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"Champa Children" by Thang Duc Nguyen

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

Media and Religion & Spirituality in Asia

In today's media-saturated world, religious experience is increasingly mediated through screens, networks, and algorithms. From theological discourse to ritual performance, from community formation to ethical responsibility, digital media has become a key space where religion is lived, contested, and reimagined. This phenomenon is particularly dynamic in Asia, a region that presents a uniquely complex and fertile ground for studying media and religion. As the birthplace of major world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, and Taoism, among others—Asia is also home to vibrant indigenous traditions and rapidly growing religious movements. These traditions intersect with one of the world's fastest-growing digital populations, where the expansion of mobile technologies, social media, and streaming platforms has profoundly transformed how religious narratives are shared, interpreted, and embodied. Whether in megacities or rural areas, digital connectivity is reshaping devotional practices, spiritual authority, and modes of belonging in ways that are distinctively Asian yet globally resonant. Many of these movements use digital media to spread their message, often challenging traditional religious institutions that perceive them as heretical and as serious threats to their authority or established order. This present issue of *Religion and Social Communication* explores this multifaceted and dynamic interplay between media, religion, and spirituality in Asia, where ancient traditions meet rapid digital transformation.

The opening article, "Anime's Ethical Odyssey: Navigating Good and Evil in Anime through the Lens of the Old Testament" by **Sam T. Rajkumar**, sets the tone for this issue by drawing an intriguing parallel between biblical ethics and the moral universes constructed in Japanese anime. Through series like *Death Note* and *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, Rajkumar uncovers how ancient spiritual themes—justice, sin, redemption—resonate within modern secular media, suggesting a transcultural dialogue between scripture and storytelling.

Rico Casta Jacoba's "Re-envisioning Dulles' Ecclesiological Models for the Digital Age" responds to the Church's encounter with digital culture. By proposing an "Interactive Community of Disciples," Jacoba invites us to rethink ecclesial life in digital spaces, integrating participatory and

decentralized modes of faith practice. This article contributes to the growing field of digital theology and challenges religious institutions to adapt without losing their theological moorings.

Ethical engagement in digital media is further explored in **Leonel B. Ballesta's** article on Confucian virtues and social media. Using the Confucian principle of *Ren*, Ballesta offers a philosophical framework for responsible media practices in interfaith contexts. His work calls attention to the relevance of age-old wisdom in Asian moral traditions in confronting contemporary issues such as online harassment and misinformation.

The theme of media's role in religious leadership and communication continues in **Yoel Cohen's** study of rabbis in Israel and their use of public relations and advertising. By surveying rabbinic attitudes toward media engagement, Cohen sheds light on the tensions between tradition and outreach, particularly among different streams of Judaism, and points to the strategic (if uneven) use of media to connect with secular and religious audiences alike.

In "An Ecosystemic Approach to Digital Christianity," **Wayne Choong** presents an ethnographic study of Pentecostal youth in Singapore, analyzing how digitalization transforms religious identity and community. His innovative ecosystemic framework reveals the intricate ways online and offline experiences of faith are interwoven, offering a model for understanding digital religion in Southeast Asia.

This focus on localized religious practice in digital contexts is also central to **Pia Patricia P. Tenedero's** sociolinguistic study of a Catholic parish Facebook page in the Philippines. Using the concept of the "figured world," Tenedero explores how online discourse shapes parish identity, participation, and mission. Her work highlights how digital platforms become spaces for reconstructing ecclesial purpose and belonging.

Also addressing digital media's broader societal impact, **Annapurna Sharma** and **Mahesh Kumar Meena's** "Understanding News Avoidance in Social Media" presents a systematic literature review of 23 studies, highlighting the growing trend of news avoidance—especially post-COVID-19. Key themes include the psychological and structural causes of news avoidance, its ties to social media and news overload, and the potential of trust-building, news curation, and constructive journalism as remedies. This study contributes to understanding a critical challenge in today's digital information environment.

Richmon Rey B. Jundis turns to papal teachings in "Understanding Pope Francis' Framing of Technology," comparing *Laudato Si'* and

Fratelli Tutti with Shannon Vallor's Technomoral Virtues. Through content and framing analysis, Jundis examines how Pope Francis promotes a morally grounded digital culture, advocating for discernment, ethical engagement, and social responsibility amidst rapid technological change.

Kasmir Nema and **Andrea May C. Malonzo** address user experience in "Understanding Media Consumption... on the Radio Veritas Asia Website." Their cross-regional study in South and Southeast Asia provides empirical data on online religious media preferences, reaffirming the enduring relevance of Catholic content in digital form. Despite digital diversity, textual content remains highly valued, reflecting a nuanced picture of media satisfaction among Asian audiences.

In a striking ethnographic contribution, **Isabel Weitschies** investigates Mother Goddesses worship (*Đạo Mẫu*) in Vietnam, showing how social media platforms have become vital spaces for spiritual expression, community building, and ritual innovation. Her article reveals the generational shift in mediumship practices, as digital technologies empower a once-marginalized tradition to flourish and evolve in the public sphere.

Finally, **Wesley Kim D. Soguilon** offers a theologically grounded response to a pressing social problem in the Philippines—misinformation. Drawing on Catholic social teaching and Thomistic ethics, his article proposes "charitable instruction" as both a spiritual obligation and a civic responsibility. Soguilon calls for grassroots educational initiatives that equip Catholics to engage ethically and truthfully on digital platforms.

Together, these articles demonstrate the breadth of religious and media engagement across Asia. They reveal how religious communities are not only adapting to media technologies but also reshaping them according to their spiritual traditions, ethical frameworks, and cultural narratives. As scholars, practitioners, and believers navigate the promises and perils of digital life, this issue contributes timely reflections on how religion and media co-evolve in an increasingly interconnected world—offering both caution and hope for the future of faith in the digital age.

Anthony Le Duc, SVD
Chief Editor

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Anime's Ethical Odyssey: Navigating Good and Evil in Anime through the Lens of Old Testament

Sam T. Rajkumar[1]

ABSTRACT

Anime's Ethical Odyssey reveals how anime, as a medium of storytelling, often explores profound ethical dilemmas that resonate with themes found in ancient texts, particularly the Old Testament. This exploration seeks to understand how anime narratives engage with morality, justice, redemption, and the consequences of human actions, drawing upon both modern philosophical discourse and biblical ethics. The Old Testament presents a rich tapestry of moral challenges, from divine justice in the stories of Job and Noah to human fallibility in the lives of David and Saul. Similarly, anime constructs complex moral universes where protagonists grapple with difficult choices, blurring the lines between heroism and villainy.

Scholars such as François Flahault, Nishida Kitarō, and Luke Russell provide varied interpretations of good and evil, further illuminating this discourse. Their perspectives contribute to the broader discussion on how morality is shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Through series like Death Note, Code Geass, and Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood, we witness ethical struggles that mirror biblical dilemmas questions of power, justice, and the

[1] ***Sam T Rajkumar*** is an ordained minister of the Anglican Church. He has completed a Master's degree in Biblical Studies (Old Testament) at United Theological College, Bangalore. Sam has penned three books: *Resounding Faith*: *Embracing Modern Music in Children's Ministry* (theology), *Anime Parables* (Daily Devotional) and *Sounding Praise: Music in the Bible* (Biblical Studies).

cost of righteousness. Light Yagami's descent into moral ambiguity, Lelouch's revolutionary ideals, and the Elric brothers' pursuit of truth all reflect ethical concerns deeply rooted in religious traditions.

By juxtaposing anime's contemporary storytelling with the Old Testament's moral foundations, we uncover a space for reflection that transcends entertainment. This dialogue between past and present, East and West, highlights how narratives continue to shape our understanding of justice, sin, and redemption in an ever-evolving world.

Keywords: *Anime, ethical reflections, Old Testament, Good and evil, Biblical parallels, contemporary storytelling*

1. Introduction

Anime's Ethical Odyssey begins with the observation that anime, with its rich storytelling and multifaceted character arcs, presents a compelling lens through which to examine the complexities of morality. Originating in Japan, anime encompasses a diverse range of genres from action and fantasy to psychological thriller and science fiction, each offering unique insights into human nature and ethical conflict. Known for its stylistic artistry and narrative depth, anime has transcended cultural boundaries to become a global phenomenon, influencing audiences across continents and engaging viewers in profound philosophical and emotional experiences.

Unlike simplistic portrayals of good versus evil, anime narratives often blur the boundaries between righteousness and corruption, challenging viewers to question their preconceived notions of justice, power, and human nature. When analyzed through the ethical framework of the Old Testament, this exploration takes on a deeper significance, drawing connections between ancient moral principles and modern storytelling.

