A Figured World Study of the Online Faith Discourse of a Philippine Catholic Parish Facebook Page

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ABSTRACT

This sociolinguistic study examines the Facebook page of a Catholic parish in the Philippines as a figured world. The figured world framework is a way of viewing a particular locus of interaction as a product of social and cultural construction. This lens, which has been widely used to examine education contexts, is applied in this study to the novel context of online religious community interactions. By using the figured world approach to discourse analysis, this research extends the view of social media for religious purposes beyond its usual attractions of entertainment, self-documentation, and self-expression. This paper argues that Facebook, as a platform for the digital staging of Catholic parish life, is an important space for the discursive (re)construction of church purpose, participation, interaction, and identity, with potentially important implications to the Catholic Church's missiological trajectory.

Keywords: *Catholic parish community, Facebook, online religion, figured world, sociolinguistics*

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1. Introduction

Facebook (FB) is the most dominant social media platform globally, with the Philippines as among its top users in Asia as of 2022, next to India and Indonesia (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2023). While it is widely used and known as a site for self-expression and self-documentation, the religious practices, discourses, and ideologies constructed in this digital site are less explored (Lee 2018). Yet examining FB as a site for 'religion online' (informative use of technology to help promote a particular faith) and/or 'online religion' (interactive use of technology to enable online participation in religious activities) (Hadden and Cowan 2000) is important. This import is tied to connections between media technology use and evangelism, discipleship, and faith education (Dahle 2014, as cited in Lee 2018). This logic may explain the growing presence of Catholic communities online through official parish FB pages. This social media platform is particularly touted as an essential form of modern parish communication, being a cost-effective way to simultaneously attract current, lapsed, and new members (Parish Content 2020).

This sociolinguistic study explores FB as a virtual site for church discourse construction. Seen to reach modern-day churches, social media has been actively used by different faith groups to make the message of their religion more widely accessible (Hodøl 2021). The social significance of this practice was especially highlighted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when social media was more actively used by churches for religious expression and purpose, which has been collectively referred to as "digital religion" (Campbell 2013). Building on Hodøl's (2021) project, which examined the practices and purposes of social media use by Christian (mostly Lutheran) churches in Norway, this study explores the discourses constructed on FB by Catholic parishes in the Philippines.

1.1 The Philippines, Site of the Catholic Facebook Phenomenon

Reportedly the most Catholic nation in Asia with about 79 million believers (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023), the Philippines is an important site for this qualitative research. Besides being largely Catholic, the country is also among the highest users of social media globally, with 86.75 million Filipinos identified as active Facebook users in early 2024

(Barangas 2024). It is quite likely that many Filipino, active Catholics are themselves also active Facebook users.

In response to the growing Catholic presence in social media and the limited literature investigating this phenomenon in the Philippine context, this research aims to extend the sociolinguistic understanding of the emerging practice of online religion (Campbell 2004) by characterizing the practices, participants, and participation in the framework of Catholic parish FB pages. The findings have potential implications for extending epistemologies on the digital shaping of the Catholic faith in a Global South context and enhancing the online ministry of the Catholic Church in the country and, by extension, across the globe.

The current trend shows that social media is likely to continue playing "a major role in the church's communication platform" (Quinn 2015). This prediction was fast-tracked and intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which imposed health protocols that forced social interactions into virtual platforms. One effect is the increased social media presence of religious personalities (i.e., priests, missionaries, lay preachers) and practices, such as online Mass, which has quickly become the preferred mode of church attendance, even post-pandemic (McKeown 2023).

While Catholic online content is quickly proliferating, scholarship has been relatively slow to catch up. To date, much is yet to be understood about the patterns of social media use by religious groups (Lee 2018). As a Catholic sociolinguist, I wish to contribute to this conversation by examining what and how discourses of church and faith are constructed in social media. Using a semi-netnographic approach, this qualitative research offers some understanding of how church communication is evolving in the Philippine Catholic Church.

Netnography is the ethnographic approach to examining online cultures and communities as a social phenomenon. Kozinets (2015) recognized the method's potential to help achieve profound human understanding by analyzing social media data and experience. Focusing on unobtrusive data in the form of FB page posts and comments, the findings of this study can provide a framework for future research probing evangelization discourse in social media, their affordances and limitations, as well as possible effects on its audiences.

Anchored on the four principles of the figured world framework (characterizing the purposeful context, messages, roles, and identities in the

particular world), this qualitative project probes the distinct discourses, practices, and participation of church and faith that are deployed in a Philippine-based parish FB page. Specifically, it answers the following questions:

- What are the purposes for the creation of the parish FB page?
- What kinds of messages are communicated online?
- How do the interactants relate with each other online?
- What kinds of identities emerge from this digital space of interaction?

