
A Discourse Interpretation of Digitally Mediated Texts as Transformation Tools among Selected Whatsapp Users

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Abstract

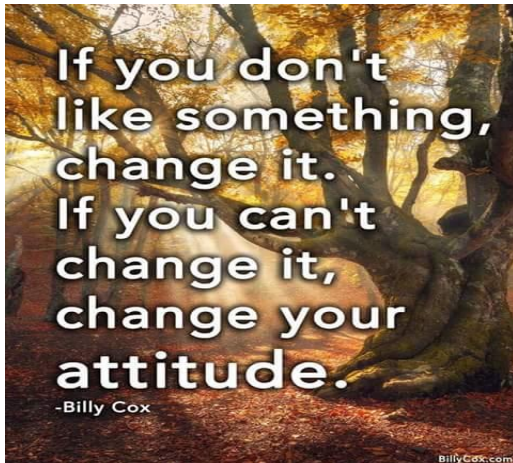
The twenty-first century has witnessed social media discourse becoming part and parcel of our daily communication. Social media can therefore be described as a vibrant linguistic platform where various classes of people converge daily to communicate with one another on all issues bothering themselves personally and the macro societies in which they live. Apart from borderless chatting opportunities, WhatsApp users have the chance of posting their pictures in a photo-profile corner for their easy identity advertisement. In recent times, rather than posting personal pictures in their photo-profile corner, an inscription is displayed to create a relatively permanent message or impression, either confirming a principle or belief of the user or admonishing the individual's contacts. The concern of this paper is to examine the relevance of selected texts displayed as profile pictures on WhatsApp in the quest for transformation of Africa as a society. Using critical theory framework, our paper shows that WhatsApp users deliberately make use of certain texts on their profile spaces to convey their ideologies. The paper concludes that WhatsApp is indeed a channel for free expression, and an opportunity for the spread of principles and ideologies which are capable of developing individuals as well as our society.

Keywords: Transformation, WhatsApp, language, texts, critical theory, social media

Introduction

With great improvement in the means of human communication brought about by the Western world, especially through the expansion of technology and digital media, the boundaries between online and offline discourses are becoming increasingly blurred and smooth, thereby aiding in the transfer of information. This situation has allowed new forms and uses of language to emerge for successful message delivery to all groups of people.

Our society and Africa in particular require comprehensive transformation and reliable development in all spheres of its existence, including economic, religious and political activities to be at par with those of developed continents. As part of efforts to transform and develop the continent, many WhatsApp users have adopted a strategy of calling on all categories of people (their contacts) to make the transformation of Africa, even from their homesteads, a priority. The picture below sums up this call:



From the PP above, two aspects of our human life are reiterated as very important for both the development and transformation of our society. These two aspects are “action” and “attitude”. While moving things into their rightful or necessary positions requires an action or a set of activities, the intention to do so is actually a product of the attitude and mindset of mankind. In other words, whatever change or transformation any society requires is obviously anchored in the attitude of the people, which propels right or wrong action or inaction. It is important to note that the PP above is strongly pivotal for all others used in this study.

The concern of this paper is therefore to examine the linguistic (and discourse) approaches adopted by the selected WhatsApp users to bring about transformation as well as development in African society. Moreover, the use of mobile telephones and their communicative aspects are part and parcel of the Digital Mediated Discourse (DMD).

Digital Mediated Discourse

DMD or alternatively Digital Discourse (DD) refers to the popular domain of human interaction using computers known as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). CMC describes specifically any form of communication involving two or more people interacting with each other on separate computers (or other computer-like devices, such as smartphones) using the Internet or a network connection. Metz’s (1992:3) opinion that CMC generally denotes “any communication patterns mediated through the computer” is confirmation of the seamless boundary between the terms employed here. As Walther and Burgoon (1992: 51) argue “...CMC is no longer a novelty but a communication channel through which much of our business and social interaction takes place, and this transformation is expected to continue”. It has been observed that in the last twenty years, the branch of linguistics dedicated to CMC has centred on many perspectives, focusing mainly on the characteristics of emails, which can be extended to other CMC formats (Pérez-Sabater 2011), as it is noted in works such as those by Baron (2000) and Yates (2000).