The Old Testament is replete with narratives that grapple with the nature of good and evil—stories of divine justice, human frailty, and redemption. Figures like Moses, Job, and King David navigate ethical dilemmas that test their faith, power, and integrity, mirroring the struggles faced by anime protagonists. In Death Note, Light Yagami's pursuit of

justice quickly devolves into a dangerous obsession, echoing biblical warnings against hubris and the corruption of power. Code Geass presents a protagonist, Lelouch, whose revolutionary ambitions force him to make morally ambiguous choices, reminiscent of the ethical dilemmas faced by leaders in the Old Testament. Similarly, Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood explores the consequences of human ambition and the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, drawing parallels with biblical themes such as the Fall of Man and the dangers of overstepping divine boundaries.

By engaging with these narratives, we recognize anime as more than entertainment. It becomes a philosophical and ethical discourse that resonates across cultures and epochs. This dynamic intersection of ancient wisdom and modern storytelling fosters a deeper understanding of the universal human struggle to define justice, morality, and redemption.

2. Rethinking Good and Evil

The dichotomy between good and evil has long been a pervasive concept woven into the fabric of religious, ethical, philosophical, and psychological discourse. This dualistic framework often posits a stark opposition, where the triumph of good over evil is the desired outcome. However, scholars have provided diverse interpretations that challenge and complicate this dichotomy.

François Flahault, a literary theorist, and Nishida Kitarō, a Kyoto School philosopher and psychoanalyst, embark on a journey to disrupt the conventional boundaries of good and evil, aiming to emancipate subjectivity from rigid categorizations.[2] Their divergent perspectives emerge particularly in their attempts to link subjectivity with the unfolding processes of social history. In doing so, they hint at the potential for crafting a universal conception of the common good, paradoxically entwined with subjective interiority. In a contrasting viewpoint, Luke Russell contributes to the discourse by advocating for the existence of evil and articulating a secular

[2] Dennis Stromback, "A Dialogue on the Good and Evil Bivalence in the Study of Ethics: On François Flahault and Nishida Kitarō," *Journal of World Philosophies* 7, no. 1 (2022): 29-42.

understanding of it.[3] Russell contends that evil actions should not be reduced to mere opposites of good actions; instead, he posits them as a distinct subset encompassing extreme moral wrongs. By constructing a more nuanced framework, he endeavours to provide a clear and usable secular conception of evil within philosophical theorizing.

These scholarly dialogues underscore that the dichotomy of good and evil is not a simplistic binary; rather, it unfolds as a complex interplay shaped by moral, philosophical, and societal factors. Importantly, these interpretations remain subject to variations rooted in cultural, religious, and individual perspectives, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this fundamental human inquiry.

Many anime series and films delve into complex characterizations and moral landscapes, contributing to a nuanced understanding of morality. Anime frequently features characters with nuanced moralities, blurring the lines between good and evil. Protagonists from anime may grapple with questionable actions, and antagonists might have understandable motivations for their choices.[4] This complexity invites viewers to question traditional dichotomies.

Some anime, especially those with psychological and philosophical themes (ex. *Neon Genesis Evangelion*), delve into the subjectivity of characters and the fluidity of morality.[5] This exploration aligns with Flahault and Nishida's ideas of emancipating subjectivity from rigid categorizations, as characters navigate moral dilemmas based on their unique perspectives.

Anime often incorporates cultural and religious influences, presenting diverse perspectives on morality.[6] Themes of honour, duty, and morality are portrayed differently across genres and series, reflecting the cultural and individual variations in the perception of good and evil. Certain anime challenges the simplistic binary of good versus evil by introducing morally grey

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[3] Luke Russell, "Good and Evil in Recent Discussion Defending the Concept of Evil," *ZEMO* 5 (2022): 77-82.

[4] The protagonist, Light Yagami, starts with good intentions but becomes morally ambiguous as he uses the Death Note to impose his version of justice.

[5] Neon Genesis Evangelion anime series delves into the psychological struggles of its characters, especially Shinji Ikari, exploring their subjective experiences and perceptions.

[6] Set in an alternate history Edo period, Samurai Champloo explores the clash of cultural influences and perspectives as three main characters navigate a changing society.

characters or societies.[7] These narratives prompt viewers to question preconceived notions and consider the impact of societal and historical factors on moral development, aligning with the scholarly discourses.

Anime, like Russell's secular understanding of evil, sometimes explores moral questions without explicit religious frameworks.[8] Themes of ethics, justice, and the consequences of actions are often portrayed in a way that resonates with Russell's emphasis on constructing a usable secular conception of evil. Anime often places characters in situations where moral choices are not clear-cut.[9] This echoes the complexity of the scholarly perspectives discussed, as characters navigate the consequences of their actions and grapple with the idea that morality is not always black and white.

Therefore we see that anime serves as a creative platform that mirrors and expands upon the complex dialogues surrounding good and evil, offering audiences diverse narratives that challenge, deconstruct, and reimagine traditional moral frameworks.

3. Exploring Good and Evil

The concepts of good and evil have held a central role in the realms of literature, art, and religion, acting as foundational themes that shape narratives, aesthetics, and moral teachings.

In literature, the portrayal of good and evil often unfolds as a dynamic interplay, serving as a fundamental evaluative category that propels plots forward.[10] Characters grapple with internal conflicts or confront external adversaries embodying these opposing forces. However, the depiction of

[7] Lelouch's actions in Code Geass challenge the traditional dichotomy of good and evil, as he uses questionable methods to achieve his goal of overthrowing an oppressive regime.

[8] Cowboy Bebop is a space-western anime which deals with moral and existential themes without relying on explicit religious frameworks, exploring the consequences of characters past actions.

[9] The anime series Steins; Gate involves time travel and explores the ethical dilemmas faced by the characters as they try to alter the past to achieve a better future.

[10] Sholom J. Kahn, "The Problem of Evil in Literature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 12, no. 1 (Sep, 1953): 98-110.

good and evil remains highly variable, influenced by the cultural, historical, and individual perspectives of the authors who craft these narratives.[11]

In the realm of art, the interpretation of good and evil undergoes shifts based on the chosen perspective—be it political, moral, religious, or aesthetic—and the temporal context in which these notions are examined.[12] Art frequently mirrors societal views of morality, with artists utilizing symbolism, colour, and composition to represent these abstract concepts. The subjective interpretation of these artistic elements adds layers of depth and complexity to the artwork, emphasizing the fluidity inherent in the understanding of good and evil.

Religion, as a moral compass, often delineates the boundaries of good and evil. In traditional religious frameworks, "the good" may revolve around self-transcendence, expressed intrapersonally through self-control and interpersonally through love and the promotion of others' well-being.[13] Conversely, "evil" might centre on self-enhancement, manifesting as moral compartmentalization and hate, aimed at diminishing others' well-being. However, it is crucial to note that within faith traditions, not all expressions of love are deemed inherently "good," and not all manifestations of hate are automatically categorized as "evil."

These interpretations underscore the complexity and subjectivity embedded in the concepts of good and evil across literature, art, and religion. They remind us that our comprehension of these notions is shaped by a myriad of factors, including cultural context, personal beliefs, and societal norms.

Anime, as a distinct medium, has gained recognition for its capacity to delve into intricate themes such as the dichotomy of good and evil. This exploration unfolds through complex narratives and character developments, offering a unique perspective on these fundamental concepts.[14] For instance, Hajime Isayama's manga, *Attack on Titan*, serves as an artistic

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[11] Daniel Candel, "Systematizing Evil in Literature: Twelve Models for The Analysis of Narrative Fiction" *Semiotica* 242 (2021): 141-168.

[12] Basil Markesinis, *Good and Evil in Art and Law: An Extended Essay* (Heidelberg: Springer Vienna, 2007), 1-25.

[13] Christopher T. Burris and John K. Rempel, "Good and Evil in Religion: The Interpersonal Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality,* ed. Lisa J. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123-137.

[14] Manuel Hernández-Pérez, "Looking into the 'Anime Global Popular' and the 'Manga Media': Reflections on the Scholarship of a Transnational and Transmedia Industry," *Arts* 8, no.2 (April 2019): 1-14.

literary work questioning the politics of co-existence in a world where the line between Good ("us") and Evil ("them") is tragically blurred.[15] The narrative suggests the fluidity of morals and the inconsequential nature of the separation between these categories when humanity's existence is at stake.

Therefore, we can see that anime provides a rich and diverse platform for the exploration of good and evil, allowing for nuanced discussions and interpretations that can vary greatly depending on the specific work and its cultural context.

4. Biblical Perspectives on Good and Evil

The exploration of the concept of good and evil in the Bible is a nuanced and intricate subject that has been extensively examined in scholarly literature. Within the Old Testament, diverse perspectives emerge on the nature of good and evil, intricately woven into the moral and theological framework of the ancient Israelites. This sacred text grapples with the complex issue of evil, often portraying it as originating from human sin and contributing to chaos in the world. For instance, in the book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden illustrates the consequences of disobedience and the introduction of sin into the world. This narrative lays the groundwork for understanding the human condition and the inherent struggle between good and evil.

