of an online religious community is real from what is found on the social media (Herring 2004; Campbell, 2011). Although the Internet has also provided a platform for questioning and checking excessiveness, as it makes room for users to challenge some instructions and remarks by religious leaders (Baker, 2005), this study is of the view that the offline laws that guide such crimes as impersonation, defamation and slander, should be applied online in order to checkmate the influx of scammers and Freud.

## **Theoretical Framework: Kress and van Leeuwen’s Social Semiotics**

The study depends on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) Social Semiotics which is an approach to multi-modal analysis influenced by the works of Halliday (1994; 2004). Here, language is viewed as a system of meaning potentials embedded in either visual or written means of communication. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also examine both visual and written modes (multimodality) as against the emphasis that had been placed on written mode over time, and study texts as a socially created network of options incorporated with meaning possibilities and ideological underpinnings which is interpretable in specific context of use. As a result, the full range of meanings that a text connotes is in a continuum, and applicable in different social contexts. They opine that common semiotic principles operate across modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), and meaning is dependent on the context in which a text is construed. A multimodal study examines the integration of all semiotic elements present in all modes, both written, graphic, colour and size so as to identify the underlying message(s) embedded in a text in relation to the



reasons people make the choices that they do and the meaning potential in such choices (Chimuanya and Ajiboye 2016). In addition, certain strategies employed to create emphasis and ‘de-emphasis’ are identified and described in order to understand the reasons for the choices text creators make.

In line with O’Halloran (2004), Social Semiotics is appropriate for a multimodal analysis because it takes the integration of different semiotic modes (written and visual) into consideration when analysing meaning in specific context. Extending Halliday’s metafunctions to visual communication, Kress and van Leeuwen propose three metafunctional levels of text as representational, interactional and compositional functions (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Based on insights from Halliday’s concept of *transitivity process*, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) opine that interpretation of images in representational terms requires the identification of the represented participants, the process or the activity described, the qualities of the participants and the circumstances in which the action is being developed. Representational function, therefore, is derived from two kinds of image structures, narrative structure and conceptual structure, each of which involves certain processes. For instance, narrative images involve action, reaction, speech, mental, and conversational processes, and further categorised according to the kind of vector and number/kind of participants a text involves, on the other hand, conceptual images point to the way abstract structures are realised in language and comprise classification, analytical and symbolic processes.

Secondly, interactional metafunction examines the patterns of interactions between participants; this may either be depicted (represented) or real (interactive). The way participants are represented can be interpreted to mean various types of interrelationships between the image and the viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 114). Lastly, just like Halliday’s textual theory, compositional metafunction relates to “the way in which representations and communicative acts cohere into meaningful whole” to form text [181]. In other words, compositionality examines how visuals combine with text and other graphic elements within a layout. Meaning here is established by three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing.

A major challenge with Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach to multimodal analysis is that each image presents so many aspects to examine, therefore, an analyst may have to either focus on one or two of their metafunctions. This study will interpret selected texts based, primarily, on the representational metafunction with insights from interactional and compositional functions. This is so because a text can actually combine several modality markers to express the complete message (Stoian, 2015).

## **Methodology and Data Presentation**

The study is qualitative in nature and it involves descriptive and discursive multimodal analysis of data. Data comprises sixty (60) Internet memes (photos, verbal and visual posts, etc.) of ‘Type Amen’ posts purposively sampled from Facebook. Because of similarity among some of these samples however, fourteen (14) texts are selected for analysis. Analysis focuses on socio-semiotic interpretation of the representational metafunction of the memes, with the aim of discussing the inherent structural patterns in ‘type amen’ posts and situate them within Pentecostal doctrine in order to tease out markers of deception.

The selected Texts have been numbered T1 – T14 and are included in the appendix for ethical reasons; some of them are graphic and hurting to the senses.

## **Data Categorisation**

The data for this study is categorised into narrative structures and conceptual structures within representational metafunction as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the recurrent text structures identified within representational metafunction. This is not to suggest that other features of interactional and compositional meanings were not observed; they are captured and discussed along the key structures the study focuses on. From the Table, narrative structures occur more in 70% of the data population. While conceptual structures feature in just 30% of the population. The reason for the huge different between the structures may be because it is easier to embed deception in an unfolding story line that viewers can easily relate to, especially when more than one participant is involved.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The data for this study is analysed within the two sub-categories of Kress and van Leeuwen’s representational metafunction. Representational metafunction has to do with the patterns of visually encoding experiences. This can be achieved in two ways; narrative structures and conceptual structures. The number of ‘likes’, ‘comments’ and ‘share’ that each text attracts have been deliberated included in order to show the rate at which the texts impacts on the society.