According to Thurlow and Mroczek (2011), DD offers a distinctly sociolinguistic perspective on the nature of language in digital technologies by simply bringing sociolinguistics up to date with the new media in communicative situations such as with instant messaging, text messaging, blogging, photo-sharing, gaming, social network sites, audio and video calling, streaming and video sharing via mobile smartphones. All these are subsumed into Social Media Discourse (SMD) (Jones *et al.* 2015; Georgalou, 2016). Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) further argue that all these interactive strategies take place in a range of communicative contexts, including journalism, gaming, tourism, leisure, performance, public debate, and among different communicators like the professional and lay, young people and adults, and intimates and groups using any of the world languages.

Meanwhile, the appearance of the Internet as a technological advancement has further enhanced and popularised DMD, DD and Computer Mediated Discourse (CMD) or CMC. Thus, the intention to share messages and the success of such sharing amongst people have become stronger both inside and outside of offices. To many discourse analysts, the Internet is a recent media phenomenon (Kennedy 2001: 479). However, when considered as a concept, it is older than virtually all of its users across the globe. Hence, Kennedy (2001) further notes that the Internet deserves all attention and applause for having brought about a quantum leap in global communications.

This domain of communication has a number of items characterising it. Some of its prominent characteristics include:

- a) **Geographical barrierlessness:** Users and communicators in DMD are enabled to collaborate by interacting over any distance. People in war zones enjoy this opportunity, especially because attacks can be either launched or averted successfully by the use of the Internet. Business transactions and international relations activities have also been on the increase with the advent of DMD/CMC. There is no intimidation of individuals arising from long distance or inaccessibility; thus, the emphasis on the world becoming a global village.
- b) **Dynamism of the message text:** Exchange of information is the main reason for online interaction. These messages are turned out in any form, such as written in text messaging, audio or voice transfer, video-calling and picture transfer. Any of these messages can be conveniently stored, edited, broadcast and copied. Importantly too, messages can be sent to individuals or groups of people. This is emphasised by Hiltz (1978) and Williams (1977) who point out that two or more people can thus look at a document and revise it together.
- c) **No personal intimidation:** Electronic communication is blind with respect to the vertical hierarchy in social relationships and organisations. Once people have electronic access, their status, power and prestige are not communicated as in face-to-face situations. Edinger and Patterson (1983) observe that people involved in DMD may participate more equally because social influence usually experienced amongst communicators becomes more equal, since much of their hierarchical dominance and power is drastically reduced if not totally eliminated. In other words, providing a certain amount of anonymity, or lack of true human contact (1994), by eliminating stereotypical classifications makes people feel free and confident about communicating their ideas, opinions and feelings about certain issues online. However, Schreiber (2017) supports the position of Jones *et al.* (2015) that online discourse exposes how power and identity are created and maintained, which can be productively explored through traditional tools, specifically Foucaultian analyses.

Digital practices like DMD are deemed fundamentally social in nature, containing actions which are aimed at social goals and enacting the identities of participants (Jones *et al.* 2015; Schreiber 2017). Therefore, both actors' perceptions of their own activities and the understanding of observers and participants are very important. As Schreiber (2017) notes, the effects of digital media are manifested in all facets of our lives and are rapidly changing how we use and realise language, in addition to contemporary literacy practices. The situation with DMD therefore demonstrates how the observed shifts necessitate novel and creative approaches to discourse analysis. The work of Jones *et al.* (2015) is particularly geared to shine more light on such digital discourses as DMD in which we exist in our increasingly intertwined online and offline lives.

WhatsApp as a Part of Social Media

WhatsApp is described as a messenger application intended for smartphones. It uses the Internet to send text messages, images, audio or video, thus fulfilling the social aspects of exchanging information and ideas, and thereby operating as one of many text messaging

services available. WhatsApp, as a messaging platform is very popular with teenagers and youths, generally because of features like group chatting, voice messages, audio and video calling and location sharing (whatsapp.com 2017). An additional reason for its popularity can be associated with the use of the Internet to send messages at a significantly lower cost than using SMS texting. With all its features, especially the ability to connect many people at once via group chatting for any particular reason, WhatsApp ably qualifies as being a social medium.

Ever since it was founded in 2009, WhatsApp in its messaging functions has maintained a steady expansion and increase in acceptability. At present, it is described as the biggest online messenger application, with more than 700 million subscribers and active users in January 2015, placing it in stiff competition with Facebook. This can be linked to its attraction for teenagers, youths and Internet-addicted adults because of just such features as group chatting, voice messages and location sharing.

