

ARTICLE

Communication Leading to Communion: Social Communications in the Digital Culture through the Catholic Church's Engagement in Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

With the prohibition of religious gatherings by the Philippine government to help curb the spread of the COVID-19, the Catholic Church had to close its doors to the public and instead hold masses and other activities online, primarily utilizing the livestreaming features of Facebook. The study probed how select parishes in the province of Bulacan engaged their parishioners online in light of the quarantine restrictions imposed in the area. Specifically, the study explores the concept of social communication as embedded in a new culture that is shaped by digital communication, in the context of the engagement of the Catholic Church and its faithful through Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by ideas regarding social communication by Eilers, participatory culture by Jenkins, and COBRA typology by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, as its theoretical lenses, this study utilizes a multi-method approach to achieve its objectives. Qualitative focus interviews were conducted with social media managers of Facebook pages of three parishes, as well as for parishioners who follow the selected parish Facebook pages. Data obtained from the content analysis and Facebook insights of the top performing posts of the parishes selected were also analyzed. Findings show that social media has changed how the Church communicates, and thus has forced the evolution of the concept of social communication. Given the size and scope of the various social media pages, they offered the Church viable fora for its visibility and evangelization. Moreover, although social media cannot totally substitute face-to-face gatherings,

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especially in-person worship, social media can support the Church's community in a myriad of ways such as providing information about the parishes' events, activities and advocacies, and allowing a space for the parishioners to engage in dialogue. Viewing communication as one that leads to communion or unity of its community, the current digital culture reshapes social communication as one that fosters a greater sense of participation in the creation and sharing of information among its members.

Keywords: *Facebook, social media, engagement, Catholic Church, COVID-19*

1. Introduction

On March 17, 2020, then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte placed the entire Luzon Island, the largest and most populated island in the country, in lockdown in a bid to contain the spread of COVID-19. A strict quarantine was implemented for all households, and all mass gatherings, including religious services, were prohibited (Tomacruz 2020). In response, the various archdioceses and dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church covering Luzon suspended public Masses in all its parishes and chapels. Several parishes also began to livestream Masses and other religious activities on their official social media pages to enable the faithful to celebrate the Holy Mass even in their own homes. Among the prominent churches that provided online liturgical celebrations as cited by media organizations included the Manila Cathedral, the episcopal seat of the Archdiocese of Manila, the San Agustin Church, considered the oldest church in the country, and the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene commonly known as Quiapo Church, recognized for its millions of devotees (Madarang 2020).

Later on, various parishes also began steps to provide the public with online Masses, community prayers, spiritual recollections and retreats and Eucharistic adoration, among others for the benefit of their own parishioners. In the '*Recommendations and Guidelines for the Liturgical Celebration in 'New Normal' Condition*' issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) on May 16, 2020, then conference president Romulo G. Valles states, "The social

distancing needed to inhibit the spread of the virus has taught all of us to maximize the potentials of Social Media.” He recognized that the Sunday, Holy Week and daily Masses, spiritual conferences and preaching streamed online had reached many of the faithful, especially the youth. Archbishop Valles strongly recommended the continued streaming and broadcast of masses especially for the elderly and the sick, the young and children who are required by the government to stay home and not to attend Mass.

According to Castillo, Biana, and Joaquin (2020), the global health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the need to cater not only to the public’s physical health but to their mental health and spiritual well-being as well. They said that religious and spiritual interventions play a crucial role during a public health crisis and they guide people to find meaning and acceptance in the midst of suffering, providing counsel, refuge, hope, and rejuvenation for those who need it.

As social distancing, home quarantine, and cancellation of mass gatherings have become a must, the Catholic Church intensified its engagement with the faithful through social media. Parishes brought Masses in the comfort of people’s homes and updated the people with news around the parish through various social networking sites. Although Masses, recollections and other devotions presently available online have been going on for quite some time, they became more prevalent in 2020 due to the stricter preventive measures of the government against the pandemic. This study involves 3 out of 105 parishes and four quasi parishes in Bulacan, namely the Immaculate Conception Parish – Cathedral & Minor Basilica, commonly known as Malolos Cathedral, the ecclesiastical seat of the Diocese of Malolos; St. Augustine Parish in Baliwag, Bulacan; and St. Ildephonse of Toledo Parish in Guiguinto, Bulacan. The above-mentioned parishes have significant followers in their official Facebook pages at the time of the writing of this study, with St. Ildephonse Parish (Guiguinto)’s [[@SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto](#)] Facebook page having more than 111,000 page likes; Malolos Cathedral’s [[@CathedralMalolos](#)] Facebook page with more than 60,000 page likes; and St. Augustine Parish (Baliwag)’s [[@AngBatingawOnline](#)] Facebook page with more than 30,000 page

likes.

