

# **Social Media and Religious Disruption — A Study of #Freethesheep Tithe Campaign**

**Meksley Nwagboh  
Pan-Atlantic University**

*Radio personality, Daddy Freeze challenged church leaders on tithing via social media with the #freethesheep campaign and it went viral, breaking the spiral of silence on church revenue and giving. Content and discourse analysis was done to examine the impact of #freethesheep campaign on the church, as a religious institution, and tithing practice. Findings indicate the campaign made significant impact, brought revolution to churches and tithing. Social media is undoubtedly an effective tool for religious, political and social change. Its effectiveness in society is relative to use and individuals' exposure. The campaign impacted religious beliefs, leadership and tithing practice. #freethesheep social media campaign had some success to some, but affected churches. Conclusions include equitable social media controls and policy protecting all stakeholders. The power, pain and potential of social media on social institutions should not be taken for granted. The impact of the media is relative to the values of the individual and so the study recommends engaging social media from the framework of the golden mean in virtue ethics.*

*Keywords: social media, tithing, religious disruption, churches*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On June 26th, 2022 a popular televangelist and megachurch pastor Creflo Dollar in a message titled, the 'Great Misunderstanding' renounced his decades-long teaching on tithing—the practice of giving 10 percent of one's income to the church (Roys Report, 2022). This news was broadcasted widely via social media and brings to mind the #freethesheep social media campaign embarked upon by Nigeria's radio on-air personality, Daddy Freeze, criticizing churches for collecting tithe and saying it was not biblical. Meanwhile, tithing is a core source of funding for many churches, especially the Pentecostals. Monies from Tithing are promoted, received, controlled and administered by the church's top leadership (aka Men of God), especially denominations with general overseers or those who established the church organization and are leading in perpetuity. Most churches have a heavy presence on social media to advance their messaging and objectives because of the ubiquitous nature of social media. These churches and the leaders thus have both their followers and everyone else reviewing their content on social media including encouraging followers to give offerings and tithes monthly or often. Daddy Freeze challenged the church leaders on tithing via social media. Would the #freethesheep campaign have gone viral without social media? The tithing discourse has continued virally on social media on the subject matter, but how is this impacting the religious institution, as it depends significantly on tithing for church administration? Has the

#freethesheep social media campaign led to a disruption in Pentecostal Christian's religious practice? This is what this study reviews significantly.

Social media is changing the way we live and portray life to the public (Lin, 2020). Many cannot even fully picture what life in the public sphere was before the advent of social media. Despite the changes that social media is bringing with it, religion remains one of the key trends shaping culture, society, and politics (Fagan, 1996). The role played by religion as a global force has long been quite evident across countries and continents. It has proved inseparable from time immemorial because humans are constantly looking to an unknown force that they can reverence, relate with, get spiritual gratification, and fill an internal void and soul longing. This longing creates the need to prove their identity as individuals and spiritual allegiance. Identity here implies the location of one's self and a search for the meaning of life. We thus look for an appraisal from a spiritual being or representative on the part of life that we have chosen to tread. This has been on and on for centuries. The Vatican, annual Hajj and pilgrimage to Israel are testaments to this.

Over the years, religious organizations have leveraged the media to spread their influence and increase followership. Christ Embassy Church founded by Reverend Chris Oyakhilome in Nigeria has an estimated followership of approximately 13 million followers globally. Bishop David Oyedepo of Living Faith Chapel is said to have over 50 million members around the world (ThisDay Newspaper, 2019) While on one hand, religion leverages the media to get its message across, the advent of social media has ushered in a change wherein audiences now leverage social media to send their feedback about the activities of these religious organizations across.

For instance, before the advent of social media, most of our interaction with religion was either through what we watched on TV, read in the papers or heard on the radio. We heard, saw and listened to what the promulgators of religion wanted us to see. Hence, for a long time, we were consumers of religious doctrine with no real avenue to give feedback on what we experienced. Thus, pastors were depicted in the media as "Men of God" ordained with the power to confer blessings by the declaration of their word. It was common to see pastors conducting healings, miracle crusades, and charity programs. Since the advent of social media, the one-way flow of religious leaders leveraging the media to reach their audiences with distinct messages has given way to a two-way communication flow whereby the audiences can give their feedback or interpretation of religion and the promulgators of religion. So, while traditional media show us depictions of the high and mighty "Man of God", on social media, we see the hidden lifestyle of the "Man of God". Social media users get to see depictions of their lavish luxurious lifestyles, private jets, and idolization by their followers. Social media shows the man behind "Man of God" optimizing the media to continually wield an overwhelming influence on religion in today's modernity. This portrayed arguably extravagant lifestyle causes dissonance for the researcher and probably many others.