The Old Testament repeatedly emphasizes the theme of retribution for both good and evil deeds. One such example can be found in Deuteronomy 28,[16] in which blessings are promised for obedience to God's commandments, while curses are outlined for disobedience. This covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites sets the stage for a moral framework where actions have consequences. The intricate balance between divine justice and human responsibility is a recurring motif, influencing notions of reward and punishment within Western ethical thought.

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[15] Ameni Hlioui, "The Good 'US' vs. the Evil 'THEM' as Fluid Constructs in the 'Attack on Titan' Manga," *International Journal of Progressive Sciences and Technologies* 27, no.2 (2021): 1-7.

[16] Hans Ausloos, "It's a Matter of Justice! The Old Testament and the Idea of Retribution," *Pretoria* 36, no.1 (April 2023): 151-165.

The prophetic books, including Isaiah and Jeremiah, contribute to the nuanced exploration of good and evil by addressing the moral conduct of individuals and the nation as a whole. These prophets not only highlight the consequences of wrongdoing but also emphasize the possibility of repentance and divine forgiveness. In Isaiah 1:18, for instance, there is an invitation to reason together and receive forgiveness, demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between human actions and divine mercy.

The Psalms, attributed to various authors, offer poetic reflections on the nature of good and evil, expressing the psalmists' struggles with righteousness in the face of adversity. Psalms 34:14 encourages the pursuit of peace and goodness, showcasing the internal moral deliberations found within the biblical text.

The enduring impact of these biblical perspectives on contemporary Western society is evident in the cultural and societal norms shaped by Judeo-Christian ethics. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) in the New Testament further expound on moral principles that have significantly influenced Western legal systems and ethical considerations.

The treatment of good and evil in the Old Testament holds particular significance for researchers aiming to comprehend its profound influence on contemporary Western society.[17] Scholars delve into these biblical perspectives to unravel the moral and ethical underpinnings that have shaped cultural and societal norms over centuries. The exploration of the Bible's teachings on good and evil is not merely a historical or theological endeavour but a crucial inquiry into the enduring impact of these ancient narratives on the moral fabric of Western thought and values.

The Old Testament thus provides a nuanced exploration of the concept of good and evil through narratives, laws, and prophetic messages. The interplay between human responsibility, divine justice, and the possibility of redemption contributes to a complex understanding of morality. As scholars delve into these biblical perspectives, they uncover the enduring impact of these ancient narratives on the moral fabric of Western thought and values.

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[17] Ester S. Buchholz and Joshua K. Mandel, "Reaching for Virtue, Stumbling on Sin: Concepts of Good and Evil in a Postmodern Era," *Journal of Religion and Health* 39, no.2 (Summer 2000): 123-142.

Anime, like the Old Testament, becomes a narrative space where creators explore the intricacies of good and evil, shaping stories that resonate with viewers and provoke contemplation on moral and ethical themes. The influence of these narratives extends beyond mere entertainment, contributing to the broader cultural and philosophical discourse.

5. Moral Complexity in *Death Note*

Anime frequently takes conventional narratives and gives them innovative twists, exemplified by the series *Death Note*, which injects a supernatural element into the traditional dichotomy of good and evil. Originally released in 2006, *Death Note* is an anime adaptation of the manga written by Tsugumi Ohba and illustrated by Takeshi Obata. The anime was directed by Tetsurō Araki and produced by Madhouse, a renowned Japanese animation studio. Spanning 37 episodes, the series aired from October 2006 to June 2007 and quickly gained international acclaim for its gripping narrative, psychological depth, and philosophical undertones. Its widespread popularity led to various adaptations, including live-action films, novels, and even a Westernized remake.

In this anime, the protagonist, Light Yagami, comes into possession of a mysterious notebook—known as the "Death Note"—that grants him the power to kill anyone simply by writing their name in it. This supernatural premise sets the stage for profound moral contemplations, compelling viewers to confront the ethical implications of justice, free will, and the sanctity of human life.

Death Note intricately navigates the complexities of morality through Light Yagami's narrative. As a highly intelligent high school student wielding the power of life and death, Light's character challenges the audience's preconceived notions about heroes and villains. The series intentionally blurs the lines between good and evil, as Light's motivations and actions are not easily classified.[18] While his initial goal appears virtuous—to eradicate crime and shield the innocent—his subsequent descent into becoming a mass-murdering figure driven by narcissism and a desire to be

[18] Bridget Hanna, "Death Note and Morality," *Screen Education* 78 (2015): 40-43.

worshipped as a god paints a darker picture.[19] Viewers are compelled to confront the profound darkness within Light's heart, turning the narrative into a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked power.

Death Note fosters an ongoing debate among its fans regarding Light's moral alignment, with some sympathizing with his idealism and others unequivocally labeling him as inherently evil. The series presents a captivating and thought-provoking exploration of the conventional concepts of good and evil through the lens of Light Yagami's character. By subverting expectations and challenging established archetypes, *Death Note* encourages its audience to reevaluate contemporary representations of moral ambiguity in storytelling.

6. Ethical Shades in *Code Geass*

Anime frequently challenges conventional moral frameworks by introducing anti-hero characters who blur the lines between good and evil, and series like *Code Geass* exemplify this trend. Originally titled *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion*, the series was first released in 2006. It was produced by the acclaimed animation studio Sunrise, known for its work on the *Gundam* franchise, and directed by Gorō Taniguchi, with character designs by the manga artist group CLAMP. The show aired in two seasons—*Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* (2006–2007) and *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion R2* (2008)—and quickly gained critical and commercial success for its blend of mecha action, political intrigue, and psychological complexity. It has since inspired multiple spin-offs, manga adaptations, and films, solidifying its place as a landmark in modern anime.

Code Geass centers around Lelouch Lamperouge, a brilliant exiled prince who acquires a supernatural ability called the "Geass," allowing him to compel anyone to obey his commands. Driven by a fervent desire to overthrow the oppressive Britannian Empire and create a more just world for his sister and the oppressed, Lelouch adopts the masked identity of "Zero" and leads a revolutionary movement. The anime delves into the

[19] Alex Herrick, "Death Note: Is Light Evil? Unravelling The Mystery," Web Design Booth, accessed Feb 1, 2024, https://www.webdesignbooth.com/death-note-is-light-evil.

intricate moral landscape of Lelouch's actions and meticulously examines the repercussions of his decisions.[20]

Unlike a straightforward classification of good or evil, Lelouch's intentions may be interpreted as noble—aspiring to bring about peace and unity in a fractured world. However, the methods he employs, including manipulation, coercion, and large-scale violence, complicate this narrative. His use of the Geass to control others without consent, even in pursuit of an ostensibly righteous goal, raises troubling ethical questions about ends justifying means. These themes echo the narrative complexity found in the Old Testament's exploration of power, divine mandate, and human fallibility.

Code Geass doesn't shy away from exploring the theme of redemption within Lelouch's character arc. As the narrative unfolds, Lelouch is confronted with the heavy cost of his revolutionary tactics and the collateral damage left in their wake. He is forced to reckon with the pain inflicted on others, including those he loves, and ultimately makes a controversial yet sacrificial choice in his pursuit of peace. This adds profound layers of moral complexity to the storyline, inviting the audience to contemplate the nature of justice, leadership, and personal atonement.

The anime *Code Geass* thus provides a captivating and intricate exploration of the concept of good and evil through the character of Lelouch Lamperouge. By challenging viewers to grapple with the moral ambiguities inherent in his decisions and the personal sacrifices made in the name of justice, the series stands as a powerful testament to the rich narrative possibilities anime offers in the exploration of ethical dilemmas.

7. Alchemical Transformations in *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*

The Old Testament frequently explores themes of redemption and the profound impact of individual choices on one's moral journey. In a similar vein, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* employs the concept of "equivalent exchange" to underscore the critical nature of moral decisions. This anime series intricately weaves the themes of good and evil into its

[20] Meredith White, "*Code Geass: Geass, Explained*," *Game Rant*, n.d., https://gamerant.com/code-geass-what-is-geass, accessed December 24, 2023.

narrative, challenging traditional moral paradigms and echoing the Old Testament's emphasis on the transformative potential of personal choices.

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood is a 2009–2010 anime television series produced by Bones and directed by Yasuhiro Irie, with music composed by Akira Senju. It is a faithful adaptation of Hiromu Arakawa's manga *Fullmetal Alchemist*, differing from the earlier 2003 anime *Fullmetal Alchemist*, which diverged from the manga due to the source material being incomplete at the time. Praised for its tightly woven plot, emotional depth, and philosophical undercurrents, *Brotherhood* consists of 64 episodes and has been widely acclaimed as one of the most impactful and thematically rich anime series of the 21st century.