2. Objectives

This study focuses on how the Catholic Church, through select parishes in Bulacan under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Malolos, engaged their parishioners online in light of the quarantine restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the time when a large group of Catholics could not go to Church to attend Masses and avail of the sacraments, this study sheds light on how select parishes utilized social media such as Facebook as the ‘new pulpit’ of the Church to spread its teachings. The study seeks to understand how the concept of social communication is being reshaped by digital communications, specifically in the context of the engagement of the Catholic Church and its faithful through social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also explores the concept of social communication as embedded in a new culture that is shaped by digital communication, and aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue with the various cultural developments brought by social media and mobile media applications, specifically focusing on new media as the dominant communication in the digital age.

3. Literature Review

Engagement in social media

According to the Digital Marketing Philippines (n.d), engagement in social media is the active participation between an organization or company and other users who belong in the same social media sphere where the former is operating from. Citing digital marketing professionals, engagement relates directly to the level of interaction of an individual, group, organization or company with other people, companies, and brands. According to the webpage, positive engagement is one of the most effective ways of building trust and credibility between an organization and its various audiences, which over time can lead to loyalty and even championing of the organization.

It also provides a measurement as to how effectively an organization is creating interactions with its audiences in the social stream. The metrics include likes, mentions, shares, views, comments, participation in live chats, subscriptions, tagging or mentioning someone in a post of photo, among others – and directly correlates with the number of people who are forming a relationship with the organization through its social media platforms.

The Philippines, being one of the countries with a significant number of social media users, is a good context to probe the concept of engagement. The “Digital 2019: Global Digital Overview” by the creative agency We Are Social and social media management platform Hootsuite shows that Filipinos spend an average of 10 hours and two minutes each day on the internet via any device. The worldwide average for hours spent on the internet is at six hours, 42 minutes, down a few minutes from 2018’s six hours and 49 minutes. The report also indicates that Filipinos usually spend over four hours on social media daily, followed by Brazilians (3 hours, 34 minutes) and Colombians (3 hours, 31 minutes). The worldwide average for social media use is at two hours, 16 minutes.

The same report says that as of January 2019, there were 4.39 billion internet users worldwide, an increase of 366 million (9 percent) compared to January 2018. There were also 3.48 billion social media users in 2019, with 3.26 billion using social media on mobile devices. The advent of new media technologies also made the communication field in general, and of strategic communications in particular, to be at the crossroads. In the age of social media and Web 2.0, there are many tools available for people to create, share and publish content and build authority online.

The Church engaging the Catholic faithful in the cyberworld

When the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifica* (1962) and the subsequent pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971) were promulgated, the term “social communication” primarily referred to broadcast media such as print journalism, television and radio, film, and even theater to some extent. On the twentieth anniversary of *Communio*

et Progressio, the pastoral instruction *Aetatis Novae* (1992) is first among these documents to mention computer networks. A decade later, in 2002, the Vatican released *Church and Internet* and *Ethics in Internet*. At present, social communication is a term that continues to imply the traditional broadcast media, but it increasingly bears a closer association with the digital media and internet-mediated communication.

For social communication, the significance of the internet also ushers in new assumptions about communication on this massive scale. Social communication through the traditional broadcast media implies a one-to-many model of sharing information, that is, there is a clear source of information and a clear audience who receives it. Social communication through the internet, especially since the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, reshaped this one-to-many model into an interactive web. Internet-mediated communication since the rise of social media and mobile media applications has become “a chorus of many voices who co-participate in the creation, sharing, and dissemination of information” (Zsupan-Jerome 2015, 6-7).

Pope Francis, in his message for the 50th World Communications Day (2016), said that the internet and social networks are “a gift of God” if used wisely. “Emails, text messages, social networks and chats can also be fully human forms of communication,” he stated. Archbishop Claudio Celli, the former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, in his talk during the 2014 celebration of World Communications Sunday organized by the Diocese of Brooklyn said the Catholic Church cannot ignore the opportunities for evangelization that the Internet offers. He said that unless the Church engages social media, “we will wind up talking to ourselves” (quoted in Gibson 2014). According to Celli, “In our church we are always fishing inside the aquarium. And we forget that most fish are outside the aquarium” (Ibid). He also referred to social media as a digital continent that the Church must consider as mission territory.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) media office director, Monsignor Pedro Quitarino III also cited the important role being played by social media in “helping spread the culture of truth.” Msgr. Quitarino, as cited in a news report, explained