The answers to these questions can have theoretical value in the fields of linguistics, religious studies, and media communication. To help build this value, the article discusses first what is known so far about social media use for religious purposes and the gap where this study is situated. This is followed by a discussion of the figured world theory, which is used as analytical lens to view a parish FB page, as well as other methodological considerations. Finally, the findings present a full description of the figured religious world that is the Catholic parish FB page.

2. The Studied Relationship between Religion and Social Media

This research sits in the intersection of social media communication and religion. While this nexus is increasingly explored as a contemporary subject of empirical research, it has been recognized much earlier by the Catholic Church, as a matter of great import. In 1963, the Decree on the Media of Social Communications *Inter Mirifica*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, recognized that social media, "if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God." In the same breath, the document cautions against the great damage that misuse of social media communication can cause to both the individual and the collective. Following this exhortation, empirical studies largely situated in the developed countries of the Global North have examined more closely how social media is being used for religious purposes and its impact on the faith community.

Critical studies in this interdisciplinary area have largely focused on FB use in Christian churches in the Global North like Norway (Hodøl 2021;

Kimaru 2019), Finland (Kokkonen 2022), and the United States (Hegy 2023; Lee 2018). Despite the predominant use of FB for religious purposes in the Global South, comparable studies have been curiously limited in this context.

In terms of focus, social media studies in the church context have explored the potential of FB to help achieve evangelization goals like growth in church membership (Hodøl 2021). Its function of promoting non-religious agenda like political and social service initiatives has also been recognized (Lee 2018). In the Philippines, for example, the massive support of the community pantries project during the COVID-19 pandemic is partly attributed to the FB campaigns that inspired spirituality in action. In their brief introspective report of this occurrence, Galang and Galang (2021) likened FB to the Greek *agora,* a central, multipurpose, public space for various political, commercial, and religious activities. Yet for all these affordances, research acknowledges that the use of social media by religious groups is a "double-edged sword" with as much potential to help as well as harm the organization (Hackler and Saxton 2007, as cited in Lee 2018).

Besides examining the effect and functionality of social media for churches, related studies have also analyzed the types of messages posted online. Predominantly, churches focused on "tradition-centered messages" such as those informing and promoting events, devotions, and lifestyle aligned with the values of the church (Hodøl 2021; Kokkonen 2022). With these messages, the online presence of churches is seen as an extension of offline religion. It is also viewed as an exercise in impression management, a way for churches to "control the image they wish to project about themselves" (Kokkonen 2022, 11). This critical view compares FB use by religious groups to sales communication which achieves its goals of persuasion through brand management (Kokkonen 2022; Stolz and Usunier 2019). Some of the frameworks used in these critical social analyses include Goffman's (1990, as cited in Hodol 2021) concept of impression management and self-presentation, Khazanchi's (2005, as cited in Lee 2018) concept of 'fit' in contingency theory, and neoliberal theory (e.g., Laval 2017). Albeit varying in focus, these lenses foreground the power of secular forces, such as globalization and neoliberalism, to (re)shape religious practices and ideologies (e.g., Tenedero 2023).

To add to the growing conversation, this study offers a picture of online religious practice from a Global South vantage, that is, informed by the

experience of a Catholic community situated in an economically developing country, as opposed to developed nations in the Global North (Williams et al. 2014), which have been more vastly represented in existing literature. Another novelty of this study is the application of the Figured Worlds theory in religious social media studies.

3. The Lens of Figured Worlds

Proposed by Holland et al. (1998), figured worlds is a framework for analyzing how a particular site is constructed and in turn constructs discourse, social actors, practices, and ideologies. It characterizes a particular world based on four principles.

The first principle considers that the world being examined represents a specific time and place in history where participants situate themselves. The second principle considers that the world is a space where the position of participants shapes practices or ways of doing and seeing things. The third principle reckons that the said world is socially and culturally (re)produced and that part of this reproduction are the roles and relationships that are assigned to participants. Finally, the fourth principle highlights the world as a site where identities are (re)defined (Urrieta 2007).

Studies using this framework have mostly been in education. It has been used to help understand the discipline-shaped practices and identities of teachers in different fields (Chao and Kuntz 2013; Darragh and Franke 2023). This lens has also spotlighted the identity transitioning of preservice teachers from novice to full-fledged teachers (e.g., Varghese and Snyder 2018). The situatedness of these figured world studies in Global North settings presents an important opportunity to apply the theory in Global South contexts.

With religious groups engaging in some form of teaching or education through online presence (Kokkonen 2022), the figured world lens is also potentially relevant in this context. Adopting this way of understanding churches' social media use, I will argue that the FB page of Catholic parishes is a figured world where specific discourses are highlighted, distinct practices are created, and identities and relations are (re)defined,

simultaneously reflecting as well as extending identities and relationships realized in onsite Parish community life.