### **Narrative Structures**

Narrative structures represent “unfolding actions and events, processes of change and transitory spatial arrangements” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:59). They always include a depicted element which forms an oblique line and indicates directionality, called vector. There are six kinds of narrative processes depending on the type of vectors and participants presented: action, reactional, speech, mental and conversational. The following analysis and discussions describe the recurrent narrative patterns in ‘type amen’ texts.

Religiosity is usually expressed in one’s ability to empathise with others who have fallen into one misfortune or the other; thus, it is usually not surprising when religious individuals are taken advantage of by deceivers and robbed of their peace of mind. One way through which such deceit has successfully been achieved is through posts that relay stories of sick people and accident victims, integrated with written request to readers to type ‘amen’ or be afflicted with severe consequences. T1 to T7 below show a representation of deceptive narrative structures; achieved through the combination of visual and written modes. From the number of comments and likes received against each post, there is no doubt that such posts affect the peace of a number of people who come across them.

*Table 2. Categorisation of data*

| SN | Representation       | Frequency | % Frequency |
|----|----------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 1. | Narrative Structure  | 42        | 70          |
| 2. | Conceptual Structure | 18        | 30          |
|    | <b>TOTAL</b>         | <b>60</b> | <b>100</b>  |

For instance, T1 uses a combination of bidirectional action process and transactional reactional process; both within a narrative structure to foregrounds four main Actors; a light skinned man in sky blue shirt with checked collar who is the main non-transactional Actor, carrying a seriously wounded light skinned female toddler smeared with thick blood all over her white clothing and face. He is non-transactional because his gaze form a vector with the Viewer, and he appears to be oblivious of other participants in the text. This signals a situation of emergency; with his gaze persuading the Viewer for attention. The other two main participants are behind the toddler carrier; a light-skinned lady in lemon green gown and scarf who is being restrained by another participant; a light-skinned man in grey shirt. A transactional reactional relationship is depicted by these last two as their gazing at each other make them appear to be involved in a sub-event within the larger scheme. The circumstance, that is, the setting portrayed is an emergency ward of a hospital as depicted by the attributive vector depicted by the hand gloves worn by the baby carrier. Also, the baby carrier’s focus on the Viewer follows a vector that connects with him; inviting him to participate in the event. In other words, his stare forces the viewer to pay attention to the bundle in his hands, which is the goal of the post. The tussle between the other two transactional Actors behind the baby carrier, and the way they stare straight into each other’s eyes creates a vector that depicts a dire situation.

There is a caption written in text format along the horizontal axis immediately above the picture that reads, “type Amen otherwise u will die within 24 hours Dn’t Ignore”. Observe that ‘Amen’, ‘Dn’t’ and ‘Ignore’ are written in uppercase initial letters. This is done to emphasize those words. The caption portrays a kind of senger that has been used to replace any form of speech process. The viewer is therefore left to a moral battle within himself whether to act or remain passive.

What connects this text to religion is simply the use of the word, ‘Amen’, a ritualized conclusion to prayers that means, ‘so be it’. This connection on its own is a form of disinformation as there is no logical bearing between the visual text and religion rather, a moral one which appeals to the emotion of the viewer may be considered. It has been argued by Jennifer Abel<sup>3</sup> that this type of manipulative text is solely designed to trick or exploit people into liking, commenting and sharing the post in order for the page to accumulate followers and invariably, earn more money. Hundreds of thousands of likes, comments and shares trail T1, which shows that about a million people are victims of this scam. Since ‘Amen’ is a religious mantra which denotes agreement to declarations made in prayers and wishes, the thousands of people that liked, commented and shared T1 have done so either in order to avert death or to placate their conscience.

T2 (not included in the appendix) shows one main Actor, a dark-skinned man in white shirt, holding two edges of a brown casket with gold cross and trimmings (the goal) with both his hands. Both participants are in a dug grave which is a symbolic process depicting a burial. There is a written text above the picture which is captioned in text form as, “PLS DON’T IGNORE!!!”. The caption is written in block letters and punctuated at the end with three exclamation marks to probably emphasize the warning and threat embedded in the message. The written text that follows instructs the reader to type a *BIG AMEN*, and goes on to pray that the reader would not lose any of his acquaintances or family members as they were under the protection of God. Since the instruction to type a big amen comes before the prayers, it can be deduced that the prayers will only be effective if the Viewer types amen. In order words, failure to obey attracts a reverse of the prayer.