that aside from traditional media platforms like radio, television, and print, “social media in today’s times has become a very efficient platform in spreading the message of the Church” (Garcia 2019). An article published in *Rappler* in 2015, citing the findings of US-based Pew Research Center in March 2014 said that social media is fertile ground for evangelization (Esmaque 2015). It says that Filipinos in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter find religion more interesting compared to politics. The said study also shows that religion is the third most popular social media topic with 26 percent of Filipino internet users utilizing social media to share their views about religion, preceded only by movies and music (71%) and sports (50%). Politics only come in 5th (16%), after products netizens use (21%). Moreover, the same study also reveals that in contrast to other emerging and developing countries, more Filipinos think that increasing use of the internet has had a positive influence in morality, with 47 percent of Filipinos seeing the internet as positive for morality, as opposed to 42 percent of global respondents stating that internet has a negative influence.

Social communications in the Diocese of Malolos

As stated in its official website (www.malolosdiocese.ph), the Diocese of Malolos was created on November 25, 1961 through the Apostolic Constitution *Christi Fidelium* by Pope John XXIII. It comprises the civil province of Bulacan and Valenzuela City in Metro Manila. The diocese is headed by Bishop Dennis C. Villarojo, D.D., who was formerly the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Cebu. The Catholic Directory of the Philippines (2020) indicates that the Diocese of Malolos has 105 parishes, 4 quasi-parishes, and 7 chaplaincies, and is served by 180 active priests.

The *Acts and Decrees of the Second Synod of the Diocese of Malolos* (2013) recognizes how new media “has created a new pace in human life, making access to the vast world of communication and information easier and more reliable. Social communication has turned the world into a global village.” The same document says new technologies may be utilized to “present the timeliness message of God’s love for His people more attractively and in ways that may engage new

audiences.” Moreover, Declaration 35 of the document mandates that the Diocesan Commission on Social Communications shall maintain its presence in social media and in other forms of information and communications.

Social communications by the diocese are being managed by its Commission on Social Communications headed by a priest serving as chairman. Currently, the commission manages the diocesan website and its social media presence, produces a few radio programs aired in Radio Veritas 846, conducts media relations, and provides ongoing formation and training of social communication workers in the parishes. The various parishes in the diocese, meanwhile devise their own social communication program to respond to their particular needs. Most parishes have their own social media presence, particularly on Facebook, while only a few maintain a website. A few parishes also have printed newsletters.

4. Study Framework

To enable the researcher to probe the concept of social communication as embedded in a new culture that is shaped by digital communication, this study was undertaken under the lens of the following:

First, since it is a study of the Catholic Church’s engagement with its faithful through social media, Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD’s ideas regarding social communication (2009) were utilized. Second, as this study intends to probe and investigate the engagement of social media users to the posts of the official Facebook pages of selected parishes, it was also guided by Participatory Culture by Jenkins (2009) and consumers’ online brand related activities (COBRA) typology by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011).

Social communications

The term ‘social communication’ was officially used by the Roman Catholic Church in the Vatican II decree *Inter Mirifica: On the Means of Social Communication* (1963). According to Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD,

the term encompasses “all forms and ways of communicating in human society from traditional forms like storytelling, rumor, drama, dance and music to the Internet and cyberspace” (2005, para 11). Moreover, in his book, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication*, Eilers explains the concept of social communication as communication in and of human society. “Mass media are only but one part of such communication which also includes books and group communication media as well as traditional means or communication in human societies” (2009, 17). Citing the works of Rogers and Kincaid critiquing past communication theory and research as linear, one-way act rather than two-way process over time, Eilers explains that social communication may be considered as a horizontal process of sharing between participants, and that there is an ongoing feedback and change of roles of participants to converge on a common understanding that takes place in a particular social network and structure. Theologically, such concept takes the view of communication as leading to communion and this communion is creating or documenting community.

The online and social media posts of the parishes selected and analyzed in this study are considered social communications, specifically pastoral communications, as utilized by the Catholic Church. How they achieve the above-mentioned theological goal of social communication, that is leading to communion during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, is the focus of this study.

Participatory culture

Henry Jenkins, in the book *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* which he wrote with Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice Robinson, defined participatory culture as follows:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care

about others' opinions of what they have created). (Jenkins 2006, 5-6).

Jenkins argues that participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful ways. Moreover, Jenkins asserts that participation is used as a term that cuts across educational practices, creative processes, community life, and democratic citizenship: Catholics follow and interact with their respective parishes' social media pages. They engage in these social media pages by sharing and commenting on the various posts, and may even create their own contents such as memes and videos and share them in their own social media accounts. The concept of participatory culture was utilized to understand how to further these engagements, and in turn understand how ordinary Catholics through their own social media accounts can also spread the "Good News" to others.