4. Selection and Analysis of a Catholic Parish FB Page

The data for this study are posts from the official FB page of the Presentation of the Child Jesus (PCJ) Parish in the Diocese of Parañaque, which is one of the younger parish groups in Manila, created on December 7, 2002 (Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila n.d.). Out of 52 parishes in the diocese (https://catholink.ph/paranaque/), only 13 parishes have no official FB page based on a manual search of each parish name in April 2023. That 75 percent of the parish communities have an official FB presence indicates that this form of online religion is an important trend that needs to be understood more as it represents a growing space where the Catholic faith is practiced. With 28,000 likes and 54,000 followers as of April 2023, the PCJ Parish FB page appears to be the most active official parish FB page in the diocese, hence, a good representative sample.

To capture a variety of interactions in the PCJ Parish FB page across an entire year, four week-long posts in 2023 were purposefully chosen:

- Holy Week (April 2 – 9, 2023);
- 17th Week in Ordinary time (July 30 – Aug 5, 2023);
- A week following a natural disaster (December 5 – 11, 2023);
- Christmas week (December 25 – 31, 2023).

Holy Week and Christmas week were selected as they represent significant times in the Church calendar, which gathers and engages more Catholics in church than at any other time of the year (Esmaquel 2023) These extraordinary times of church engagement are then balanced with the inclusion of data from a week in Ordinary time, which represents the longest period in the Church calendar with 33 or 34 weeks. The 17th week represents the mid-year point. Another week in the Church calendar was chosen based on its proximity to a natural disaster that could potentially prompt particular interactions, such as solicitation of donations and prayers for the victims. For this study, the magnitude 5.9 earthquake in Manila on December 5, 2023 was chosen as reference point.

Out of the posts during the purposefully chosen weeks, only those with more than 20 comments were retained in the data set since comments are the basis for the interpretation of engagement. To collect the posts and comments, individual screenshots of the posts were tabulated alongside the most relevant comments for each post (adopted from Mancosu and Vegetti 2020). This yielded a final dataset of 89 posts and 547 comments.

Since the FB pages to be reviewed are publicly available, the study was exempted from a full ethics review (e.g., Kokkonen 2022). Still, the author set in place protocols to ensure that the data is used responsibly for the sole purpose of the current project. This includes removing the names of the members whose comments were included in the analysis. Any names or locations mentioned in the comments excerpted in this paper were replaced with generic references such as [name] and [place]. Faces of parishioners in the images were also blurred.

The posts were then categorized and inductively coded using the purposes of social media posts proposed by Tro and Medier (Sovik 2018, as cited in Hodøl 2021): information, inspiration, and invitation. Besides posts, audience engagement in the form of comments were considered in qualitatively analyzing the interactions, identities, and practices performed online. The comments were analyzed using as initial categories: complimentary comment and affirmations of faith (Hegy 2023). In examining the online interactions, the inductive analysis was also guided by the characteristics of participatory culture of social media identified by Jenkins (2009, as cited in Lee 2018):

- Relatively low barriers to artistic engagement and civic engagement;
- Strong support for creating and sharing creations;
- Informal mentorship of novice members;
- Valuing of contributions;
- Sense of social connection with other members.

To safeguard the validity of the qualitative interpretation, the analysis was also done deductively, allowing themes and categories to emerge from the data. Combining top-to-bottom and bottom-up approaches in thematic analysis helps ensure the comprehensiveness of interpretation. To further ascertain the quality of interpretation, two domain experts were invited to participate in peer debriefing (Spall 1998). An experienced social media researcher and a religious leader involved in social media parish activity were

invited to analyze the FB posts and comments based on the figured worlds framework. Their interpretation of 27 randomly selected posts and 217 comments (representing 43 percent of the complete dataset) was incorporated in the final analysis to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the parish FB page as a figured world.

5. The Parish Facebook Page: A Figured World of Online Religion

In this section, I discuss the findings of the analysis anchored on the four principles of the figured worlds framework (Holland et al. 1998) as applied in the context of the PCJ Parish FB page.

5.1 What Is the Purpose for the Creation of the Parish FB Page?

The first aspect of a figured world relates to the purpose for its emergence as a distinct setting at a given time in history. Focusing on these aspects, it was noted that the PCJ FB page was created in early 2016. The description of the FB page (in 'Post' > 'Intro'), which generically defines the space as the "official page" of the parish, also indicates (in 'About' > 'Page transparency') that there are multiple administrators or people who have privileged access to control what content is posted on or removed from the digital space of interaction.