Besides the real time chatting opportunity available on WhatsApp, where a “speaker” engages a co-interactant or group members in message sharing, another crucial message communication avenue is through the “profile picture” corner, otherwise known as the PP or display picture (DP). While some subscribers upload their real image (photograph) into the provided box, others display pictorial inscriptions of various length and forms which are periodically replaced. This may be the reason why Scott *et al.* (2004) (in Taiwo 2012: 13) claim that mobile telephones have become increasingly important on the African continent. They are believed to be “a booster of economic empowerment” (Taiwo 2012: 11), and a developmental and socio-relational tool. Thus, WhatsApp users of PPs feel they occupy some kind of superior position from which to counsel, encourage or sensitise their message recipients on certain aspects of life, which confirms Schreiber’s (2017) opinion and the position of Jones *et al.* (2015) that online discourse exposes how power and identity are created and maintained.

Methodological Issues

Schreiber (2017) describes the ethnographic method in research as that which often makes use of actors’ perceptions of their own activities, and the understandings of observers and participants. Using this methodology, the data involved could range from that which is intimate to that which is more anonymous, and in which the identities of the participants do not have a serious negative effect on the integrity of the work. The researchers’ use of these and other ethnographic methods, such as video and photographic records, is to complement a more quantitative investigation of texts in DMD which illustrates the importance of interpreting textual data within “the context of its use” (Jones *et al.* 2015: 15).

In contrast to the use of surveys and interviews as methods concerned with domains such as Flickr users, for the purpose of understanding how tags are used creatively for both communal and personal purposes (Schreiber 2017), this study employed the intimate aspect of ethnographic methodology in collecting data for analysis. Thus, the DP inscriptions collected as data were saved from our personal mobile telephones’ contacts. Many of these contacts (friends, office colleagues and relations) replace their pictorial messages (DPs or PPs) on average twice a week. Although the methodology here is not intended for quantitative data collection, DPs (or PPs) which focus on societal development and social transformation were purposively collected and collated. These were analysed and discussed using the descriptive method in relation to critical theory employed as a guide. The collected DPs are henceforth referred to as ‘plates’ for the purpose of analysis.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework guiding this study is critical theory. According to Abrahams (2004), critical theory can be traced to a group of German social theorists popularly called the “inner circle” at the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt, Germany in 1923. With members including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal and Frederick

Pollack (Rose 1990), the theorists' expertise covered various disciplines, including economics, psychology, history and philosophy. Today, the ideology they represent (in close association with Freudian and Marxist philosophy) is described as "the Frankfurt School". They framed critical theory, which integrates diverse philosophical approaches to educational and societal issues. It is of interest to note, for example, that their interests in the nature of reason, truth and beauty were inspired by German idealistic thought, while their concern with social transformation and exchange processes was inspired by Marxism.

Critical theory envisions a process of critique which is self-conscious, leading participants to develop a discourse for social transformation and emancipation. On this note, critical theory raises our consciousness beyond the walls of the classroom and the boundaries of the school to broader social and cultural concerns. These concerns connect well with education in general and the needs of African societies in particular. While most African countries have really advanced with time, having gained their independence some decades ago, the issue of development in terms of infrastructure, politics, education and technology remains largely unresolved. As a result, the masses of various states on the African continent consider themselves as the most important stakeholders to debate seriously on how best to develop or transform the continent from each country. The WhatsApp DPs selected from Nigerian users of the medium revealed a great deal. National and continental transformation concerns them, as patently expressed in the texts.

WhatsApp Reformative Relevance

The understanding of the reformative relevance of WhatsApp as a message application within social media is not unconnected to its features as an aspect of discourse analysis in having such elements as texts, contexts, actions and interactions, and power and ideology (Jones *et al.* 2015). The first element "texts" covers written texts, conversations (written, spoken), videos, photos, drawings, paintings and street signs, amongst other such semiotic elements, which can function as tools for people to take social action. The PPs selected for this study are parts of these texts. Secondly, "contexts" refers to the social and material situations in which texts are constructed, consumed, exchanged and appropriated for certain effects. Telephoning, or the use of mobile telephones at the level of WhatsApp, constitutes the context for this study. Thirdly, the "actions and interactions" element encapsulates what people do with texts and what they do with and to each other. This manifests in a need for African social development or transformation. Finally, the "power and ideology" element shows how people use texts to dominate and control others. Through this element, they are able to create certain "versions of reality" which they believe in, as reflected in the tone of the text writers in this study.