COBRA typology

According to Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), who proposed the concept of consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRA) typology, the rise of Web 2.0 has provided many opportunities for netizens to share and create content about anything. They recognize that social media have transformed online consumer behavior which has important consequences for firms, products and brands, for instance. As such, consumers are becoming increasingly influential with respect to the brands they are interacting with, and these interactions have a much stronger impact on consumer behavior than traditional forms of marketing and advertising. In their study to understand the motivations of consumers' online brand-related activities, they developed the 'COBRA typology' which categorizes into three dimensions what corresponds to the path of gradual involvement with brand-related content on social media, namely consuming, contributing, and creating. The typology takes activeness of social media use into account and establishes a continuum from high to low brand-related activity.

First, the consuming COBRA type represents the lowest level of online brand-related activeness. It means minimal participation, without

actively contributing to or creating content. Second, the contributing COBRA type is the middle level of online brand-related activeness. It covers both user-to-content and user-to-user interactions about brands. Third, the creating COBRA type represents the highest level of online brand-related activity. It means actively producing and publishing the brand-related content that others consume and contribute. The COBRA typology guided the researcher in initially probing the depth of interaction of the Facebook users who are parishioners of the selected parishes with regard to the latter's engagement with them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Methodology

In achieving the objectives set by the study, the researcher utilized a multi-method approach. To be able to appraise the extent by which strategies and tactics in social media typically employed by secular institutions and businesses were utilized by the Catholic Church, the researcher employed content analysis of top 100 performing posts of three parishes in the Diocese of Malolos from March 17 to August 17, 2020, the during the time the strictest lockdown and home quarantine protocols were imposed in the Philippines. Pernia (2004) defines quantitative content analysis of media materials as to designing, operationalizing, and analyzing manifest elements of communication message – that is, the measurable characteristics of messages such as format, topic, length, and use of words/language, visuals, and other symbols present in a communication material.

In the context of this study, the content analysis was done by first, determining the content of each post. Second, the type of each post was also identified. Third, the source or persons featured in the posts was also identified and counted. Informant interviews of social media managers of their official Facebook pages were also undertaken to achieve the above mentioned objective.

Specifically, there were two priests and two lay persons who served as the study's informants. One of the priests and the two lay persons who were part of the managing team of the Facebook pages of the selected parishes were interviewed. They were specifically chosen to provide insights on the strategies and tactics employed by their respective pages

on how they attempted to engage their parishioners and other faithful through social media during the Luzon pandemic lockdowns. Another priest who was part of the team managing the social communication efforts of the Diocese of Malolos was also interviewed to provide a ‘big-picture’ perspective on how the diocese directed and/or guided the selected parishes in their social media endeavors.

To probe the level of engagement by the followers/likers of the said Facebook pages, the researcher measured and analyzed the following among the top 100 performing posts using the data culled from Facebook Insights:

- reach (the number of people who have seen the post in their timelines);
- likes and reactions (the number of people who click the like or the other reaction buttons on the post);
- comments (the number of people who posted their comment on the post); and
- shares (the number of times users share the post in their own page).

These indicators show how well the page’s posts are performing and which type of posts are performing better.

Lastly, to be able to examine how Catholic netizens re-appropriate the messages conveyed through social media by the Church, the researcher conducted qualitative in-depth focus interviews from March to May 2021 with parishioners of the three above-mentioned parishes selected through snowball sampling. As explained by Merton and Kendal (1956) as cited by Portus, et. Al. (2018), focus interviews discuss the participant-informant’s experience, where they are encouraged to speak non-directively about their retrospective reaction to a specific event or phenomenon.

They were 12 parishioners who followed their respective parishes’ official Facebook pages that were interviewed to gain the perspective of the audience, with each interview taking one to two hours. Among them, two were from St. Augustine Parish, four from St.

Ildephonse of Toledo Parish, while six from Immaculate Conception Parish – Cathedral & Minor Basilica. They were asked to share their lived experience of engaging the Church through social media during the height of the restrictions in movement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participant-informants were met in person by the researcher in locations chosen by the former for their convenience, ensuring that the said places were conducive in the conduct of interviews, and complies with the minimum health and safety protocols being imposed by the government at that time.

7. Data Analysis

Data from the content analysis were also analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the engagement rate per reach (ERR) were computed from the data derived using Facebook insights. Qualitative data were coded and categorized by the researcher to be able to come up with a descriptive textual analysis. For the qualitative data gathered by the researcher, coding and categorizing leading to a descriptive textual analysis was conducted. Particular focus was given in the unique experiences, and trends and patterns alluded by the participant-informants.