Like T1, several thousands of likes, comments and shares trail T2 showing the number of individuals that have fallen victim to this kind of disinformation; with attendant severe psychological implications for such victims (Martin, 2010).

### ***“Type Amen” or Perish!***

T3 on the other hand is a non-transactional action that shows a single human Actor with written texts as goal. The human actor is a popular Nigerian Pentecostal Pastor and General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Pastor Enoch Adeboye. He is in a pink shirt, wine coloured bow tie and a grey jacket. Clutching a microphone in his left hand, he lifts his right hand in the manner of prayer, smilingly staring at the Viewer in an inviting dispositions and friendly ambiance. The picture is captioned, “I’VE GOT GREAT NEWS TODAY...”, written in bold font to show emphasis, with some part of the texts omitted as indicated by the sign of ellipsis. The ellipsis provokes the mind of the reader to find out the great news and thus, is persuaded to read up all other written texts within and outside the picture.

The complementary text outside the picture is typed in bold font, and it is a declaration that the reader will not die but would step into the coming year to say congratulation to the preacher. However, a persuasive condition to the fulfilment of the declaration lies in the last line of the text which reads, “TYPE AMEN TO CONFIRM THAT YOU WILL CONGRATULATE ME TOO.” It is pertinent to note that persuasion and coercion have been identified as markers of deception (Kampik, *et al.* 2018); all the post examined so far have these features embedded as conditional clauses.

Like the previous posts, hundreds of thousands of like, comment and share trail T3, showing the huge number of people vulnerable to this type of deception.

T4 shows triplicated pictures of a bubbling toddler in green polo vest and blue trousers as the non-transactional actor. He is smiling and starring directly at the Viewer, and by so, captures the Viewer’s attention. While T5 shows a wounded blood stained baby with very deep cuts on her forehead, chest and arm as the non-transactional actor. The paleness of the baby’s skin contrasts sharply with the redness of the blood on it thereby foregrounding the pitiable condition of the Actor. This is like T6 which also shows a single Actor, a crying naked baby with a big open wound on her belly. The Viewer of these posts has been requested to type “Amen” or to “ignore” if he was heartless. Since being heartless is not a characteristic feature of a religious person, many are forced to type amen in other to soothe their consciences of any guilt (see Feldman, 2000).

These deceptive ‘type amen’ posts hold grave trauma for individuals on Facebook, especially those of them that are not analytical in nature to understand that the mere act of typing amen against such posts has no impact on the participants in the post, nor does it in anyway affect his wellbeing - the viewer has not in any way helped the predicament of the participants in the posts. Such viewers also need to know that the posts are just tools used by page owners to gain recognition and followers and emotionally defraud the Viewer (Whitehead, 2015). The page earn money using stolen images of sick babies without the knowledge of the babies’ family.

T7 is a departure from previous texts as it represents a symbolic attribute. It shows several bundles of Nigerian five hundred naira currency, held together with bands and stacked up in tens of piles. The written text above the picture reads, “to the fist\* [first] 1000 people to type Amen, I declare prophetically this week your hands shall count money. Share this and testify.” In other words, if the viewer does not share, he would not testify, and if he is not among the first ‘1000 people’ to type amen, he loses his chance of the free money. According to Malan (1997), one of the characteristics of ‘Jesus’ in new Pentecostal doctrines is ‘gift giver’. Little wonder the visual representation of a stack of money with the written promise work effectively to convince the Viewer.

In addition, other lexical items within religious domain have been introduced in the written text above T7; they include *declare*, *prophetically* and *testify*. These words are popular within Pentecostal discourse.

The foregoing discussion describes the processes inherent in the selected narrative text structures. Findings show that both transactional and non-transactional action and reactional processes characterise the patterns.

## **Conceptual Structures**

Conceptual structures are used to represent participants in relation to class, structure or meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). They can be divided into classificational; relates participants to each other, analytical; connects participants in terms of part-whole structures, and symbolic; depicts what a participant is or means. This is another recurrent method observed within ‘type amen’ deceptive posts. Here, participants in the texts comprise fictitious human Actors who are used symbolically to reinforce the message. Just as in the forms of role play, the Actors take up the roles of sacred religious personalities like God, Jesus, Saints, Martyrs, and so on to portray ideologically saturated meanings. For instance, the originators of such posts understand that it would be almost impossible for any Christian to ignore the picture of ‘Jesus’, and so they leverage on this to send out messages with underlying deceptions and misinformation as seen in T8 to T12.