The story follows the compelling journey of the Elric brothers, Edward and Alphonse, as they navigate the ethical complexities of alchemy and pursue their aspirations in a world governed by scientific laws and moral consequences. The brothers commit the grave taboo of human transmutation in a desperate attempt to resurrect their deceased mother, resulting in devastating physical and spiritual consequences.[21] This event sets them on a path of restitution, both literal and moral, as they seek the Philosopher's Stone to restore their bodies—a journey fraught with moral compromise, philosophical reflection, and ethical ambiguity.

A central tenet of the series—"to obtain something, something of equal value must be lost"—frames the characters' struggles within a moral universe where actions carry weight and consequences must be faced. Throughout the series, Edward and Alphonse wrestle with questions of guilt, sacrifice, justice, and the value of human life. Their story is not simply one of regaining what was lost, but of learning what truly matters and what kind of people they choose to become.

The conclusion of *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* serves as a poignant resolution, reinforcing its core themes and offering satisfying closure. It reveals the divergent paths the characters take after confronting the consequences of their choices, emphasizing personal growth, moral account-

[21] Joe Allen, "The Ending of Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood Explained," accessed January 23, 2024,
https://www.looper.com/334644/the-ending-of-fullmetal-alchemist-brotherhood-explained.

ability, and the long-lasting impact of ethical decisions.[22] In doing so, the series echoes biblical narratives in which figures such as David, Jacob, or Moses are shaped and transformed by their moral struggles and acts of repentance.

Through its exploration of morality, sacrifice, and the intricate facets of human nature, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* presents a nuanced perspective on the concepts of good and evil. Viewers are challenged to reflect on the nature of morality within the context of the characters' experiences and the powerful, often painful, choices they make throughout their transformative journeys. As with many biblical figures, the Elric brothers remind us that redemption is not found in perfection, but in persistence, humility, and a willingness to grow.

8. Bridging Old Testament Wisdom and Contemporary Storytelling

The exploration of anime's ethical odyssey through the lens of the Old Testament unveils a fascinating tapestry of narratives that bridge the gap between ancient moral principles and contemporary storytelling. Contextually, this journey is not merely an academic exercise but a dynamic intersection of cultural, religious, and artistic expressions that shape our understanding of good and evil.

In the context of the Old Testament, the exploration of good and evil extends beyond theological inquiry to encompass its profound impact on Western thought and values. The Bible's teachings on morality have left an indelible mark on literature, art, and societal norms. The dichotomy presented in the Old Testament, echoed in anime narratives, acts as a cultural touchstone that resonates through centuries, prompting ongoing reflections on human nature and morality.

The dichotomy between good and evil, as discussed by scholars like François Flahault, Nishida Kitarō, and Luke Russell, provides a contextual lens through which we analyze anime narratives. The complexity they introduce challenges simplistic binary classifications, inviting viewers to grapple with nuanced character motivations and ethical landscapes. This

[22] Dillon Rey Dowell, "Fullmetal Alchemist: Which Brother Got a Better Ending?" *Game Rant*, n.d., https://gamerant.com/fullmetal-alchemist-which-brother-got-a-better-ending (accessed November 12, 2023).

scholarly dialogue enriches our contextual understanding, emphasizing that the ethical odyssey in anime is a dynamic conversation that echoes broader philosophical discussions on morality.

Furthermore, the examination of good and evil in literature, art, and religion provides context for anime's role in this broader discourse. The malleability of these concepts across different mediums highlights the fluidity inherent in the understanding of morality. Anime, as a distinct medium, both reflects and challenges these interpretations, contributing to the ongoing evolution of cultural narratives surrounding ethics.

Some parallels can be drawn between the anime narratives and specific biblical passages that echo similar ethical considerations.

8.1. Genesis 3:22-24 - Consequences of Human Sin

The narrative of Genesis 3:22-24 presents a pivotal moment in the biblical understanding of sin and its consequences. Adam and Eve's disobedience eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil ushers in a profound moral shift, resulting in their expulsion from Eden. This passage underscore's themes of transgression, the burden of knowledge, and the consequences of human choices, all of which resonate deeply with ethical dilemmas in storytelling, including anime.

One of the clearest parallels to this biblical narrative can be found in *Death Note*. Light Yagami's decision to wield the Death Note mirrors Adam and Eve's choice to eat the forbidden fruit both acts stem from a desire for greater power and knowledge, but they ultimately lead to irreversible consequences. Just as Adam and Eve's newfound awareness introduces suffering and exile, Light's pursuit of justice through divine-like judgment entraps him in a downward spiral of moral corruption. His initial intentions to rid the world of criminals evolve into a ruthless quest for dominance, echoing the idea that knowledge and power, when misused, lead to downfall.

Moreover, Genesis 3:22-24 highlights humanity's separation from divine perfection, emphasizing the limits imposed on human autonomy. Similarly, *Death Note* explores the dangers of overstepping moral and ethical boundaries. The story suggests that assuming the role of an all-powerful arbiter of justice carries severe consequences, much like Adam and Eve's actions resulted in their loss of paradise.

8.2. Deuteronomy - Retribution for Deeds

The book of Deuteronomy emphasizes the principle of retribution often articulated through the covenantal framework of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28). This doctrine, known as *divine retribution*, reinforces the idea that human actions carry consequences, a theme deeply embedded in anime narratives. The moral philosophy underlying Deuteronomy finds strong parallels in series like *Code Geass* and *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, where protagonists navigate the far-reaching consequences of their choices.

In *Code Geass*, Lelouch vi Britannia seeks to overthrow an oppressive regime using the supernatural power of the Geass, which allows him to command absolute obedience. While his intentions to create a better world for his sister and liberate the oppressed are noble, the means by which he pursues his goal become increasingly ruthless. His deception, manipulation, and willingness to sacrifice others lead to devastating consequences, including the loss of close friends and allies. His eventual self-sacrifice mirrors Deuteronomy's ethical principle that every action carries weight; even when striving for justice, immoral choices bring their own form of judgment.

Similarly, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* explores the *law of equivalent exchange*, which aligns closely with Deuteronomy's moral cause-and-effect structure. Edward and Alphonse Elric violate natural and divine laws by attempting human transmutation, resulting in severe personal losses. Alphonse loses his body, and Edward sacrifices limbs. Their journey to restore what was lost serves as a narrative of atonement and redemption, reinforcing the idea that transgressing ethical boundaries leads to unavoidable retribution.

8.3. Proverbs 14:12 - The Way That Seems Right

Proverbs 14:12 states, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way of death." This verse encapsulates the dangers of misguided righteousness when individuals, convinced of their moral correctness, pursue a path that ultimately leads to destruction. This theme resonates deeply in anime narratives, particularly in *Death Note* and *Code Geass*, where protagonists Light Yagami and Lelouch Lamperouge embark on ambitious quests they perceive as just, only to be ensnared by their own moral failings.

In *Death Note*, Light Yagami, armed with the power to kill by merely writing a name, initially seeks to create a utopia free of crime. His vision of a perfect world where he reigns as a god blinds him to the ethical cost of his actions. As his power grows, so does his willingness to manipulate, deceive, and eliminate anyone who opposes him. What began as a pursuit of justice transforms into tyranny, ultimately leading to his downfall. His tragic end exemplifies Proverbs 14:12 what seemed like the right path, driven by a self-righteous vision, results in destruction.

Similarly, Lelouch Lamperouge in *Code Geass* believes he is fighting for the liberation of the oppressed, using his Geass ability to manipulate others for what he perceives as a noble cause. However, his reliance on deception, violence, and moral compromises leads to devastating losses, including the deaths of those he loves. His well-intentioned path spirals into a cycle of betrayal and sacrifice, mirroring the proverb's warning about the deceptive allure of a seemingly righteous path.

8.4. Psalm 34:14 - Turn from Evil and Do Good

Psalm 34:14 exhorts, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." This verse underscores the biblical principle of moral transformation acknowledging one's past transgressions and actively choosing a righteous path. The themes of redemption, atonement, and the pursuit of justice that permeate *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* align closely with this wisdom from the Psalms, as characters wrestle with their past mistakes and strive to make amends.

Edward and Alphonse Elric, the protagonists of *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, serve as prime examples of individuals who turn from their initial missteps to seek redemption. Their journey begins with a grave sin attempting human transmutation, a forbidden act that defies natural and divine laws. In their pursuit of bringing their mother back to life, they suffer dire consequences: Alphonse loses his entire body, and Edward sacrifices an arm and a leg. Recognizing the gravity of their mistake, they dedicate their lives to rectifying it, searching for the Philosopher's Stone not to gain power, but to restore what was lost.