As to why this online space was created, the posts examined offer some understanding. Analyzed in terms of the purposes that they serve, the 89 posts predominantly serve five interrelated purposes, which are all tied to the priority of building a community anchored on a shared religious identity. These purposes and descriptions of posts are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Purposes of Parish Facebook Posts

Purpose	Description of posts
To inform	Posts that give updates about upcoming parish activities
To inspire	Posts that feature quotes from saints and church authorities
To invite	Posts that livestream Mass and devotional prayers done in the church

To include	Posts that include references to the parish as a family or as home
To inspirit	Posts that express appreciation for the life, service, and achievements of priests and active members of the church

5.1.1. Post that informs (post 1)

Informing, inspiring, and inviting have been identified as typical goals of religious communication as observed and prescribed by the Norwegian Interdenominational Center for Faith and Media (Søvik 2018). Informative posts provide details about activities of the church and other advisories that may be valuable to members. The information shared could be practical (e.g., advisory on health protocols), religious (e.g., explaining the purpose of a religious gathering), or relational (e.g., asking prayers for an active parishioner who died). Besides texts, information is also shared through pictures that document onsite parish activities. A sample is shown below.
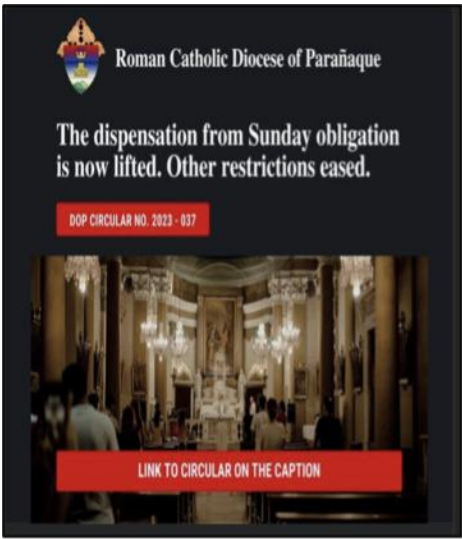
5.1.2. Post that inspires (post 2)

Inspirational posts, on the other hand, target the heart. These posts encourage followers or viewers to persevere in developing virtues of the faith through exhortations and stories from recognized authority figures of the

church. Religious inspiration takes the form of quotes from religious leaders or saints, that is, people whose lives serve as models of holiness. These kinds of posts invite followers and viewers to engage in personal contemplation of a religious message. An example is shown below.

5.1.3. Post that invites (post 3)

Meanwhile, invitational posts give a call to action. Done either explicitly or implicitly, these posts show followers and viewers that they are welcome to join church activities. They also encourage more involvement in community events and relationships, particularly through onsite engagement.

5.1.4. Post that informs, inspires, invites, and includes (post 4)

While directed toward distinctive ends, these three goals are interrelated and tend to co-occur in some posts. For instance, posts that livestream Masses simultaneously inform, inspire, and invite FB page followers. Livestreamed onsite church activities (see example below) also achieve a fourth purpose—making more people feel included, particularly those who are homebound. This includes those who wish to participate in religious activities of the community but are unable to (or choose not to) physically go to the parish church for various reasons. By making onsite church experiences available online, the parish FB page serves as a space where members, who are limited to or prefer online involvement, do not miss out on the communal rituals. These active or mobile posts, which comprised more than half of the dataset (50 out of 89 posts), help build the image of the parish as an inclusive space characterized by a virtual continuity with the physical space for communal prayer. Inclusive posts cultivate the idea that the parish is a space that welcomes and that is open to broader membership, thereby enlarging the notion of the parish community.

5.1.5. Post that inspirits (post 5)

Besides making members feel welcome, FB posts also inspirit or rouse the spirit of members by showing appreciation to specific individuals or groups that serve a specific function in the community. Inspiriting posts highlight specific members of the parish, who take on important roles as leaders who serve. See sample post below.
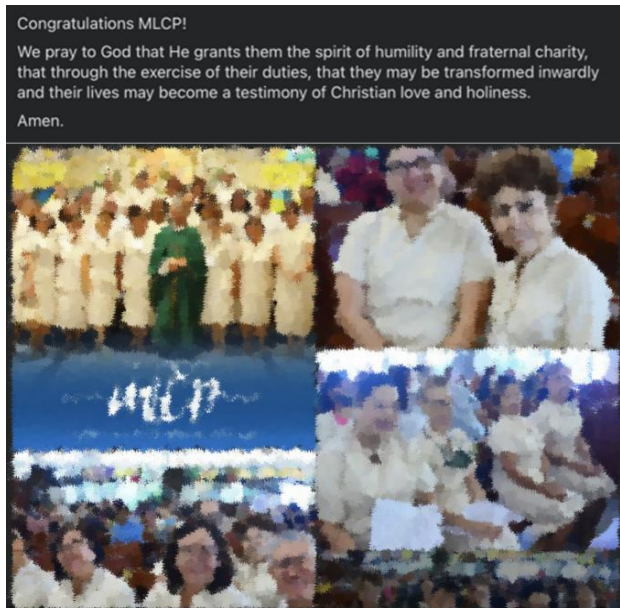
Overall, the posts in the parish FB page help create a positive image of the parish community – one that has order, that inspires its members, that is welcoming, that is inclusive and accessible, and that appreciates its members. As indicated by the different posts, the FB page contributes to the Church's evangelical goal to increase membership (Hodøl 2021). This digital approach to promote parish life is an important strategy to reach out to members who have become used to purely online engagement with the church during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. By showing them posts that feature onsite parish activities, the FB page serves as an important device to reel them back to the physical church. Yet, at the same time, by making available online important church activities, the FB page could (unintentionally) promote the more comfortable option of a purely online membership. Whether the audience of the FB page chooses to engage with the church physically or digitally is also possibly influenced by the discourse co-created in the social media platform.