This seeming dissonance created in the amount of individual wealth created by Nigerian pastors and their seeming reluctance to lower tuition fees in church-owned schools has raised public inquest on the source of their wealth. In the early days of the development of our nation, the church in Nigeria was at the vanguard of development. The church brought missionary schools, hospitals, and skill acquisition centres and offered other social facilities virtually pro-bono. (Jacobs, Onuegbu, Duru, Edukugho, & Anibeze, 2014). Back then, it was very common to see churches provide scholarships, food, free books, clothing and shelter to the less privileged in society. Though they remained focused on the message of repentance and contriteness with God, they were strategic in touching people's lives by providing amenities that the government failed to provide. On one hand, they preached a message of life after death but on the other hand, tried to ensure that those who accepted God in this life lived a good life before death. Modesty was the order of the day. The life of a pastor or missionary was a life of servitude and simplicity. Oftentimes, they lived within the church premises, rode bicycles and maintained a small garden where they harvested local farm produce for themselves and widows in the church. But today, it appears the reverse is now the case and this formed the bane of Daddy Freeze's accusation of contemporary Pastors. From a life of servitude to the congregants, the members now attend to the needs of the pastor. Members are funding television broadcasts, crusades, travels, book publishing and distribution, universities, cars, houses and private jets for their Men of God.

It is believed that the giving of gifts to the “Man of God” attracts some form of divine blessings to the giver. Hence, some congregants go to unimaginable lengths to squeeze themselves and meet up with their pledge offerings. Oftentimes, members cross ethical boundaries to illegally obtain money to give in church and gain adulation as major givers in the church. A classic example happened in 2003 when Lawrence Agada, a celebrated member of the Christ Embassy renowned for giving to the cause of the gospel stole the sum of N39 million (\$91,104) from his then-employer; Sheraton Hotel where he served as the accountant. According to him, he was constrained to stealing due to growing pressure from the church on him to give (Newswatch, 2003). On July 6, 2014, when a catholic priest beckoned on his congregation to step forward and appreciate God with a N200,000 (\$467) Offering and receive a special blessing in return. On May 29, 2022, the Methodist Church Prelate was kidnapped and the church eventually paid N100 million (\$233,600) as a ransom for his release. The kidnappers had an inkling of the amount of money the church controls and chose a criminal route to get some. The commoditization of Christianity is becoming more and more prevalent in today’s modernity. ‘Give and you will be blessed’ or ‘pay your tithes so that your life will not be tight’ are common clichés being used by pastors to elicit funds from members. (Jacobs, Rich Churches, Poor Members, 2014).

Since the advent of social media, more and more questions are being raised over the lifestyles of religious leaders, their mannerisms of worship and general church administration. Many have raised concerns via social media on issues in church administration. However, Daddy Freeze rocked social media in Nigeria with his #freethesheep social media campaign on tithing. The campaign amplified accusations of financial misappropriation of tithes and impropriety of church leaders at the expense of followers. Critiquing church leaders on finance administration were conversations followers hitherto considered conservative and not to be queried, until Daddy Freeze's social media campaign on tithing. Tithing and giving form a major financial source for churches, especially the Pentecostals, hence the reaction of church leaders and ardent followers to the campaign. Previous studies indicate social media permeates other social institutions. The church is a major social institution implicated by the #sheep campaign. Therefore, this study seeks to review the extent of the impact of the #freethesheep social media campaign on tithing on the church as a social institution, whilst leveraging the cultivation theory and Spiral of Silence theoretical framework.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study used the content and discourse analysis methods. Textual Content on the #freethesheep social media campaign by Daddy Freeze was scraped from Twitter and analysed. Discussions and discourse analysis were also done with a focus on the keywords in the study i.e. social media, media and the church as social institutions and religion.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Cultivation Theory**

Cultivation theory by George Gerbner and Larry Gross looks at the mass media as a socializing agent and investigates whether television viewers come to believe the television version of reality the more they watch it. Contemporarily social media has become mobile television and taken mainstreaming a notch higher. This is because people now have the privilege of taking their mobile ‘televisions’ or phone everywhere and watching content on the go.