Throughout the series, the brothers consistently choose to uphold their moral integrity despite the temptations of power and revenge. Edward, in particular, refuses to kill, even when faced with enemies who embody corruption and destruction. His unwavering commitment to doing good, even

at personal cost, mirrors the Psalmist's call to turn from evil and actively pursue righteousness.

Additionally, the series explores the redemption arcs of other characters, such as Scar and Greed, who transition from vengeance and self-interest to seeking justice and camaraderie. Their transformations reinforce the biblical message that individuals are not bound by their past sins but have the capacity to change and seek the path of righteousness.

8.5. Isaiah 5:20 - Woe to Those Who Call Evil Good

Isaiah 5:20 warns, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." This prophetic declaration critiques the moral inversion that occurs when society distorts the true nature of right and wrong. The verse emphasizes the danger of redefining moral boundaries, where actions traditionally considered evil are reinterpreted as virtuous, leading to societal corruption. In many ways, this biblical warning resonates with anime series like *Death Note*, where characters, particularly the protagonist, grapple with the complexities of labelling actions as either good or evil.

In *Death Note*, Light Yagami begins his quest with a self-righteous belief that he is morally justified in using the Death Note to rid the world of criminals. His initial intentions to create a utopia free from evil align with a socially accepted notion of justice. However, as Light grows increasingly power-hungry, his actions become more morally ambiguous. He starts to redefine "good" and "evil" based on his own standards, positioning himself as a god-like figure above human laws and moral constraints. In doing so, Light not only blurs the line between good and evil but inverts it, viewing the murder of thousands as a noble act for the greater good, while portraying those who oppose him as the true evil.

This inversion of moral order reflects Isaiah's warning about the dangers of calling evil good and vice versa. As Light's actions escalate, his personal justification becomes a dangerous form of moral relativism, where he no longer recognizes the inherent wrongness of killing and punishing people based on his own arbitrary definitions of justice. His descent into moral corruption mirrors the societal consequences warned about in Isaiah when evil is misrepresented as good, it leads to widespread destruction and chaos.

8.6. Jonah 4:11 - Concern for the Innocent

The Book of Jonah, particularly the narrative of God's mercy toward Nineveh, underscores the profound ethical principle that God is deeply concerned with innocent lives, even in the face of impending judgment. Jonah's reluctance to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh stems from his belief that they deserve divine punishment for their wickedness. However, God's response reveals a different perspective: the potential for redemption and the preservation of innocent lives outweighs judgment. In Jonah 4:11, God expresses His compassion, saying, "Should I not be concerned about that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?" This divine concern for the innocent, even in a city steeped in sin, highlights the complexities of moral choices and the ethical responsibility we bear toward others, especially those who may be unaware or unintentionally harmed by our actions.

This ethical dilemma closely aligns with the struggles faced by the Elric brothers, Edward and Alphonse, in *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. At the start of the series, the brothers commit a grave sin in their attempt to resurrect their mother through alchemy, an act that violates the natural order and causes significant harm to themselves and Alphonse, who loses his entire body. The consequences of their reckless actions ripple through the lives of others, as they journey to find the Philosopher's Stone in hopes of restoring what was lost. Along the way, they encounter individuals whose lives have been directly or indirectly affected by their past mistakes. The brothers grapple with the responsibility of the harm they've caused and the moral complexity of their choices.

As the series unfolds, the brothers come to realize that their actions, even if initially motivated by a desire to rectify their own loss, impact the lives of innocent people. Their quest to undo their wrongs mirrors the ethical dilemma seen in Jonah: the brothers must weigh their personal desires against the broader consequences for others. Just as God shows mercy to Nineveh, offering the opportunity for repentance and restoration, the Elric brothers ultimately seek redemption by confronting their past actions and striving to heal the damage they have caused, recognizing that their moral choices cannot be made in isolation from the lives they touch.

By intertwining the ethical landscapes of anime with biblical references, we gain a deeper understanding of how these narratives engage with timeless moral considerations. The Old Testament serves as a rich source of inspiration, enriching the ethical odyssey portrayed in anime and

highlighting the enduring relevance of these ethical inquiries across different cultural and artistic expressions.

As we contextualize this exploration, it becomes clear that anime serves as a contemporary canvas for ethical reflections, providing a platform where ancient wisdom and modern creativity converge. The contextual reflection on anime's ethical odyssey prompts us to appreciate the cultural dialogue it fosters, inviting viewers to contemplate their own moral compass within the diverse and evolving landscapes of storytelling. In essence, this exploration transcends the boundaries of entertainment, becoming a dynamic conversation about the enduring human quest to navigate the complexities of good and evil.

9. Conclusion

In this exploration of anime's ethical odyssey through the lens of the Old Testament, we find a captivating interplay between modern storytelling and ancient moral principles. Anime, as a dynamic and evolving medium, continues to grapple with questions of good and evil in ways that resonate with audiences across cultures and beliefs. The Old Testament, with its timeless teachings, provides a thought-provoking backdrop against which we can assess the ethical complexities presented in anime narratives.

Through our journey, we have witnessed characters facing moral dilemmas, undergoing redemption arcs, and navigating the consequences of their choices. These narratives serve as mirrors reflecting the human experience and the perennial struggle to discern right from wrong. Anime's capacity to weave intricate tales allows for a nuanced exploration of ethics, transcending cultural and religious boundaries.

While many of the parallels drawn between anime and Old Testament themes may be unintentional—given that the creators of series such as *Death Note*, *Code Geass*, and *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* do not explicitly cite biblical inspiration—the similarities are nonetheless striking. These convergences invite deeper reflection on the universal nature of ethical storytelling. From a religious communication standpoint, this raises an important and timely question: How might religious educators and communicators intentionally adopt anime-style narratives to convey theological truths and moral teachings?

Given anime's global popularity, especially among younger generations, there lies significant potential for religious communicators to engage anime's visual storytelling techniques, character complexity, and moral ambiguity to make scriptural principles more relatable and resonant. This does not mean appropriating anime superficially, but rather understanding and embracing its narrative depth as a vessel for expressing enduring themes such as justice, mercy, sacrifice, and redemption.

Ultimately, as we conclude this odyssey, we recognize that the intersection of anime and the Old Testament offers a space for contemplation, discussion, and appreciation of the multifaceted nature of ethical storytelling. In this ongoing dialogue between ancient wisdom and contemporary creativity, we find that the exploration of good and evil remains a timeless and universal pursuit. This conversation also opens pathways for future exploration—inviting theologians, artists, and educators to reimagine how sacred narratives might be communicated afresh through the storytelling idioms of our time.

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Re-envisioning Dulles' Ecclesiological Models for the Digital Age: Towards an Interactive Community of Disciples

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ABSTRACT

The Church faces new challenges and opportunities in fostering communion and evangelization in the digital age. Avery Dulles' Models of the Church provides a foundational framework for understanding ecclesiology, yet its applicability to digital contexts remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by critically analyzing Dulles' ecclesiological models—Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, and Servant—through digital engagement. The objective is to re-envision these models to develop a model called "Interactive Community of Disciples," a dynamic ecclesiological paradigm suited for digital platforms. This study critically analyzes Dulles' models, drawing from theological and ecclesiological references available in library and internet sources. The analysis considers contemporary discussions on digital theology, online ecclesial communities, and CyberSource frameworks. The study also interrogates how digital spaces reshape the Church's mission, authority, and communal identity, examining their limitations and transformative potential. Expected results indicate that while Dulles' models remain relevant, they require adaptation to fully capture digital ecclesiology's interactive, participatory, and decentralized nature. The research

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anticipates that a re-envisioned model will emphasize relationality, shared leadership, and online sacramentality, fostering a Church that is not only present in digital spaces but also actively engaged in meaningful faith-based interactions. This study seeks to contribute to contemporary ecclesiological discourse by proposing a theologically grounded yet contextually responsive model of the Church in the digital era.

Keywords: *digital ecclesiology, discipleship, virtual Church, theology, community*

1. Introduction

There has been a massive increase in internet use worldwide in the past few years. Every day, millions of people are online. According to the Digital 2025 reports published by Hootsuite and We Are Social, Kemp (2025) forecasted that the upcoming year will witness noteworthy advancements in digital trends, highlighting rapid progress in artificial intelligence, evolving social media platforms, and changing consumer behaviors online, all of which are anticipated to reshape modern interconnected living. Manuel Castells' book, *The Rise of the Network Society: Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, first published in 1996 and subsequently revised in 2000 and 2011, examines how "networks" in the information age go beyond the borders of nation-states and constitute themselves as a global system (Castells 2011).

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has profoundly transformed societal interactions and communal dynamics, challenging traditional ecclesiological models (Alshaikh et al. 2024). While foundational, Avery Dulles' (2002) seminal typology of ecclesial models requires re-examination in light of contemporary digital contexts, as existing frameworks often struggle to integrate digital dynamics effectively. With online platforms and virtual communities becoming integral to religious practice and faith formation (Campbell 2020), there is an urgent need to understand how these digital environments shape and redefine the concept of the Church as an "Interactive Community of Disciples."