T8 shows the picture of a half-clad man with a crown of thorns on his head, set up to be Jesus Christ. The Symbolic Actor is carrying a long wooden cross to his shoulders with his right hand, bent as though fallen on his knees, with his left hand placed on a rocky ground. The picture is used to re-enact the story of Jesus Christ’s travail on the way to the Mount of Calvary as recorded in Luke chapter 23, Verses 25 to 33. There is a written text framed across the length of the cross which reads, ‘I did this for you’. And right below the picture is another bold uppercase-letter written text that says, ‘TYPE AMEN IF YOU AGREE’. This second text has been written in bold to emphasize the message of the entire post, which imply that ‘if’ as a Christian one does not type, that person has rejected the acts of Jesus Christ. The use of the conditional conjunction ‘if’ presupposes that some ‘deviant’ or ‘disloyal’ Christians would not agree, thus, in order not to be label ‘disloyal’, and to save themselves some embarrassment many viewers opt to comply.

Just like T8, T9 shows another Symbolic Actor depicted as a man in a blue hospital staff uniform, with an identity card hanging around his neck, set up as Jesus Christ and running through what appears to be the passage of a hospital. An inscription above the head of the man reads, ‘Jesus Is Coming To Save You From Devil’, and at the bottom of the picture is another written text which says, ‘Type “Amen” To Be Saved’. The initial letters of the written texts have all been written in capital letters to probably show emphasis, and the word *amen* has been enclosed in double quotation marks to further foreground what the Viewer is required to do to be saved – failure to type amen implies that the Viewer will not be saved.

The story line in T8 is continued in T10, showing a wailing fair-skinned woman in black robe (set up to signify Mary, the mother of Jesus) as the Symbolic Actor. She is clutching a now bruised, naked and dead Jesus Christ with both hands. Above the picture is an emphatically written text which instructs the reader to ‘Type AMEN If JESUS died for you!!!’ Just like T8, a Christian who refuses to type amen may be overwhelmed with the guilt of unbelief and denial.

T11 shows two reactional and interactional Actors depicted by a different version of Jesus Christ in white robe as the Symbolic carrier, beckoning on a fair-skinned man in black suit. The man is shown to have dropped his brief case, probably out of the excitement of meeting Jesus Christ on a street of what appears to be an urban city. The circumstance (on the street) is illogical in itself as the possibility of meeting a real Jesus in such situation; even from a biblical perspective is fallacious. The text above the

### ***“Type Amen” or Perish!***

picture reads, ‘Type AMEN if You will Follow Jesus’. The recurrent use of the conditional conjunction ‘if’ creates a kind of division between two groups of people; the group that will and the group that will not. While there is a reward for the group that would comply, there always appears to be an unwritten punishment for the group that would not type. The unwritten punishment usually appear to portend more trepidation for the vulnerable Viewer than the written punishment does.

The second pattern of conceptual structures found in the texts is classificational process. This process relates participants to each other and attempts to pair participants in such a way that there will always be a subordinate for a superordinate (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 79-87). For instance, T13 shows two attributive participants, depicted by two well-known Nigerian Pentecostal leaders, Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church, Incorporated and Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, who their congregation usually refer to as ‘prophets of God’. The text above the picture reads, ‘EVERY HAND THAT TYPED AMEN AND SHARE! You will not die before

your time. -Voice of the Prophets’. The implication of the text is that every hand that does not type amen against T13 shall die. The condition to live is therefore, to type amen, especially with one having been informed that the written text represents the joint voice of the Prophets. In other words, typing amen translates to near everlasting life of seeing ones fourth generation. The creator of Text 14 is aware of the level of sacrosanctity Nigerians ascribe to their ‘Daddy GO’ or ‘Papa’ as such Pentecostal leaders are fondly referred, to the extent that their words are efficaciously held on to by their followers. The composer of the text is also aware that longevity remains one of the top prayer points of Nigerians. Texts 14 is therefore able to successfully manipulate readers to achieve the number of responses it gathered. An overt subordinate – superordinate relationship has been set up between the participants by the vector created by the direction of Oyedepo’ hand and gaze. He is depicted as the subordinate, holding the microphone towards the superordinate; Adeboye. The truth condition of this representation is ascertainable in the real world as it is a known fact that Pastor Adeboye ordained Bishop Oyedepo. However, the message encoded in the written text cannot be verified to have been uttered by either of participants.

Also, T14 shows another classificational process where three Actors above and two Actors below are depicted in an overt subordinate-superordinate relationship. The integrated written text informs the Viewer that the actors are family, a mother, her four year old and her new born baby. The story above the picture narrates how the heroic four year old saved her mother and her unborn sibling from dying by calling 911. The instruction that follows the narrative reads, ‘Please like in 1 second and type amen to show respect to this four year hero’. This post is more likely to appeal to the consciences of females. Many Nigerians also believe that what one does not appreciate does not come through for them. Thus, T14 as well as other previous texts examined, is viewed to be a highly manipulative tool used to enforce subtle deception.