In a nutshell, Taiwo's (2012: 15) description of trends in text messaging across the world, and particularly in Africa, shows that WhatsApp PPs should be seen as advanced texting efforts (or SMSs) which are traditionally known from Yahoo mails and GSM (mobile telephone) text messages. As Drotner (2005) observes, the combined development of mobile telephony together with ubiquitous media technologies signals a reorientation of people's appropriation of mediated time and space as they develop more personalised and interactive forms of communication, including the popular SMS, MMS and chats. The relevance of PPs is captured amongst the various services offered by mobile phones, which centres largely on what Ling (2008 in Taiwo 2012: 16) calls "social grooming", focusing on messages such as "greetings, jokes, new day/week/month/year messages; some of which are sent to tell receivers or to remind them that the sender is thinking about them". It should be noted that these services have encouraged several innovations in the way the technology is used across different groups of people (Taiwo 2012). Beyond personal or interpersonal social relations, mobile telephone advancements can be used for many other innovative activities, including for economic, educational, political, agricultural and health purposes.

From all indications, this mobile technological advancement can address a number of Africa's social challenges and developmental issues (Ekine 2008). In keeping with the point above, all the PPs having inscriptions focusing on transformation or development and addressing society at three levels of personal, interpersonal and general are shown below.

(A). Personal Profile Pictures (Texts)

Personal PPs (texts) encourage individuals to embark on a kind of self-development which can promote social development. The texts below illustrate further:



Plate 1



Plate 2

IF YOU DO WHAT YOU ALWAYS DID, YOU WILL GET WHAT YOU ALWAYS GOT.

Trylife

Plate 3

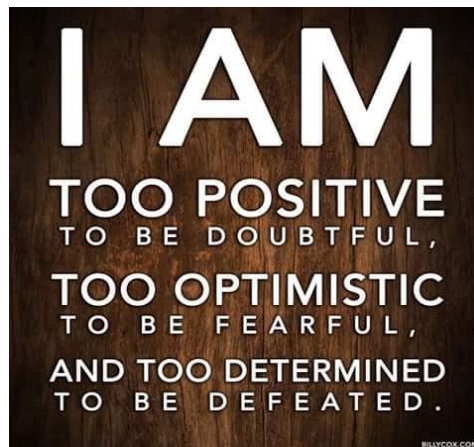


Plate 4

Gloss

Plate 1 reiterates the need for immediacy in a matter concerning change for improvement in personal lifestyle. When the urge or need to improve on one's way of life arises, any attempt to procrastinate may obstruct the expected improvement or transformation indefinitely. Meanwhile, the perspective of the text in this plate emphasises the notion that social development or transformation is the product of an individuals' development or transformation with the required urgency and not lackadaisically. Plate 3 seems to be shedding more light as a kind of warning for the text in Plate 1. The writer warns that people should avoid a lifestyle of status quo if development and transformation are truly desired. In the same vein, Plate 4 echoes the message in Plate 2 by highlighting the three developmental principles of positivism: "optimism" and "determinism", as against "doubtfulness", "fearfulness" and any "defeatist tendency" which could be practised by people. With all these elements in place, distraction as

a major discouragement in the developmental process, such as is needed in Nigeria and Africa in general, should be jettisoned (Plate 2).

Writers' opinions on social transformation or development as far as Nigeria or Africa is concerned are presented in Plates 5 to 8, illustrated in Table (A) below.

Table (A): Personal Profile Pictures (Texts)

S/n	PPs/Texts	Focus/Message
5.	The 3C's of life: Choices, Chances, Changes. You must make a choice to take a chance or your life will never change.	Personal action relating to preferences and opportunities determines the change experienced in life. Inactions will definitely result in failure, stagnancy or backwardness.
6.	If you want to change the world, go home and love your family.	Family development is central to, or the beginning of, social development and transformation. The same love shown at this level can easily be replicated at every gathering (secondary family).
7.	If you want it, you work for it. It's that simple.	Everyone has a role to play in developing or transforming society. All it takes is being responsible towards others.
8.	Your beliefs don't make you a better person, your behaviour does.	While thinking (belief) is natural and constant, it is considered passive until it is put into action (behaviour), which is very significant in development/transformation.

Gloss

The concerns of the text writers in Plates 1 to 4 are recapitulated in Plates 5 to 8 as presented in the table above. Plate 6 has a text particularly focusing on the need for people to personalise development or transformation of our society in the simplest possible way. The idea portrayed in the text is that family development or transformation, when replicated across the land, should necessarily translate to general social improvement. Similarly, Plate 7 concurs with the content of Plate 4 on the need for determination and focus to achieve either personal or social development or transformation, while the text in Plate 8 shows that actions or attitudes as products of the human mind are highly germane to social development or transformation.