8. Results

Engaging the faithful: strategies used by parishes in Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic

To understand the strategies utilized by the three Facebook pages to engage their parishioners and other audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, two methods were utilized. First is the content analysis of the top performing Facebook posts of the three parishes from March 17 – August 17, 2020, when the strictest lockdown protocols were imposed by the government. Second is focused interviews with key informants who were part of the social media team managing the three parishes, and of the diocese. Using Facebook Insights, the top performing posts based on reach of the three parishes were sorted. They were then analyzed

based on their content, format, and sources/persons mentioned or cited.

Based on the results of the two methods, it was shown that the parishes included in this study prioritized ensuring that the faithful would have access to the celebration of Masses despite the prohibition on public gatherings and religious services. As mentioned by the informants, the major adjustment done by their parishes during the start of the Luzon-wide lockdown beginning on March 17, 2020 was to shift the holding of public Masses to the online platform, Facebook in particular. This was also reflected in the results of the content analysis, where it was identified that the top performing posts in terms of reach of @AngBatingawOnline and @CathedralMalolos were the Eucharistic celebrations, while it is among the top three for @SanIdefonsoDeGuiguinto.

Apart from Masses, the Facebook pages also posted live videos and cross-posts of religious activities such as Marian devotions and popular piety, as well as info posters of prayers, inspirational messages, and Gospel reflections.

Table 1. Contents of Posts of three Parishes

	Baliwag	Guiguinto	Malolos
Announcement	3	16	2
Catechism	2	0	0
Eucharistic Celebration	77	15	60
Eucharistic Devotion	3	0	4
Gospel Reflections	0	12	2
Inspirational message	1	13	0
Liturgical Prayer	3	0	2
Marian Devotion	0	4	14
Other devotions	4	0	5
Popular Piety	5	1	5
Post-event coverage	1	1	0
Prayer	0	37	6
Recollection	1	0	0
Religious Image	0	1	0

The content analysis' results show that live videos of Masses and other Church activities were the 95 percent of the top performing posts

for @AngBatingawOnline, and 91 percent for @CathedralMalolos. The then priest-moderator of @AngBatingawOnline explained that due to the lockdown, and with mainstream media also not producing new content as most of their productions were also halted, they realized it was the best opportunity to use social media to catechize and evangelize.

The results, moreover, show that the Facebook page @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto took a somewhat divergent strategy compared to the other two pages included in this study. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of their posts were infoposters, with contents ranging from various prayers, announcements, inspirational quotes/messages, and Gospel reflections. This strategy was also mentioned by the lay coordinator of their parish social communications as their tactic to encourage more likes /followers of their page. San Ildefonso de Guiguinto's page deliberately posted info posters of prayers or inspirational messages/quotes that were closely connected with a significant or current event. As the lay coordinator explained, "For example, there was an earthquake, we had the Oratio Imperata [during earthquakes] right away."

The results also show that based on the contents and strategies of the three Facebook pages, they all conform to the guidelines and best practices stipulated in the *2017 Pastoral Guidelines on the Use of Social Media* issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. The parishes concerned indeed utilized Facebook as a tool for evangelization, and their engagement, though limited, still strengthened the mission of the Church to be inclusive. The use of the Facebook pages by the Church, at least through the parishes included in this study, indeed falls within the purview of pastoral communication, which was defined by Eilers as "the communicative activities of the Church and her members." During the height of the Luzon-wide lockdown, it was practically through social media that the Church was able to communicate with her faithful.

Results of the two methods so far show that the Church, through its social communications in the form of Facebook pages of her parishes, utilized social media to help address what it believed were the needs of its parishioners. As the informants surmised, it signaled that the Church was in business, that the Masses did not stop just because of the pandemic, and in fact, the Church never left the faithful during the

height of the health crisis.

Engagement of likers/followers in the churches' Facebook pages

To ascertain the level of engagement of the followers/likers of the Facebook pages of the parishes selected in this study, the researcher used Facebook Insights, with the following indicators and engagement to the top performing posts of the parishes gathered and averaged, namely, likes and reactions, shares and comments. To ascertain whether the engagement was effective or not, the engagement rate was computed. As mentioned in the methodology, the research utilized the engagement rate by reach or ERR as reach can be a more accurate measurement than follower count, since not all the page's followers will see all the content, while non-followers may have been exposed to the posts through shares, hashtags, and other means. A recent dissertation that studied social media engagement of sports fans (Cadilhe 2020) utilized the description given by scrunch.com to understand what engagement rates mean:

- Low engagement rate: 0% and 1.64%
- Good engagement rate: 1.64% and 3.48%
- High engagement rate: 3.48% and 6.67%
- Very high engagement rate: 6.67% and 10%

The results show that the three parishes were successful in engaging their faithful through their social media pages. Based on the computed engagement rate, the parishes obtained 'very high' engagement through the likes/reactions, comments and shares they received.