So far, the conceptual structures in ‘type amen’ texts shows the predominant use of classification and symbolic patterns. Both have been effectively used to fabricate the text in such a way that viewers are manipulated to respond.

## **SOLUTION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study has examined the recurrent representational structures in ‘type amen’ Facebook posts with the aim of teasing out the deception and ideological underpinnings that are embedded in them. Findings reveal that both the narrative and conceptual structures are present in the posts. The action processes

with the transactional and non-transactional types and transactional reactional processes are the most frequent narrative structures, while within the conceptual structure, the symbolic and classificational processes were observed. Also, persuasion and coercion have been validated to be veritable tools of deceptive communication as seen in their recurrent use in the integrated written and visual texts. Their effectiveness is also seen from the compliance by hundreds of thousands of text viewers.

Thus, it is recommended that Facebook users be enlightened by both social psychologists and other stakeholders on the futility of the threats issued by the type-amen meme creators, and encourage viewers to see them as other ways of soliciting attention on the social media. It may also be necessary to begin to take legal actions against meme creators that use pictures of famous personalities to propagate messages that project deceit in online communities. Such actions should be considered in the same light as libel committed against the person whose picture appears on such nefarious posts.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the tendency to tell lies and deceive is a functional part of both plant and animal. What is key to research is being able to account for;

1. What motivates deception and fake news dissemination?
2. How can deception be identified in language?
3. What positive directions can deception be made to take in specific settings?
4. What direction will religion take in the face of increased deceptions?

The above questions call for a multidimensional research approach across disciplines, especially in the domains of cognitive psychology, linguistics, language learning, artificial intelligence and computer science.

In the light of this, cognitive psychologists are taking up interest in examining how access to religious information can be extended to determine memory effects to specific religious stimulus<sup>4</sup>. Within behavioural psychology, research is looking at the psychological mechanism of religious altruism, with the need to place morality ahead of religiosity<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, there is the multidisciplinary interface between linguistics, cognitive neuroscience, speech production and artificial intelligence in the design of an Information Manipulation Theory 2 (IMT2). Within the proposition, specific conditions under which various forms of information manipulation will or will not occur can be identified.<sup>6</sup> Also within linguistics lies the potential to identify specific language – lexical, syntactic, semiotics and discourse – markers that can reveal the different structures of truthful and deceptive messages. Two levels of linguistic analysis in Russian language, lexis and discourse have been successfully experimented<sup>7</sup> using Support Vector Machines with rbf Kernel (F-measure 0.65). Perhaps, this method or an improved version can be applied to test for syntactic and semiotic deceptive cues.

With the turn of centuries and as life continues to evolve, research in deception and fake communication will continue to expand and open up more opportunities for multidisciplinary research collaborations.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, New Media provides a virtual pulpit via the social media for the sporadic extension of religious practice; with some of the consequences being the rise of alternative voices of authority; the re-framing of traditional religious texts; and the loss of control over religious materials, all leading up to gross religious deception. This chapter is an exposé that calls out one of such deception on Facebook with the intention to contribute to the awareness of misinformation and disinformation that abound online.

From the discussions so far, it is obvious that religion is one major domain that is fertile for breeding deception especially because of man’s continuous quest to seek explanations for all the astonishing happenings in his environment. Advancement in communication technology has made it easier to access and share information with very little security policy and check thereby making cyberspace, especially the social media a dumping site for misleading messages like the ‘type amen’ category examined in this chapter.

With the high religiosity rate found among Africans, Nigerians in particular, it is no surprise the thousands of comments and shares as well as millions of likes against each text. This clearly demonstrates the effect deceptive posts have on communities online.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Authority:** The legitimacy to enforce rules or give order entrusted on an institution or individual.

**Community:** A group of people sharing common space, language, and law.

**Deception:** The act of lying or misleading others.

**Online:** A system that enables one to connect to a larger network of people and activities.

**Religion:** The belief and worship of the supernatural.

**Social Media:** An interactive forum powered by the internet that allows users to interact with and publish to each other.

**Threat:** An expression of fear or indication of imminent danger.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Karl Marx in ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Rights’ published on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1844.
- <sup>2</sup> Discussion on ‘Social Media and the Church’ by James P. Long: <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/4048-Social-Media-and-the-Church.html> (April, 3, 2011).
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