(B). Interpersonal Profile Pictures (Texts)

The texts in Plates 9 to 12 can be considered dialogic (or conversational) because addressees are indicated with prominent pronominals, such as "you" (Plate 9) and "yourself" (Plate 10). The same items of speech are implied in Plates 11 and 12.



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11

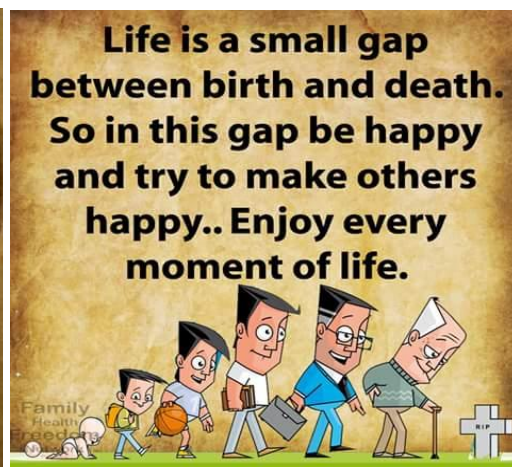


Plate 12

Gloss

The texts below further illustrate the interpersonal approach to social development. The overall impression given in this section is that development or transformation of any given society requires somebody taking the lead in mobilising others in doing the right things. In other words, despite the fact that individuals can do much in this regard, discouragement and frustration can set in as serious obstructions to the wheel of progress. At such times, it takes one enlightened mind to keep others standing and committed to the principles of development or transformation, otherwise status quo, stagnancy or backwardness may be the experience.

In Plates 13 to16, the writers of the texts sustain the interpersonal perspective required for social development or transformation as discussed in the previous texts. In the Table (B) below, the contents of Plates 13 to 16 are presented.

Table (B): Interpersonal Profile Pictures (Texts)

S/n	PPs/Texts	Focus/Message
13.	Beautiful line: Tell my mistake to me not to others, because these are to be corrected by me not by them.	Everyone needs positive feedback; no tale bearing; correcting the wrongs (faults) of others positively is a motivation to do well.
14.	My greatest treasure is my family. We may not be perfect, but I love them with all my heart.	As seen inPlate 6 above, if homes and families are developedthe society will automatically be developed and transformed.

15.	The worst distance between two people is misunderstanding.	Crisis, misunderstanding or disagreements resulting in a feud of any kind bring enmity. This is an impediment to peace and progress, the requirements for social development and transformation.
16.	When you see something beautiful in someone, tell them. It may take a second to say, but for them it could last a lifetime.	As in Plate 13 above, motivation in the form of compliments or commendations go a long way in making people committed to a task. Where this is achieved, development or transformation becomes possible.

Gloss

A sense of addressivity runs through Plates 13 to 16 with the implied pronominals (“you” or “yourself”) in all the texts. While the message in Plate 13 appears like an admonition or appeal to listeners, that of Plate 16 can better be seen as an injunction from a superior personality in authority. A message such as this has to be obeyed to avoid being sanctioned. Meanwhile, what is displayed in Plate 14 is a subtle admittance of the need to engage or partner with others for development or transformation from the family level to a societal level. This, however, may not be achieved where there is rancour or disharmony (Plate 15) amongst people. Synergy in development is a key factor emphasised by this section of interpersonal PPs (texts); its indispensability in acquiring transformation is too patent to be ignored.

(C). General Profile Pictures (Texts)

The general PPs (texts) in this section make topical elements of development or transformation their focus. Thus, the section comes as a summary of all the previous PPs and their messages regarding the requirements for development in African states, or in Africa as a continent. The two texts dwell deliberately on synonymous factors: love and unity, as presented below.