The concept of digital ecclesiology appeared in several online reports by the New Media Project, where researchers explored how different religious groups' digital practices reflected their underlying beliefs about the church. They examined the assumptions shaping these practices and the deeper meanings behind various approaches to online engagement (Campbell 2020). For example, Jim Rice (2012) discussed what a 'digital ecclesiology' might look like in terms of how it helps us understand a model of how the Church functions in a digital age. He said,

> Just as there are communion ecclesiology and feminist ecclesiologies—theological studies of the Church from particular perspectives—a 'digital ecclesiology' could yield fresh and profound insights into the nature of the Church in the postmodern world and, conversely, into the ways that church bodies make use of new media technologies. (Rice 2012)

Moreover, with this fast change in network society and space, the Church has the duty of creating new ways of interpreting and communicating the Gospel to make it relevant and meaningful for the daily experiences of the human person. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis urged the faithful to "be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us together to read the signs of the times" (2013, no.14). On June 13, 2013, the Pope addressed the members of the 13th Ordinary Council of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops and emphasized the significance of the Assembly's theme: "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" (Francis 2013).

Since Dulles formulated the Models of the Church before the digital era, he may not have developed a model that adequately reflects the challenges of the digital age. While he did not explicitly define digital ecclesiology, the concept can be drawn upon to spark discussions about how digital engagement might necessitate rethinking the Church and revisiting traditional models (Campbell 2020). Drawing on the classic work of Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* (1974), Rice argued that despite digital innovations in how online congregations, clergy networks, and Christian universities gather and communicate, their core liturgical functions aligned with Dulles' theological models, urging a return to historical ecclesiological principles before asserting the emergence of a distinct digital ecclesiology. He concluded:

> The way the Church behaves digitally today is no different, morally or spiritually, than any other mode in which the Church manifests. If the Church is a servant to the marginalized and an advocate for justice, the Church will use its digital presence to fulfill those missions. If the Church

> emphasizes forming the Christian community, social media will increasingly contribute to nurturing communal connections. Proclamation of the Word will always be central to the Church's calling, and new media will join older media as vehicles for the announcing of the good news. (Rice 2012)

However, I would like to argue that Rice has missed significant points. Traditional models emphasize physical interactions and conventional forms of community-building, which may not adequately capture the complexities and opportunities of digital spaces. The "Interactive Community of Disciples" in the digital space seeks to bridge this gap by utilizing digital tools to create meaningful and inclusive faith experiences, particularly engaging younger generations more familiar with digital interactions.

This study aims to adapt Dulles' models for digital contexts, providing practical frameworks for religious leaders, theologians, and digital community builders. Examining the intersection of theology and digital technology, it offers insights into fostering authentic interactions, spiritual growth, and communal solidarity within online faith communities. The findings will be especially valuable for scholars, practitioners, and Church leaders seeking to strengthen the Church's presence in digital spaces and for religious educators and policymakers invested in the relationship between technology, theology, and community engagement.

2. The Digital Ecclesial Reality

The scholarly exploration of online churches is extensive, yet several key works have shaped the discourse. Early research by Schroeder, Heather, and Lee (1997) examined social interaction in virtual worship spaces, highlighting how early online church services replicated traditional liturgical elements within a digital environment. The Barna Group (1998), as cited by Campbell (2003), predicted that by 2010, approximately 20 percent of the population would primarily rely on the internet for religious engagement. A foundational contribution to the field is *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by Hadden and Cowan (2001), which includes Christopher Helland's influential distinction between institutional online religion and grassroots digital faith communities.

Building on this, Young (2008) and Helland (2005) further nuanced the understanding of virtual ecclesial spaces. A significant milestone came in

2004 with the launch of the Methodist-funded *Church of Fools*, a 3D virtual congregation that saw an average of 8,000 daily visitors (Young 2008). Tim Hutchings (2000) observed the growing academic attention to digital religion, with contributions appearing in journals such as *Online* and the *Heidelberg Journal of Religions and the Internet*. Douglas Estes (2009), in *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, defended the legitimacy of virtual churches, urging theological reflection on their role in contemporary faith practice. More recently, Heidi A. Campbell (2012) has provided essential insights into how digital cultures shape religious expression, further solidifying the study of online churches as a critical area of theological inquiry.

Campbell's scholarship on religion and digital media is extensive and multifaceted, providing critical insights into how religious communities engage with digital technologies. In *Digital Judaism*, she examined how Jewish communities use media to preserve cultural heritage and negotiate religious authority online (Campbell 2015). Her co-authored work *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* explored how video games embed religious symbols to shape narratives, examining titles such as *Okami* and *The Legend of Zelda* (Campbell and Grieve 2014). In *Digital Religion*, she systematically studies various media forms, from blogs to virtual worlds, analyzing their impact on faith communities (Campbell 2012). *When Religion Meets New Media* introduced the concept of the "religious-social shaping of technology" (RSST), demonstrating how religious groups actively negotiate technology based on tradition and community values (Campbell 2010). Her foundational book, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, investigated how Christian communities integrate digital practices, emphasizing that online religious networks are deeply embedded in offline life (Campbell 2005). She traced the evolution of religious communication studies, from early notions of "cyber-religion" to the emerging field of "digital religion studies," highlighting both the utopian and dystopian views of technology's impact on faith (Campbell 2005; Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1997). Across these works, Campbell's scholarship underscored contemporary religious practice's dynamic, innovative, and technologically mediated nature.

Stephen O'Leary (1996) initially viewed computer-mediated communication as a transformative force for religion but later adopted a more skeptical stance, acknowledging the rise of online extremism. Similar concerns were raised by scholars such as Jakobsh (2012) regarding Sikh

rituals and McWilliams (2000) on the impact of online Buddhist practices. However, Campbell (2012) challenged this pessimism by framing online religious activities as "virtual religion," exploring MUDs, MOOs, and video games as religious spaces. Hutchings (2007) documented the rise of digital Christian communities, while Karaflogka (2002) distinguished between "religion in cyberspace" and "religion on cyberspace," emphasizing different modes of religious expression online. Højsgaard (2005) advanced the concept of "cyber-religion," questioning whether the internet generates new forms of faith and categorizing online religion based on mediation, content, and organization.

Recognizing this shift, Pope Benedict XVI (2011) highlighted the Church's need to engage deeply with digital culture, reinforcing *Gaudium et Spes* and John Paul II's teachings. Antonio Spadaro 2014) responded with *Cybertheology*, analyzing faith in the digital era and defining cybertheology as the theological study of technoscience. He identified three forms of cybertheology: "theology in" (online sources), "theology of" (cyberspace studies), and "theology for" (theological engagement on the Web). Viewing cybertheology as "the intelligence of faith" in the digital age, Spadaro (2014) argued that it goes beyond sociological reflection, shaping how faith interacts with the logic of the web. Le Duc (2020) argued that cyberspace is no longer a separate reality but an integral part of human life, shaping social interactions, communication, and religious experiences. He emphasized that the internet has moved beyond being a novelty to becoming an essential space where people live, learn, and practice faith, necessitating theological reflection on the digital milieu.

3. Bridging the Digital Divide: Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Era

The notion of the digital divide, introduced in the 1990s, refers to the disparity in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the internet, leaving over four billion people in developing regions without benefits (Hartnett 2019). This gap is described as "large, complex, and multidimensional," driven by inadequate infrastructure, high costs, low digital literacy, and linguistic barriers (World Economic Forum 2019). It exacerbates inequality, creating a digital class divide within and between countries. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications

(2011) highlights that the digital divide is a form of discrimination, underscoring the need for equitable access to avoid further deepening societal disparities. Public institutions are crucial in bringing this gap by providing affordable, multilingual digital resources.

Despite increasing global internet users, the challenge of ensuring quality and universal access remains, hindering opportunities for education, healthcare, and economic development. Social media, though transformative, has exacerbated this divide by spreading misinformation and creating echo chambers, as pointed out by Maria Ressa (2025), who criticized Big Tech companies for prioritizing profit over societal cohesion. Additionally, the rise of online churches has sparked the need for updated ecclesiology to address virtual faith communities' theological and communal implications. As digital technologies reshape social and religious practices, it is imperative for the Church and society to critically examine how they can serve to enhance, rather than hinder, spiritual and community connections in the digital era.

4. Revisiting Dulles' Models of Church

Avery Dulles, an American Jesuit theologian an also a Cardinal, wrote two significant theological studies on the Church and revelation, employing insights from model theory to address fundamental theological issues. Dulles' theory involves a series of questions addressing the purpose, types, and combination of models, which synthesize existing knowledge or generate new insights. He views models as necessary due to the mysterious nature of the Church and revelation, advocating for their coexistence and cross-pollination despite inherent limitations.