According to the cultivation theory, viewers' perceptions of social reality are shaped, or "cultivated," by television. Individuals and, ultimately, our culture's perceptions of social reality are subtly shaped by the cumulative influence of viewers' extensive exposure to television over time. Theorists contend that the mass media preserve and spread existing cultural attitudes and values among its audience, hence tying a culture's members together. The theorists further suggested that television frequently fosters moderate political philosophies and refer to this outcome as "mainstreaming." Theorists of cultivation make a

distinction between "second-order" impacts (certain attitudes, such as attitudes toward the law) and "first-order" effects (generic ideas about the world at large, such as the prevalence of violence).

Additionally, there is a differentiation between the heavy watchers and the light viewers of television. The target audience is "heavy viewers." People who watch more television are likely to be more impacted by how television shows present the world than people who watch less television, particularly when it comes to subjects with which the viewer has limited first-hand knowledge. Information sources may be more plentiful for light viewers than for heavy viewers. "Resonance" refers to the audience's enhanced reaction when what they see on television matches an experience they have had in real life. The cultivation effect is often amplified by this twofold dose of the television message.

In the context of this study and view of current realities with social media, many people mainstream social media, consume religious content and are thus influenced by it. Beyond the offline or in-house cultivation some persons may be getting from their churches, churches broadcast actively on social media channels including Youtube, Instagram, Facebook etc. Emphasis is placed by most religious organisations on video broadcast and this is virtually synonymous with television. The implication of this heavy exposure of viewers via television and social on religious content and tithing is that many have accepted as the norm, the concept of tithing, which Daddy Freeze stepped out to challenge via the #freethesheep campaign. So Daddy Freeze was challenging predominant cultivation and resonance on tithing and this sparked reaction, hence this study.

### **Spiral of Silence**

Neumann's (1974) introduction of the "spiral of silence" provides some insight into how public opinion is created. She questioned why Germans embraced incorrect political ideologies in the 1930s and 1940s that resulted in their country's defeat, shame, and bankruptcy. The term "spiral of silence" truly describes how people tend to keep quiet when they believe that the majority of others share their viewpoints.

The model is based on three tenets:

- 1) people have a "quasi-statistical organ," or sixth sense if you will, that enables them to know the consensus even without access to polls,
- 2) people have a fear of isolation and are aware of the behaviours that increase their risk of social isolation, and
- 3) people are reluctant to voice their minority views, mainly out of fear of being excluded.

A person is more willing to publicly share their opinion in public if they think it to be similar to the general public opinion. Afterwards, if public opinion shifts, the person will realize that the opinion is no longer favourable and be less inclined to share that position in public. The greater the perceived gap between the consensus and an individual's perspective, the less likely that individual is to voice their position.

Before the #freethesheep social media campaign on tithing, no public advocacies or active conversations were countering the concept of tithing. But when Daddy Freeze began the campaign, many people came out to share their viewpoints in alignment with the campaign. This indicates that there was a Spiral of Silence on the subject matter of tithing. This indicates the significance of the subject matter and the amplification via this study.

## **DISCOURSE & CONTENT ANALYSIS**

### **The Role of Social Media in Human Practices**

In discussing the roles of social media in human practices, we are talking about what part social media plays in the human practices aforementioned. The role played can either be positive or negative. Social media has played a very huge role in communication today. It can be said that it has even changed the way we communicate interpersonally and on a group level. It has improved communication and created more (video calls -Skype, Whatsapp video call, chat rooms - WhatsApp, Facebook chat, etc, voice calls- Skype, WhatsApp voice call and live streaming- Facebook live, Instagram live) to communicate. It has also increased one's audience e.g with a Facebook account, an individual has access to a larger number of people

to communicate with. In essence, it has played a role in making communication easier, cheaper, accessible and more effective in comparison to media that existed before social media. A negative role social media plays in communication is because it allows people accessibility, there is no gatekeeping like traditional media, therefore anything can be put on social media irrespective of other people's dignity.

Another role social media play is acculturation. Social media is beginning to shape how we do things and carry out our day-to-day actions such as what to wear, what hairstyle to make, how to do our events, etc. which in turn affects human practices. Some of these practices might not originate from us but from interactions, we make on social media and things we see other people doing.