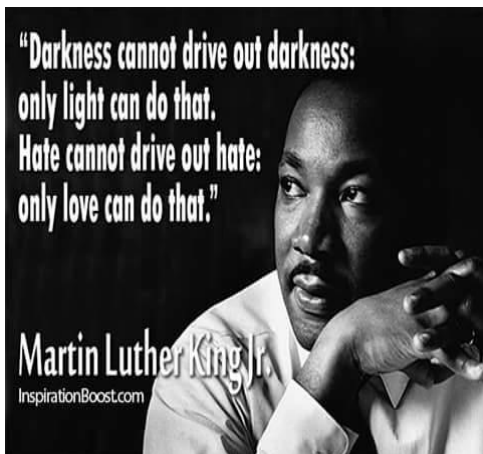


Plate 17

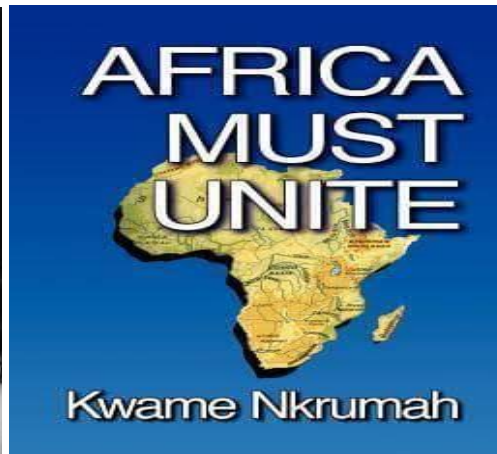


Plate 18

Gloss

Plate 17 presents “love” as a potent counteragent for “hate”. Where and when people hate one another, no progress can be achieved until they choose to “love” one another to bring about unity, as stated in Plate 18.

Table (C): General Profile Pictures (Texts)

S/n	Display picture/text	Focus/message
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19.	The happiest people don't have the best of everything, they make the best of everything.	Being happy (and united) is sacrosanct for development and transformation to take place.
20.	Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try.	A small attempt at a plan is better than just thinking or wishing away the time. No matter how complex or difficult development and transformation are, people must make an attempt.
21.	The distance between dreams and reality is called action.	Attempts, actions and efforts, as explained above, will develop and transform us, not mere wishful thinking or complaints.
22.	A positive mind finds opportunity in everything while a negative mind finds fault with everything.	We must desire and work towards transformation and development. No room for complaints.

Summary

From the samples of PPs above, we notice how the text writers have set out to address the issues of transformation and development in society. Plates 1 to 8 focus on individuals' required efforts or activities. They emphasise the notion that any kind of transformation or development starts with individuals at various levels. These personal PPs prescribe to individuals what could be done for transformation to be achieved. This hinges on the notion that societal transformation begins with individuals. Whatever goes wrong or right with society can be traced to individuals who make up the society based on their action or inaction; decision and indecision; and positive or negative mindsets. In other words, there must be a good measure of determination, positive disposition, correct decision-making, appropriate action and love from all persons before the required societal transformation can take place.

Plates 9 to 16 discuss the interpersonal requirements for societal transformation and development. The emphasis in this section was on the need to care for others in the form of assistance, encouragement and making them happy. All of these things amount to having a positive attitude towards others, which will enhance positive interpersonal relationships which could engender the required transformation and development across social strata. In Plate 9, the popular "buck-passing" attitude is frowned upon. Achieving transformation and development is a sensitive task. Thus, Plate 10 (as reflected in 6 to 8 of the personal PPs) in particular echoes the need for everybody to take up the challenges and responsibility involved in transforming and developing society rather than expecting other people, a superhuman or genius to initiate the action required. Plate 12 reiterate the need to care for (be responsible towards) other people around us starting from the family level (Plates 13, 14 and 16) to non-family members of the community.

Having considered the various transformative and developmental factors necessary, especially in Africa (at personal and interpersonal levels), Plates 17 to 22 attempt a collection of the prerequisites by being more prescriptive and forceful. Plates 17 and 18 of the general PPs recommend love and unity (also Plates 11, 12, 14 and 15). The continent of Africa is multilingual and multicultural in nature. However, its many ethnic groups should work together, even though its growth may be difficult. Having the right attitude, as well as taking action at the right time and in the right direction, are of concern in Plates 20 to 22 and in Plates 5 to 8 as well. If Africa is to transform, all the recommended virtues and good habits should be expedited, and love and unity considered sacrosanct.

Conclusion

Every society aspires to transform, and people in different communities desire development. The challenge always lies in people knowing what the right actions and attitudes should be,

and who should be held responsible. As seen in Plates 17 and 18 above, words of admonition for transformation and development in PPs are sometimes adapted from very important personalities (e.g. Martin Luther King, Kwame Nkrumah) or organisations within society to make such utterances appear original and more acceptably convincing to their readers (addressees). This paper has shown that WhatsApp users are conscious of the need for transformation and development within African society. In order to make this happen, people admonish others through their PPs/inscriptions to act more responsibly as individuals.

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