The first edition of *Models of the Church* by Dulles was published in 1974. This version introduced five ecclesiological models: Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, and Servant. Later editions expanded on these models, adding the Community of Disciples as a sixth model. The book explores how different theological perspectives shape the understanding of the Church, emphasizing that no single model fully captures its complexity, but rather, a synthesis of these models provides a more balanced ecclesiology.

In this book, Dulles argued for a dynamic approach that accommodates new contexts, challenges traditional perspectives, and urges reevaluation. For instance, the model of the Church as an institution emphasizes hierarchical structures and organizational authority, drawing criticism for fostering clericalism and neglecting lay participation. In contrast, the communion model focuses on the Church as a community of believers, emphasizing mutual love, justice, and the shared gifts of the Spirit among members. Another perspective, the sacrament model, sees the Church as a visible sign of God's grace, combining external structure and internal spiritual life. Additionally, Dulles introduced the Church as a herald, emphasizing its role in proclaiming the Gospel message and promoting social transformation. Lastly, the servant model views the Church as actively serving humanity and advocating for social justice, echoing Jesus' compassionate ministry. Ultimately, the *Sensus Fidelium*—shaped by Newman's and Polanyi's thoughts (2013) lends credibility and authority to theological models within the Church.

5. Evolving Ecclesiology: From Traditional Models to Cyber Contexts

Terrence Merrigan critically analyzed Dulles' approach to theological models, pointing out that while they offer useful frameworks, they also carry limitations, particularly when applied rigidly to ecclesiology (Merrigan 1993, 145). This study followed in Dulles' footsteps by exploring the model of the Church as an Interactive Community of Disciples emerging in the cyber context. A model, he noted, can either be a symbolic or a conceptual representation or abstraction by which we try to organize a body of knowledge (Dulles 2002, 29).

The need for a new model arises from the increasing significance of digital interactions in people's lives. As millions of individuals engage in online platforms daily (Hootsuite and We Are Social 2019), the Church must find ways to be present and active in these virtual spaces. Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasized the importance of being attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and reading the signs of the times to address the challenges of modern society (2013, sec. 14). Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI (2013) highlighted the potential of social media to foster relationships and build communities while also cautioning against its pitfalls. These insights underscore the Church's need

to adapt and develop new models that resonate with contemporary experiences.

The critical analysis of Terrence Merrigan in *Models in the Theology of Avery Dulles* elucidated several insights on how Dulles' "model theory" is to be understood. He noted how theology had accepted the principle of model theory, already long established in other research fields, that models are a legitimate, indeed inevitable, component of scientific discourse. When critically researched and explained, models allow believers to transcend their limitations and converse with people with different outlooks (Merrigan 1993, 145).

Why and whence models? For Merrigan, "[t]he short answer to the question of why models are necessary at all is the fact that both the Church and Revelation are, ultimately, 'mysteries'—realities about which we cannot speak 'directly' but only 'indirectly'" based on analogies drawn from our experience of the world (1993, 145). In *Models of the Church*, Dulles regarded the use of images (e.g., vine, flock, temple) to describe the Church as the first instance of analogical speech and the initial step in forming models. The second step involved employing these images in a process of "critical reflection," which deepened one's theoretical understanding of reality. When this occurs, Dulles argued that an image evolves into a model (2002, 23).

A model, however, cannot capture the totality of the Church's experience. While models provide insight into certain aspects of the Church, they also inherently obscure others. This limitation underscores the necessity for multiple models, each offering only a partial and inadequate explanation of the Church's reality. In this light, this project aims to contribute to conceptualizing a new model of the Church within the digital context.

Furthering the discourses on the models of the Church, Brazal (2015) authored an essay entitled "Church as Sacrament of Yin-Yang Harmony: Toward a More Incisive Participation of Laity and Women in the Church." The paper aims to contribute toward "an East Asian reimagining of ecclesiology that is pluralistic and inclusive of laywomen and men equally with clergy in church ministries" (Brazal 2015, 786). Brazal beautifully crafted contrasting but complementary qualities of generative forces that maintain balance, illustrating the nuances of the Daoist belief in Yin and Yang. She argued that "yin-yang symbolism can be fruitful for reimagining man-woman, cleric–lay, and other dualities in the church as fluid polarities"

(2015, 793). This article is another example of how Dulles' model framework can be used to rethink our contemporary ecclesiology (Dulles 1985).

Building on Terrence Merrigan's critical analysis of Dulles' approach to theological models and recognizing the inherent limitations of any single model to fully encapsulate the Church's experience, this study proposes a new model of the Church in the digital space as an "Interactive Community of Disciples." As highlighted in the foregoing, multiple models are necessary, each offering only partial insights. This proposed model aims to address the increasing significance of digital interactions in people's lives, as millions engage on online platforms daily. By developing a model that aligns with contemporary experiences, the Church can be present and active in these virtual spaces. This approach follows the discourses on the models of the Church and incorporates the dynamic and interactive nature of digital communities, fostering a holistic and inclusive ecclesiological perspective that resonates with modern society's needs.

6. Assessing the Interactive Community of Disciples through Dulles' Framework

Using Avery Dulles' framework for describing Church models, this study analyzed the objectives, beneficiaries, and communal bonds of the proposed model. By applying Dulles' (2002, 201-2012) seven evaluative criteria—basis in Scripture, basis in Tradition, fostering corporate identity and mission, promoting Christian virtues and values, aligning with contemporary religious experiences, theological fruitfulness, and effectiveness in external relations—we assess the model of Interactive Community of Disciples.

These criteria highlight the proposed model's strengths and limitations. Evaluating the model through these lenses provides a broader, integrative ecclesiological perspective, acknowledging each model's limitations while benefiting from their strengths. To assess the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Interactive Community of Disciples, Dulles' criteria offer a comprehensive framework for understanding virtual faith communities.

First, the Interactive Community of Disciples must be grounded in Scripture, aligning practices and teachings with biblical principles. Second, it should uphold Christian Tradition, maintaining continuity with the

Church's historical and theological foundations. Third, it should cultivate communal identity and shared mission, fostering collective commitment to faith and service. Fourth, the model should promote core Christian virtues and values, guiding spiritual and ethical growth. Fifth, it must resonate with contemporary religious experiences, addressing spiritual needs meaningfully. Sixth, it should demonstrate theological depth, contributing to the ongoing reflection and development of Christian thought. Lastly, the model must engage meaningfully with those beyond its digital boundaries, fostering dialogue, outreach, and inclusivity. These criteria ensure the Interactive Community of Disciples can sustain an authentic Christian community in the digital age.

6.1. Basis in Scripture

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew records, "[F]or where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). This verse is part of a larger discussion on biblical exegesis and is not a parameter for defining the Church, nor can it be used to argue for or against online churches. However, it establishes an important principle: "God works when individuals work together." Critics may argue that the Bible does not mention the Interactive Community of Disciples or online churches. It is important to note that the Bible does not contain terms like cyberchurch, cathedrals, Baptist churches, and Reformed churches. This is because the Bible is not a collection of proof texts and does not provide a direct definition of the Church.

In his seminal work, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Paul Minear (1960) identifies 96 metaphors that describe the Church. Minear notes that "none of those metaphors are descriptions, and none consider the dynamics and reality of the church. They are images that depict the Church in all God's immensity." Today, various models of the Church exist, including the Interactive Community of Disciples, which is a significant metaphor exemplifying how followers are to relate to God and one another. If the Interactive Community of Disciples facilitates believers' encounters with God, it aligns with the biblical imagery of the Church.

Avery Dulles asserted that the Church is a community—a worshiping community of believers who serve as both a sign and instrument of the union between God and humanity. The Gospel, according to Matthew, records Jesus saying, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). The context in which Jesus spoke this was

not within church buildings but rather in more intimate, smaller gatherings. The early Church often met in private homes, as seen in Acts of the Apostles and in letters like Romans 16:5, where the "house church" concept is evident. Paul referd to the Church in 1 Corinthians 16:19 as meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. The early Christian communities were characterized by face-to-face associations, fluid organization, and intimate relationships based on covenants rather than contracts.

The Church, described as the "People of God" in 1 Peter 2:9, extends beyond individual homes and even beyond cities, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, and 1 Thessalonians 1:1. The New Testament affirms that the Church is not confined to buildings, but instead refers to the gathering of believers, whether in private homes or across cities. Wayne Grudem (1994) explains that "church" in the New Testament can refer to any group of believers, from small house meetings to the global community of all true believers.