Knowledge guides our actions, and that is why education is very important. Social media has provided more avenues for people to learn. Information is now everywhere and one can be said to be ignored simply because he doesn't want to know. YouTube offers videos that guide you virtually on how to act or in understanding things that are unclear to you. People also look to social media to get real-time updates on different happenings before it hits other traditional media platforms like radio, television and newspaper. In all, social media has created an opportunity for people to express themselves.

### **Religion and Religious Beliefs in Nigeria**

Religion is a universal social phenomenon which is a matter of belief and practice that seriously concerns almost every living man. People understand religion to be a belief in the Supernatural power or the Supreme Being and their relationship with the nature that surrounds them. Man as a social being is, therefore, seen as a religious being and one of the strongest sources and means of social control is religion. It is considered one of the earliest institutions of the human person and is found in all societies of past and present. Being one of the earliest institutions of mankind, religion is also the oldest subject in human history taught widely and universally discussed at many levels. Religion is a belief in a power which is believed to direct and control the course and nature of human life (Rao, 1990).

The three main religions in Nigeria consist of: Islam: It is the oldest form of religion in Nigeria. It was established in the northern parts of Nigeria, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and since that time expanded its horizon to the middle belt and other parts of Nigeria. Usman Dan Fodio used religion to establish an Islamic government before the colonial era. This religion follows the principles written in the Quran.

Christianity: Introduced in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by British missionaries in Nigeria. The religion began to evolve in the east, then to the southern part of Nigeria and then themed mid-region of the country. There are however different sects of this religion these are: Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, and Protestant sects. This religion follows the principles written in the Bible.

Traditional Religion: This was the first religious institute established in Nigeria, Unlike Christianity and Islam, this religion was majorly practised by worshipping objects such as living and non-living things (plants and animals) etc. Unlike the previously mentioned religions (Christianity and Islam), which believed in the existence of only one God, those that practised traditional thought that these living and non-living things had supernatural powers and that they could perform extraordinary acts.

### **Social Media and Religion**

Social media as an aspect of new media has over a billion users between Facebook and Twitter alone. These users generate and discuss several topics and issues on the network and Religion is certainly not an exception (Rabbi, 2011). Today, as a way to communicate to the congregation and the masses, social media has been used by religious leaders who get thousands of followers they update them on spiritual and other activities. For example, the Catholic Pope Francis gained over 1 million followers within 12 hours of creating his Instagram account (Barnett, 2108). In this case, there is now the option to turn to social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube in other to acquire knowledge on religious issues rather than the external religious groups in the communities.

Unlike traditional media, social media is changing the face of religion. It has facilitated and made different religious practices become a 24/7 experience rather than something done on weekends. Perhaps, now more than ever before has there ever been a clearer distinction between the impact of media and religion. With the advent of media technologies, the proliferation of religion has become faster and easier.

Today, a church service in Nigeria can be broadcasted live and viewed from anywhere in the world using Facebook, Instagram, Google + and other social media platforms. Unlike traditional media which provided little opportunity for real-time feedback, online viewers can now give real-time feedback and get real-time responses. Social media is truly having far-reaching consequences on the practice of religion in Nigeria.

### #Freethesheep Social Media Campaign

One of how social media networks were used to influence religious issues and mobilize individuals was through the #Freethesheep movement. This movement was generated by a popular broadcaster and controversial social media critic Daddy Freeze who is a strong critic of those clergymen who pay attention to luxurious lives and are more interested in it than service to God and their church congregation. He also believed that religious practice has become so corrupt in Nigeria and most often, people believe their religious leaders without daring to ask questions. In the OAP's view, The church is as much the problem of the poor masses in Nigeria as well as the political leadership. The church which is supposed to be a place of compassion, love and upholder of godly truth, has become a place of darkness, lust and greed, where the anointing of God is readily available for sale as long as you can pay the price. The church has seriously departed from that path of straight and narrow to follow that broad and wide way.