5.2 What Kinds of Messages are Communicated Online?

The second aspect of a figured world examines the messages or discourses that characterize the interactions in the given space. In the PCJ FB page, messages are exchanged through posts (by admin) and comments (by followers). Table 2 summarizes the general themes of the messages exchanged online.

Table 2. Discourses in the Parish Facebook Page

Discourse	Created in Posts	Created in Comments
We ritually celebrate our faith as a parish.	P	P
Christ is the center of our faith.	P	P
The parish is our common home. We are family.	P	P
We pray for each other.	P	P
We value priests.	P	P
We keep our traditions.	P	P
We learn from holy men and women.	P	P
Join us wherever you are.	P	P

Join us onsite.	P	P
I am alone. I need help.		P
The church is not doing the right thing.		P

5.2.1. Discourse of solidarity (post 6)

The discourses gleaned from the parish FB page are differentially constructed. Most messages are amplified in both posts and comments; others are more dominantly created by FB page administrators; still others are contributed by FB page followers with differential levels of involvement in parish life. The messages conveyed collectively construct the identity of the parish community as a common home or as a family on the bases of its practices (i.e., rituals, traditions, praying, coming together) and its members (i.e., Christ, priests, holy men and women, parishioners). While less popular discourses are found in the dataset, such as cry for help and criticism, the permeating theme is one of solidarity. This is particularly salient when posts and comments echo the same message, as shown below.

Comment 1: Good morning everyone.

Comment 2:Have mercy on me & my family, Oh! Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Comment 3: Reading from the Book of Genesis

Thanks be to God 🙏

Sing to the Lord a new song for he has done marvelous deeds

Comment 4: Thanksgiving prayer for guidance, blessings, wisdom, safety, protection and healing of [Person A], [Person B]...[Person J] and me and all other members of my whole family n friends in Jesus name. Amen.

Post 6 shows a screenshot of the livestreamed Mass on December 8, commemorating the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This feast is recognized as a holy day of obligation, a day when Catholics are obliged to go to Mass to celebrate an important event. On this day, Catholics remember that Mary was especially chosen to be the mother of God, Jesus Christ, and so was given the special grace to be conceived without the stain of sin (Britsch 2023).

This ritualized tradition is shown support and appreciation in comments where the parishioners politely greet each other, acknowledging the presence of others in the observance of this liturgical practice (Comment 1). Some comments directly address the Blessed Virgin Mary, suggesting a relationship between a person in heaven and those on earth (Comment 2). Other comments echo excerpts from the formal script followed in the observance of the Holy Mass (Comment 3). By citing segments of the liturgical script, online participants demonstrate their familiarity with the ritual and their synchronous, online observance of the Mass. Finally, another type of comment makes prayer requests, even specifying names of people and intentions for each one (Comment 4). This practice of greeting, praying, and asking for prayers demonstrate a rapport and relationship anchored on shared religious beliefs and identity.

5.2.2. Discourse of onsite participation (post 7)

On the other hand, one discourse that appears to be constructed more strongly by the FB administrators than supported by FB followers is the exhortation to join parish activities onsite. However limited, this is illustrated in the post and comments below.
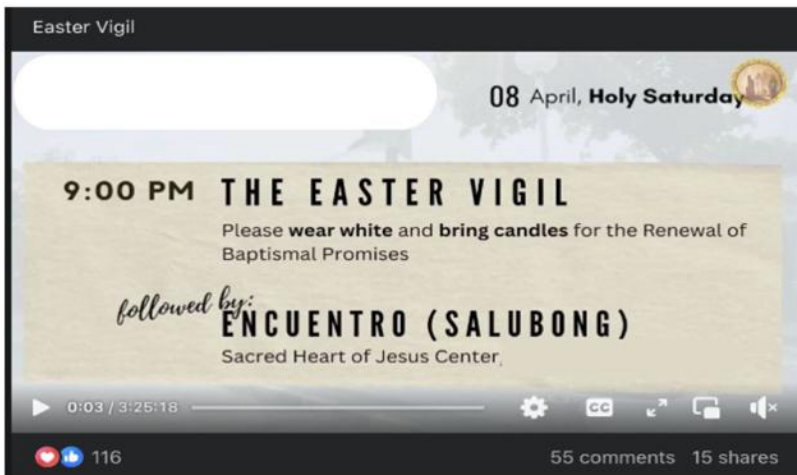
Comment 5: Gud am po. Meron po ba mass ng anticipated 6pm april 8, 2023 salamat po

[Good morning. Is there anticipated Mass at 6pm on April 8, 2023? Thank you.]