Table 2. Engagement Averages and Engagement Rates

<i>Avarege Engagements</i>	<i>Baliwag</i>	<i>Guiguinto</i>	<i>Malolos</i>	<i>3 Parishes</i>
<i>Reach</i>	38,897	464,842	55,917	186,552
<i>Likes and Reactions</i>	1,872	35,703	3,819	13,798
<i>Comments</i>	852	6,921	1,046	2,940
<i>Shares</i>	155	2,458	241	951
<i>Engagement Rate</i>	7%	10%	9%	9%
<i>Interpretation</i>	Very high	Very high	Very high	Very high

The average engagement rates of the various posts of the parishes were then computed to determine the level of engagement they received from those who saw their posts. In terms of specific contents, ‘other prayers’ received the highest average likes and reactions in @SanIdefonsoDeGuiguinto and @CathedralMalolos, while for @AngBatingawOnline, it was popular piety. Almost all types of contents received thousands of likes and reactions in the three parishes.

Table 3. Comparison of Average Likes and Reactions by Type of Posts

	<i>Baliwag</i>	<i>Guiguinto</i>	<i>Malolos</i>
Announcement	2,402	34,775	4,308
Catechism	1,074		
Eucharistic Celebration	1,615	6,669	2,444
Eucharistic Devotion	1,844		3,378
Gospel Reflections		23,987	3,671
Inspirational message	1,751	41,193	
Liturgical Prayer			1,692
Marian Devotion		14,273	3,228
Other devotions	2,723		2,973
Popular Piety	3,858	8,341	3,129
Post-event coverage	3,295	8,610	
Other Prayers		54,038	21,119
Recollection	2,131		
Religious Image		17,102	

Other prayers also received the highest number of comments on @SanIdefonsoDeGuiguinto and @MalolosCathedral, while Eucharistic celebration was the highest for @AngBatingawOnline. It was @SanIdefonsoDeGuiguinto that consistently received comments by the thousands, while there were only two types of contents that received thousands of comments in @CathedralMalolos. The comments in @AngBatingawOnline’s page were in the hundreds only. The numbers are also lower compared to average likes and reactions received by the pages.

Table 4. Comparison of Average Comments by Type of Posts

	<i>Baliwag</i>	<i>Guiguinto</i>	<i>Malolos</i>
Announcement	260	6,862	772
Catechism	125		
Eucharistic Celebration	981	1,196	1,111
Eucharistic Devotion	192		632
Gospel Reflections		2,627	485
Inspirational message	140	7,806	
Liturgical Prayer	878		473
Marian Devotion		3,121	558
Other devotions	212		286
Popular Piety	683	1,120	755
Post-event coverage	282	1,184	
Other Prayers		11,201	3,161
Recollection	694		
Religious Image		2,136	

In terms of shares, the results mirror that of likes and reactions, where ‘other prayers’ received the highest average number of shares in @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto and @CathedralMalolos, while it was popular piety for @AngBatingawOnline. Only a few types of posts in @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto are in the thousands in terms of shares, while it is only one for @MalolosCathedral. The number of shares in @AngBatingawOnline average in the hundreds. The average shares of the three parishes are also lower compared to the average likes and reactions, and average comments received by their top performing posts.

Table 5. Comparison of Average Shares by Type of Posts

	Baliwag	Guiguinto	Malolos
Announcement	204	2,534	252
Catechism	157		
Eucharistic Celebration	127	268	181
Eucharistic Devotion	70		208
Gospel Reflections		1,738	410
Inspirational message	245	3,288	
Liturgical Prayer	266		194
Marian Devotion		897	153
Other devotions	75		98
Popular Piety	522	466	335
Post-event coverage	435	200	
Other Prayers		3,586	1,068
Recollection	179		
Religious Image		731	

Following the COBRA typology suggested by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), this study was also able to ascertain that its Facebook users reached up to the second level or dimension of activeness in social media based on the engagement numbers received by the three social media pages in this study. Likes and reactions are considered at the level of ‘consuming’ content, where netizens only view only photos and videos, and click like and other reactions to them. Comments and shares are considered ‘contributing’ content, as the netizens are able to provide a moderate level of contribution to page contents when they comment on the posted photos and videos or share it among their friends. The third level of dimension of the COBRA typology was not reached in this study, as the researcher was only able to see content generated by the pages themselves among the top performing posts of the parishes. There was none of the user-generated content that is required by the COBRA typology.