@DaddyFRZ

FollowFollow @DaddyFRZ

More

Enough of the extortion and manipulation in the name of Christ! I will stop at nothing to get the message of truth to every Christian! ~FRZ

10:57 AM - 24 Nov 2017 from Victoria Island, Nigeria

- 
- 93 Retweets
  - 293 Likes
- 

100 replies93 retweets293 likes

Reply



Daddy Freeze@DaddyFRZ

For my teachings on giving money to God and tithing please visit  
[https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=rkSbtacLZPg ...](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=rkSbtacLZPg...)  
6:17 PM - Nov 25, 2017, · Victoria Island, Nigeria  
34 people are talking about this

Daddy Freeze also stated that the Nigerian “churchscape” has become a place where our General Overseers are more concerned with the number of private jets they could acquire than the number of people in their congregation who could feed their families or comfortably take care of their household needs. The competition to see who can buy the fastest and latest jet is more important to them than the emasculating and crushing poverty of their teeming members. In order to fight and change perceptions of people in society toward tithing, the Cool FM OAP, took to social media and launched a campaign in 2016 which gained prominence in 2017. The team of the campaign was “Breaking Religious Chain”. This campaign entailed his teaching on tithing in Christianity, church weddings and even premarital sex. One of the cases Daddy Freeze took to his Instagram page to share was the case of The Redeemed Christian church of God’s plan to charge N50, 000 for a marriage booster program.

He wrote:

“N50,000 per couple for marriage course? RCCG una well-done o! This wasn’t intended for the poor members of the congregation. The Nigerian god prefers the rich and makes provisions only for them. "If Jesus had collected N50,000 each from the 5,000 people he fed that would have been N250 million #FreeTheSheeple"

Also, the Cool FM OAP took things further the same month by comparing RCCG’s Pastor Enoch Adeboye to the (former) Emir of Kano, Muhammadu Sanusi II.

He wrote:

“Two prophets and their prophecies. One perfectly foretold the financial state of an entire nation, for some time, and even suggested a prophecy from coming to pass. While the other could not correctly predict what would happen within his church within the same period. The one that predicted rightly was exasperated in the office while the one who failed to predict correctly is getting, more followers daily”.

He further stated that the #FreeTheSheeple movement is also aimed at freeing society from the bondage of religions and mental slavery, bringing them into the path of enlightenment and love.

Another major area of concern for Daddy Freeze in the #FreeTheSheeple movement was Tithing. According to him, Tithing is an unprofitable venture because it is the LAW and it brings curses! He further states that *“Tithing as practised under the law of Moses has expired and no Christian should be forced, made, cursed or compelled to pay tithes. Contrary to Daddy Freeze’s belief Bishop David Oyedepo took to social media to reveal his thoughts on tithing. He stated that tithing is giving to God the first tenth of your income. In an attempt to prove his points, he made references to various passages of the bible on tithing. His comments received mixed feelings online because Daddy Freeze followers strongly disagreed with his view. The OAP took to his Instagram page and reacted to Bishop Oyedepo’s comments.*

He stated:

“Let us be careful of what these men of God teach us. In the Bible, Jesus only mentioned tithe once and he never linked it with success or salvation. Jesus who is the head of the church never collected tithe and his disciples who are our first pastors did not collect tithe as well. The tithe was never taken by any church for 600 years after Christ’s death”

After his battle with Bishop Adeboye, Apostle Suleman advised Daddy Freeze to stay away and stop questioning the church and tithe offering. In response Daddy Freeze on Twitter exposed the Overseer of the Omega Fire Ministry and reported that he built a shopping mall, filling station and Transport Company as birthday gifts to his wife.

The cleric further asked Freeze why he decided to question men of God who had instructed that tithing should be paid by the congregants. In reaction to this question Freeze wrote on Instagram saying until any Christian leader can show a bible passage that supports the payment of tithe, he will not stop protesting.

There were other battles via social media between Daddy Freeze and other Pastors like Pastor Humble Okoro of the Joy Christain Church, Port Harcourt, River State, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, Pastor Paul Adefarasin, Apostle Johnson Suleman and Pastor Mathew Ashimolowo of the Kingsway International Christain Centre (KICC). This campaign was a huge disruption in the religious beliefs of most Christians who believed otherwise.

FIGURE 1



Above is an image of Pastor Humble Okoro who took to his social media page to attack Daddy Freeze.

### Impact of the Campaign on Religious Belief in Nigeria

The #Freesheep campaign of the Cool FM OAP, Daddy Freeze gained a lot of attention from different people online. Besides from the attention, it also resulted in fights and arguments about religion, tithing and other issues. At the beginning of the campaign, most people criticized the OAP for daring to attack tithing and the lavishing lifestyle of popular men of God. Eventually, with different views and opinions of people on how tithes should be used, public opinion changed as people discussed the controversial issue and their daily lives. Furthermore, more people became convinced to go search the scriptures to see if Daddy Freeze was wrong and their pastors were right. To Daddy Freeze, it was an unexpected result because a lot of people were convinced and joined the OAP, <http://www.pulse.ng/communities/religion/pastors-are-only-making-daddy-freeze-more-popular-id7658528.html> based on what they found in the Bible.