All white po ba? Or pwede po ba ang any kind of color pang baba specially sa girl.

[Should it be all white? Or could we wear any color for bottom clothing especially for girls]

Post 7 shows a screenshot of the announcement about the upcoming parish Easter Vigil celebration. The post informs parishioners about the time, venue, and dress code for this important liturgical celebration, which culminates the Holy Week observances. Comments show parishioners asking further clarification about the schedule and dress rules (Comment 5), signifying the intention to participate onsite and to demonstrate solidarity with the community's practice.

5.2.3. Discourse of challenge

While there is a general sense of oneness and participation in the posted and commented messages, two outlier comments introduce distinctive discourses.

> *Comment 6 – Cry for help*
> *I lost my gall bladder today. Nobody cares to pray for me. My stomach is all busted up. Deaf & poor.*
> *Comment 7 – Criticism*
> *Isa 2:8, Mich 5:13, Isa 45:20, 1cori 10:14, catholic churches rejects God Jesus Moses.*

Comment 6 was a response to two posts anticipating the celebration of Easter Sunday. It stood out in the comment set where majority were greeting other parishioners, addressing prayers to God, and echoing lines from the Mass. While it may be seen as a negative framing of a prayer request, the comment highlights a neediness ('nobody cares') that challenges the notion of solidarity and inclusivity emphasized in majority of the posts and comments.

Another, different kind of challenge is put forth by Comment 7. Examining the four Bible verses quoted shows a common reference to idolatry or the practice of worshipping images other than God Himself, which is a violation of the first commandment of God (Exodus 20:3). It is curious that this faith-informed, Bible-supported claim was a comment to a post congratulating and warmly greeting the priests of the parish after the Chrism Mass. This Holy Thursday religious observance is jointly celebrated by the bishop and the priests of the diocese in the cathedral, where they bless the holy oils used for the sacraments. In celebration of their priestly ministry, Catholics in the Philippines typically consider this day 'Priests' Day' and show appreciation for priests, for example, by giving them flowers after the Chrism Mass or by posting affirmations on the parish FB page. The comment clearly goes against the tide of admiration and appreciation for priests, which forms a dominant discourse in this online space.

While limited and seemingly random, the atypical message expressed by Comments 6 and 7 represent alternative discourses that challenge the construction of the parish community as a space that is welcoming to all and that is in right standing with the teachings of the Bible, the sacred book of the Catholic faith. It is even more interesting to note that these outlier comments, which were found during the first data collection, appear to have been removed when the posts were revisited. The removal of these comments demonstrates the power of certain characters or participants (i.e.,

FB page administrators) to moderate or audit the discourse in this figured world.

5.3. How Do the Participants Relate with Each Other Online?

The third aspect of a figured world focuses on the participants, the roles they take in this socially organized space, and the way they relate with each other. In terms of role-based participation, there are two cohorts in general that can be easily identified – those authorized to control the parish FB page and those who follow the page. For simplicity, we refer to them as the admin (short for 'administrator,' referring to those who run the FB page) and the followers. In the PCJ FB page, the 'About' description of the page simply indicates that, "This Page can have multiple admins. They may have permission to post content, comment or send messages…." Meanwhile, at the time of the data collection, it had 54,000 followers, the biggest follow-ership compared with the official FB pages of other diocesan parishes. How these participants relate with each other in this digital, religious space can be characterized largely by *banal positivity, solidarity*, and *fluidity*.

Banal positivity is a way to describe the predominantly positive, uplift-ing, and joy-inspiring messages that permeate the parish FB page. This messaging is repeatedly demonstrated in comments that affirm the shared faith (i.e., Amen!) and dispense compliments, as shown in the excerpts below.

> *Comment 8: Thank God for the beautiful and unique Belen!!!*
>
> *Comment 9: Thank you Lord for the successful activity yesterday. We give you back the glory.*
>
> *Comment 10: Congratulations Fr. [A] and welcome to our parish. Happy birthday po!*

Comments 8, 9, and 10 are compliments variably directed to the post itself (e.g., picture of the Nativity scene set up in the parish church), to God, and to members of the parish (e.g., new parish priest). Regardless of ad-dressee, messages of gratitude, warm welcome, celebration of life milestones, among others, generate positive feelings that make parish membership desirable and pleasant. The desire to preserve this positivity

could be the very reason for the removal of the negative discourse expressed in Comments 6 and 7.