The findings show that based on the engagement numbers, netizens who saw the top performing posts of the three parish Facebook pages aimed to create or maintain a relationship with the latter primarily

through likes and reactions. Through likes and other reactions, netizens provided positive feedback, which indicated that they were connecting with the things they cared about in the pages of the parishes included in this study.

‘Re-apportioning’ the social media contents of the parishes’ Facebook page by their likers/followers

Qualitative focus interviews were conducted to examine how Catholic netizens re-apportionate the messages conveyed through social media by the Church. Twelve parishioners who were followers of the parish Facebook pages in this study were interviewed – six from Immaculate Conception Parish – Cathedral & Minor Basilica (Malolos City), four from St. Ildephonse of Toledo Parish (Guiguinto), and two from St. Augustine Parish (Baliwag). When public Masses were canceled in mid-March 2020, all the interviewees said they resorted to attending the livestreamed Eucharistic celebration on their respective parishes’ Facebook page. When asked why they preferred this over watching Masses on television as some broadcast networks also aired them daily, they said they were more familiar with their own priests, and would also like to see what was happening in their parishes even though they were not physically present there.

The parishioners-informants all followed their own parishes’ Facebook pages to be able to view Masses and be updated with parish activities and other developments. Though some said they also followed other Catholic pages on Facebook, they primarily relied on their parish Facebook page for the Eucharistic celebration as they were more familiar with their priests. It was also their way of connecting with the rest of their parish community. The informants said they specifically sought out their parishes on Facebook as they felt more emotional connection to it compared to other similar Catholic Facebook pages. An informant even felt emotional when he watched the online Mass for the first time during the lockdown. A youth volunteer from Malolos Cathedral said during the interview that he became emotional when he first watched the live streaming of Mass by their parish. “What was memorable for me was the very first Sunday Mass during the lockdown that was live streamed, I felt like crying because I was not in the church physically.”

Apart from the obvious reason of being able to still take part in the Eucharistic celebration virtually, the informants also gave other advantages of online Masses, at least from their perspective. One informant said he needed less time to prepare to attend as he could catch one on Facebook anytime. “Sometimes, when I wake up late, I just attend Mass there [on Facebook],” an interviewee from Guiguinto said. Another interviewee said, “That is also the case for me when I do not feel like getting up early.” An interviewee from Baliwag, for her part, said watching the Mass on Facebook was more convenient as she did not have to dress up compared to when she was attending masses in her parish.

While they recognized the limitations imposed by attending Masses online, such as being unable to receive communion, they felt they were still given the opportunity to practice their faith and hear the Word of God. However, they still felt the need to eventually go back to their parishes once restrictions begin to ease, as attending the Masses in person was much better than online. An interviewee from Malolos also shared that while the livestreamed Masses helped during the beginning of the lockdown, he eventually felt he wanted to go back to church and physically take part in the Mass. He commented, “At the start of the pandemic, I felt that the live Mass [on Facebook] helped. I looked for the page of the Cathedral because I was looking for the Sunday Masses at first. But eventually, it didn’t feel complete. I get distracted easily and I begin to long for the actual Mass.”

Apart from not being able to receive Communion, the most common disadvantage the informants said was the propensity to be distracted while watching the live streamed Mass. They also affirmed the concerns that the priests who were interviewed expressed with online Masses – that the faithful are indeed distracted while watching Masses on Facebook, and most of them are not in the proper disposition. When they were asked how they interacted with their own parish Facebook pages, the informants responded they would sometimes like and react to the posts, as well as post comments and share announcements and videos. None of the interviewees said they would contribute actual content to their parish Facebook pages, and they also did not expect their parish to encourage it.

The informants affirmed the findings from the data obtained from Facebook insights with regard to engagement in the parishes' Facebook pages. As the informants said, their interaction was limited to likes and reactions, commenting the appropriate responses during the Mass, and sharing the online Masses, the parish announcements and biblical passages to their own social media contacts. They did not take the opportunity to collaborate further by contributing their own content, and in fact did not see the need to do so. As such, similar to the earlier findings, in terms of the COBRA typology, they only reached the levels of consuming and contributing, and not the level of creating.

Relating further the insights and feelings expressed by the informants to participatory culture by Jenkins, they re-apportioned the social media contents of their parish Facebook pages as substitute to in-person participation to the Masses and other religious activities, and as a means to maintain their sense of community with their parish.