FIGURE 2







**Daddy Freeze** @DaddyFRZ

FollowFollow @DaddyFRZ

More

May God bless this gentleman for speaking the truth! I love a man of truth, a man willing to accept change! ~FEZ - #FreeTheSheeple

3:57 AM - 14 Dec 2017



Wale Gates

✓@walegates

I'll nominate @DaddyFRZ Freeze as my person of the year... See wetin #tithe don cause.

3:15 PM - Nov 26, 2017

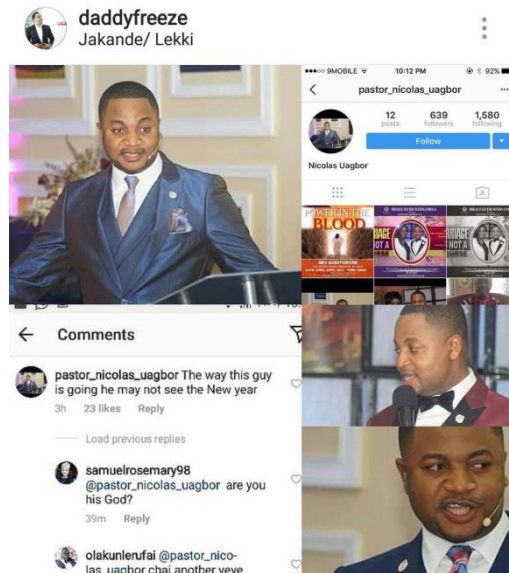


Alexander Asuquo@AlexanderAsuquo

This #TAPChallenge is very welcoming. I pray it lifts many out of poverty as envisioned. However, please ensure that you use foolproof criteria to determine those most deserving. Carry go. #FreeTheSheeple

On the other hand, there were a lot of controversies. The OAP was cursed and his wife got threatened on different occasions. Many pastors were portrayed in a negative light as most of them failed to handle the issue appropriately.

FIGURE 3



Within the influence of the campaign, there has been a revolution in Nigerian churches and a lot has changed regarding tithing in some churches. The campaign had a great impact on the religious beliefs of most Nigerians regarding tithing and the flamboyant live style of Nigerian Pastors.

Some people went on social media to credit Daddy Freeze for helping them to stop taking their tithes to the church. Also, Individuals including some Pastors are thanking the OAP for helping them see things differently.

In the course of this campaign, Daddy Freeze used harsh words that one may consider insulting in the context of African values against many Pastors and Men of God. He later came to social media and apologized to people who felt insulted. The campaign appeared controversial but it got Christians and many leaders thinking about their beliefs and the basis for holding on to these beliefs.

One might also allude that the #freethesheeple social media campaign of tithing is tied to the recent denouncing of tithing obligation/expectation announced by American celebrity preacher, Creflo Dollar. This social media campaign was far-reaching and successful in some regard but painful to the church's purse. Some scholars argue that social media messaging needs to be more controlled, with a separate policy to protect all stakeholders and ensure fairness (Nzeaka & Ehondor, 2020). It is a testament to the power, pain and potential of social media and its impact on other social institutions, hence should not be taken for granted.

## CONCLUSION

Social media has proven to be an effective tool for religious, political and social change in Nigeria and the world at large as it gives room for participation by the public in the various programs. It is also an institution for social change as it has become extremely influential in the development of values and beliefs. Religion, on the other hand, is a belief in a power which is assumed to direct and control the course and nature of human life. Daddy Freeze optimized social media via his #freethesheeple campaign and impacted the Christian community and cultivation as regards tithing. He broke the spiral of silence on the subject matter, with the instrumentality of social media amplifying the campaign across the continent.

Social media is a tool in the public sphere to amplify discourse on any and very communicativity. The effectiveness of social media in society is relative to the use and exposure of individuals. This goes a long way to determine societal cultivation on issues and breaking spirals of silence. It is no doubt that social media and the media at large in some way affect religious beliefs. It is, however, dependent on how well

the public, government and civil society use it, as well as how easily accessible it is to the people who know how to use it. A key factor that determines the impact of the media is the values of the individual and engaging social media from the framework of the golden mean in virtue ethics.

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