Another characteristic of the interactions in the parish FB page is ***solidarity*** or the notion of oneness. This is strongly communicated through the dominant use of 'us', 'we', 'our' (compared to 'I' and 'my') in comments, and the use of the comment section as a kind of bulletin board for personal life updates (e.g., "my nephew is going to be a seaman," "my husband is sick," "[A] is excelling in school," "[B] and [C] want to have a child"). Consider the sample comments below, which demonstrate concern and familiarity among members.

> *Comment 11: Good morning Lord. Thank You Lord for all the blessings. We love You Lord* 😘 ❤️ 🙏
>
> *Please continue to guide and protect us oh Lord* 😘 ❤️ 🙏
>
> *Comment 12: Mama Mary, pray for my daughter [Full Name] for the miracle result of her CT scan this week. Have mercy to my family especially on their illness. Heal them O Lord. Amen.*

It is notably common for participants to refer to each other using family terms, like bro (short for 'brother') and Tita (Tagalog for 'auntie'), even if they are not related by blood. References to the parish as a family or as a home are also included in some posts, further strengthening the idea that the parish community is a relational membership valued as family ties.

Finally, interactions are also marked by ***fluidity***. This is reflected in different ways, through language code, speech style, location, and addressee. First, linguistically, comments on the parish FB page are variably coded either in English or Tagalog. One comment was in Korean script: "성마티아가정성베드로가정봉헌합니다," Google translated into English as: "The Family of St. Matthias and the Family of St. Peter are dedicated." Besides multilingualism, fluidity is also evident in the speech style used by members to interact online. Table 3 shows samples of comments that demonstrate the different speech styles according to Martin Joos (1962) which varies based on the interlocutors' degree of social intimacy, ranging from highly detached to intimately close.

Table 3 Speech Styles of Parish FB Page Comments

Speech style - Description (Joos, 1962)	Sample comment
Frozen – fixed and ritualistic speech, often in the context of religious ceremonies	Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.
Formal – straightforward message of a speaker with authority using formal vocabulary	Peace and blessings to all!
Consultative – a question-and-answer exchange between an inquirer and an expert	Ano po sched? [What is the schedule?] *Good day. The next schedule will be on August 19. Thank you.*
Casual – friendly style of speech, marked by use of informal language	Thank you for sharing, Southies!
Intimate – speech used with very close relations, characterized by the use of endearments	Happy Birthday Padong!

Besides using different speech styles signalling variations in social closeness, participants also perform flexibility by disclosing their remote location (e.g., "Love from Lagos Nigeria"), thereby highlighting the affordance of social media, which enables participation anywhere, any time. Yet another way that fluidity is reflected in the parish FB page is through the addressing of messages to different participants, ranging from divine personas (e.g., "Good morning po Mother Mary, St. Joseph, and Child Jesus") to other fellow human participants, alive (e.g., "Good morning to all the people of God") or dead (e.g., "Rest in peace bro"). The sample comment directed to an absentee member (a parish worker who passed away) demonstrates a relationship that transcends earthly life, which affirms the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints. Pope Francis explained this doctrine as a spiritual solidarity that "holds together the community of believers on earth and in heaven"; not even death can sever this unity (Watkins 2022).

Overall, the ways of relating in the parish FB page are defined by banal positivity, solidarity, and fluidity. These practices reflect the social presence

theory by Short et al. (1976) that highlighted how telecommunication platforms variably enable intimacy, immediacy, social context, communication medium, and interpersonal involvement. These relationships are shaped by and also shape, in turn, the identities that emerge from this digital social site.

5.4 What Kinds of Identities Emerge from This Digital Space of Interaction?

The final aspect of a figured world pertains to the identities that emerge in it. As a digital space of interaction, the parish FB page is seen as attracting three cohorts: (1) active members, (2) those seeking to be active in the group, and (3) those who challenge the legitimacy of the group. These identities may also be described as insider, peripheral (i.e., semi-insider-semi-outsider), and outsider personas, aligning with the insider-outsider theory on social media by Holur et al. (2022).