9. Discussion

Apart from livestreaming Masses, the Church also used their Facebook pages to cater to the various spiritual needs of their faithful despite the limitations and disruptions brought by COVID-19. As the results of the content analysis of the parish Facebook pages included in this study show, parishes also posted prayers for various intentions and addressed to several saints, Gospel reflection from their pastors, inspirational quotes/messages, a myriad of devotions and popular piety for the benefit of their likers/followers. The parish Facebook pages in this study aimed to mimic, so to speak, the experience parishioners had when they were physically attending Masses and other activities in their churches. They tried to fill the gap the COVID-19 forced all organizations and institutions with regard to limiting face-to-face interactions among their members.

Despite the social isolation brought by COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino Catholics found ways to express their unity and togetherness in professing their faith by attending online Masses, reciting devotional prayers online, and taking part in popular piety through Facebook. After

being restricted to physically attend Masses and other devotions in their parishes, based on the interviews and engagement numbers, parishioners took to social media to follow and take part in the various activities livestreamed and posted in Facebook by parishes' official pages.

The netizens-informants interviewed in this study all followed their own parishes' Facebook pages to be able to view Masses and be updated with its activities and other developments. Although some said they also followed other Catholic Facebook pages, they primarily relied on their parish Facebook page for the Eucharistic celebration as they were more familiar with their priests. It was also their way of connecting with the rest of their parish community.

Relating further the insights and feelings expressed by the informants to participatory culture by Jenkins, they re-appropriated the social media contents of their parish Facebook pages as substitute to in-person participation to the Masses and other religious activities, and as a means to maintain their sense of community with their parish. As for the specific elements of participatory culture, the findings show that the parishes' Facebook pages indeed provided them with a relatively low barrier to practice and express their faith. Followers/likers of the social media pages also felt some degree of social connection with one another since they all belonged to the same parishes and were commonly served by the same priests.

The informants also manifested a 'better-than-nothing' attitude regarding their participation in Church liturgies and other activities on social media. While they recognized the limitations of attending Masses online, such as being unable to receive Communion, they felt they were still given the opportunity to practice their faith and hear the Word of God. However, they still felt the need to eventually go back to their parishes once restrictions began to ease, as attending the Masses in person was considerably better than online. This is a recognition that virtual liturgies, such as livestreamed Masses on social media, cannot substitute in-person attendance at Sunday Mass as the former does not fulfill the obligation of attending Sunday.

As the audience of the parishes' social media pages exponentially

grew to tens of thousands starting from March 2020 onwards, the Church, as it were, was able to create its own dedicated media channels through Facebook. Instead of competing for airtime and coming up with content for broadcast in the national media which entailed a lot of cost, parishes were able to create cost-effective programs to achieve the same goal: spread the Word of God to the people. These emerging themes allowed the researcher to revisit the concept of social communication as expounded by Eilers, and how it is enriched by the concept of participatory culture and consumer online brand-related activities. Eilers, as mentioned in the study framework, points out that the expression ‘social communication’ was introduced in the Catholic Church’s vocabulary through the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifica*, and is a broad expression that covers “all ways, means and situations of communication in human societies.” Eilers has also earlier noted that given the increasingly social nature of digital communication today due to the prevalence of social media, the term social communication as coined by Vatican II is crucial for engaging in conversation in digital culture.

10. Conclusion

This study’s findings reveal that the parishes, through their Facebook pages, took a proactive social media strategy by regularly posting content such as live streaming of Masses, devotions and popular piety, as well as infoposters of prayers for various intentions, inspirational messages, and Gospel reflections. These contents, in turn, provided parishioners who followed their parish Facebook pages an avenue to continue engaging with their parish, and provided them a means to substitute physical presence inside the Church with online participation, as well as a sense of continued belongingness and affiliation to their parish community. This allowed the Catholic churches to utilize their Facebook pages, which had gathered thousands of followers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a potent tool to disseminate and reinforce her teachings, traditions and authority, and continue to build and engage with its members despite the physical structures of the Church being empty with people.

Based on these conclusions, social communication, although originally coined to refer to traditional media, may now be considered to have closer association with digital media. Viewing communication as one that leads to communion or unity of its community, the current digital culture reshapes the understanding of social communication as one that fosters a greater sense of participation in the creation and sharing of information among its members. This participatory digital culture, in turn, provides opportunity for the faithful to take part in the Church's mission to evangelize, and thus connect with others to show how they together understand and live the faith.

The field of social communication in this age of social media, when viewed in light of participatory digital culture, will truly be, in the words of Eilers, a "communication as leading to communion, and this communion is creating or documenting community."

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