The insiders are marked by their familiarity with the ritual scripts and other practical knowledge, such as dress code and calendar of gatherings. Onsite, they are also legitimized by the roles assigned to them and which they perform in face-to-face community gatherings. This includes, for example, the parish priest, choir members, and lectors. Online, they may be assigned as a FB page 'admin' or tagged as a 'top fan' because of their active engagement with posts on the page. Meanwhile, the peripheral members show some awareness of what the group does (e.g., offering prayers) and signals a desire to be included albeit couched negatively (e.g., "If anyone cares…."). Finally, the outsiders are indexed by unusual comments that appear to question, even challenge, the authority of the insiders. This is captured in the singular comment that makes a bold claim, "The church has rejected God." This negative comment, which responds to a post showing appreciation for priests, goes on to cite three passages in the Bible criticizing the worship of idols (Comment 7). The juxtaposition of the claim and related sections in sacred scripture suggests the accusation that priests are being treated as idols, which is a sin against God. On the other hand, this outlier message is dismissed by the priest-intercoder as possibly from a 'troll' or a person who deliberately leaves provocative messages in online spaces to create discord. If this is the case, then the recommendation is to simply ignore or (as was actually done by the FB page admin) delete the comment.

Overall, the identities emerging from this online religious space may be described in reference to their degree of activeness in community activities both onsite and online, as well as their roles in the community life. Characters with titled roles (e.g., parish priest, lector, choir member) tend to be more active onsite and, in some cases, also online, as FB page admin or active followers. Meanwhile, those without titled roles tend to assume a more peripheral, even an outsider position, where they may opt to be involved in (or be critical of) parish life.

6. Conclusion

This study has taken a brief excursion into the parish FB page as a figured world, offering some understanding and appreciation of the social communication dynamics of parish life online.

In terms of purposes, the FB page appears to be largely pre-occupied with evangelical goals of informing, inspiring, and inviting members to join the parish community life either onsite or online. In addition to these "tradition-centered" priorities, which were also noted in social media practices of European Christian churches (Hodøl 2021; Kokkonen 2022), the inclusion of livestreamed Masses and devotional prayers, as well as appreciation posts for priests and active parishioners, can also be linked to the church goals of inclusivity and inspiritment. These identified purposes collectively support the notion of the Catholic church as universal.

In terms of messages exchanged online, the dominant discourses that are jointly constructed through posts and comments emphasize the Catholic church's valuing of formal tradition and rituals centered in Jesus Christ, deference to authority, appreciation of members, promotion of high virtues, and priority to welcome everyone. While majority of the posts appear to encourage onsite participation (through information, photos, and explicit invitations), there are notably less comments supporting this idea. Other distinctive comments show evidence of alternative discourses that challenge the markedly positive image of the parish community. By disclosing an unmet need (of care for a member who is unwell) and the critical view of the deference shown to priests as a form of idolatry, these comments—albeit already removed from the page—demonstrate how the parish FB page can be constructed as a site for resistance. While potentially

causing discomfort among devoted members of the church, such censored participation reflects more realistically the true nature of community life, which is typically fraught with tensions, conflicting views, and varying opinions.

In terms of interactions and identities, the participants cooperate to create and maintain banal positivity, to express a strong sense of solidarity among members, and to flexibly accommodate different languages, speech styles, locations, and relationships. By supporting these ways of relating online, the parish FB page makes community membership an attractive prospect. This may explain the FB page attraction of active, as well as peripheral members, who show some interest in parish involvement, albeit selectively. For example, they may be content to simply have someone pray for their health concerns without necessarily attending communal prayer gatherings. Finally, even outsiders are seen to leave a digital footprint in this site. Although limited and censored, their contribution highlights the participatory nature of social media which tends to minimize barriers to engagement unless censored by administrators, who have power to police undesirable comments on the page.

In summary, the parish FB page in the Philippines may also be characterized as an extension of offline (or onsite) religious, community life. Like parish church life, there are exercises in impression management to ensure that the community image is polished and positive. Yet, followers or visitors of the parish FB page may also see and experience parish life differently—perhaps more wholistically—than a casual visitor in the parish church, who may be selectively exposed to different aspects of the parish life depending on their degree and frequency of involvement. The nature of the digital space allows characters in this world to experience different facets of a religion-based community life asynchronously, enabling them to see a bigger picture of the parish as a site where rituals and tradition centered on faith are highly valued, where priests are warmly appreciated, where all interested members are welcomed, wherever they may be, whatever language and manner of speech they choose, and whichever relationship they may be interested to build in the community. The broadness of the parish FB page's appeal somehow reflects the strategy described by St. Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 9: 22-23: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Taking inspiration from this celebrated patron of missionaries and evangelists, parishes may consider creating or evaluating their social media presence, particularly through Facebook, based on how inclusive and flexible it is to grow not only in terms of quantity of members but also, and more importantly, in terms of quality of relationship. As an example of what parish life looks like on Facebook, this study invites a deeper investigation of related online practices of the Catholic faith, including the continued practice of online Masses and the rise of 'celebrity priests.' Critically examining these practices through quantitative or mixed methods approach may help further deepen our understanding of their implications to the growth (or decline) of the Catholic faith as an individual conviction of believers and as a communal experience of the Church.

Statements and Declarations

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