The term *ekklesia,* used in the New Testament, referred to an assembly or gathering of people, never to a building. Given this, the concept of an online gathering is feasible. When people gather in Christ's name, He is present among them, whether in person or virtually. This idea aligns with the understanding that God's Spirit transcends time and space, as highlighted in Colossians 1:18, where Christ is described as the head of the Church, supreme in all things. Therefore, online gatherings in Christ's name maintain the biblical integrity of the Church community.

The Greek term *ekklesia* is significant because it emphasizes gathering people rather than a physical structure. The Church, as depicted in Scripture, refers to a community of believers united under the Lordship of Christ, sharing a common citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20). The New Testament's usage of "church" underscores the people that form the congregation, regardless of the location or method of their gathering.

Avery Dulles (2002) further elaborated on this concept by describing the Church as a "Community," focusing on the personal and interpersonal fellowship with God and one another. This model, while universal, is expressed in local gatherings of believers, each embodying the same potential as the whole body of Christ.

The New Testament stresses the importance of believers "coming together" (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:26) and warns against neglecting these gatherings (Hebrews 10:25). These gatherings were essential for teaching, prayer, breaking bread, and fellowship (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). The core of

the Church's identity lies in the people who make up their bodies, and thus, there should be no restriction on the location or method of their gathering. The emphasis is on believers' collective worship and communion, whether in physical or digital spaces, as the Church remains defined by the unity and Lordship of Christ, not the physical setting in which it gathers.

6.2. Basis in the post-Apostolic Tradition

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model can be linked to the concept of the Church as the (body) of Christ. Both foreground the invisible feature of the Church (unity in Christ) in relation to its visible structure. Augustine and other Church Fathers elucidated the Body of Christ, stressing the invisible communion that unites Christians. Augustine speaks of both the earthly and the heavenly Church, including the angels and souls of the departed. Thus, as cited by Amin (2020), both Thomas Aquinas and other theological perspectives affirm that the Body of Christ is not visible.

Invisible communion, though by its nature always growing, presupposes the life of grace, by which we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), and the practice of the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Only in this way do we have true communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nor is faith sufficient; we must persevere in sanctifying grace and love, remaining within the Church "bodily" as well as "in our heart"; what is required, in the words of Saint Paul, is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Keeping these invisible bonds intact is a specific moral duty incumbent upon Christians who wish to participate fully in the Eucharist by receiving the body and blood of Christ (Amiri 2020).

The Church is a "divinizing communion with God, whether incompletely in this life or completely in the life of glory" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q.75, art.1). It is the Holy Spirit that binds the members of the Church. Visible structures like sacraments, laws, and so on have a secondary role in fostering a disposition toward an interior union with God through God's grace.

However, the thrust toward institutionalism during the period of Emperor Constantine led to the over-emphasis on the visible features of the Church in the succeeding centuries (Williston 2014). In the early 20th century, Belgian Jesuit Emile Mersch revitalized the Mystical Body of Christ concept and distinguished between the institutional Church and the mystical body as those who embody the life of Christ (Amiri 2020).

In 1943, Pius XII published his encyclical *Mystics Corporis*, in which he identified the mystical body of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church. Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* affirmed the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ but departs from *Mystics Corporis* in distinguishing between the Church as a hierarchical society and the Body of Christ. The institutional Church is comparable to Christ's human nature, while the Body of Christ is to its divine nature. It also did not identify the Body of Christ simply to the Roman Catholic Church (Pius XII 1943; Vatican II 1964).

Within the framework of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" associated with local dioceses and parishes, there exists a seamless continuum between the Church's online and offline expressions. This interconnectedness serves as a manifestation of the Church's visible and invisible dimensions, where its sacramental and spiritual realities are harmoniously integrated (Yohannes 2017; Campbell and Evolvi 2020). These communities reflect the ecclesial principle of *communio*—a visible gathering that transcends physical presence through digital engagement.

In contrast, independent "Interactive Communities of Disciples" tend to emphasize the Church's invisible dimension, particularly its spiritual unity in Christ as the foundation of ecclesial identity. This focus highlights the mystical nature of the Church as the body of Christ, wherein digital interactions serve to strengthen the spiritual communion of believers regardless of their geographic or institutional affiliation. Such ecclesial models invite a deeper reflection on the ways digital connectivity participates in the Church's mission of unity and inclusivity.

6.3. Sense of Corporate Identity and Mission

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model is strong in fostering a corporate identity and mission, especially among the young, those who are digitally connected, and those who may not be "wired" but benefit from this connectedness.

To ask whether the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model can give church members a sense of their corporate identity and mission is the same as asking if the "Interactive Community of Disciples" is genuinely a church. Campbell (2020) explained that "religious community is possible online but is different from traditional ideas of community."

The sense of mission, nonetheless, need not be weaker. While the model of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" may not emphasize

mission in the sense of gaining converts to Christianity, the community itself actively engages in mission through dialogue with others, including the poor, the excluded, and people of different faiths and religions. In the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), Pope Francis described the sad reality that "persons are no longer considered as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, particularly whether they are impoverished and disabled, 'not yet valuable'—such as the unborn—or 'no longer needed'—such as the old" (*Fratelli Tutti,* no. 18). We have become oblivious to all forms of wastefulness, beginning with food waste, which is abhorrent in the extreme. This illusion, which is blind to the great fraternal virtues, leads to "a kind of cynicism." For that is the temptation that awaits us if we follow the path of disillusionment and disappointment. Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about regeneration. The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model reminds us of the good Samaritan who goes out of his way to be a "neighbor" to the person who has been victimized. The mission of this model of Church is to witness especially to the victims of society the compassion of Jesus.

6.4. The Capacity to Foster Christian Virtues and Values

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model fosters the value of option for the marginalized and excluded and the need for participation and equality. The Parable of the Good Samaritan stresses the inclusion of and participation of other/s in the promotion of God's reign. In this story, it is not the religious people—the priest and the Levite—who fully understand what it means to be a neighbor, but the Samaritan, an "other" to the Jews. Jesus expanded here the meaning of neighbor to include not only members of dominant groups, people who are like us, but also those from the peripheries who are not like us.

A positive aspect of computer-mediated communication is the potential for intensifying collaboration in the neighborhood. The collaborative process blurs the boundaries (between men and women, between students and teachers) because their roles have become somewhat shared and interchangeable. Women are placed in a collaborative environment with men to explore, examine, explain, and reorganize their knowledge. The development of the internet and digital media, together with the increase in the population's educational level, the changes brought about by the development of advanced service industries, and the growing demand for non-

material labor has dramatically changed how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed (Fortunati 2007; Lin et al. 2000).

The traditional boundaries between those who create information and those who consume it and the tools, time, and space for disseminating knowledge have also been blurred (Shirky 2008, 15). Bridging the gaps between the elite and the ordinary people is another important value promoted in the "Interactive Community of Disciples." Hargitay (2008, 936–944) asserted that universal access to digital technology serves as a crucial means of bridging the divide between societal elites and the broader population. This endeavor fosters intergenerational and interfaith engagement while addressing disparities across social strata, encompassing both the affluent and the marginalized. Such principles resonate deeply with the theological vision of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model, which aspires to embody Christ's call to unity, inclusivity, and justice within the digital neighborhood.

In traditional churches, women's roles were usually used more to handle functions in the domestic sphere. In terms of communication, women were bound to minimal knowledge production since their role was domestic and connected to a limited and closed network (Tannen 1990). The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model, involving both women and men, has enabled women to expand their communication processes and engage with previously unknown individuals (Tannen 1990). Generally, cyberspace serves as an open platform where women can discuss a variety of issues. The unknown women become known in the Interactive Community of Disciples, and possible controls reappeared.

Through multilateral communication, the internet may challenge and assert conventional authority. The web offers the plausibility of subverting authority structures. It can potentially break down the traditional unidirectional flow of information from church authority to the faithful. However, Christians tend to duplicate the same offline chain of command online. They are used to having a clear mission statement and set of principles that have been decided by committees and worked out through specific authority structures (Campbell 2013). If you do that vetting process, you will lose many people because the digital natives are not used to that in an instantaneous, global culture. Campbell noted that people no longer live in these tightly bound groups defined by family, institution, or geography. They live in these fluid networks, and it is up to the institution to see how we will frame that as a challenge or an opportunity.

6.5. Correspondence with the Religious Experience of Humanity Today

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model corresponds to the experience of two important groups: the digital natives and the immigrants. This model emerges as a response to the digital native experience, where individuals, especially younger generations, seamlessly interact with technology from an early age. Observing children independently navigating smartphones and tablets highlights their innate adaptability to digital tools, which continue to evolve rapidly. As previous generations adapted to innovations like Betamax, today's youth are immersed in ever-advancing digital experiences. However, if the Church lags technologically, it risks becoming irrelevant to digital natives who expect personalized and interactive engagement, like their curated social media and online experiences.

While some perceive this generation as disconnected from faith, they are not disengaged from spirituality but rather from churches that fail to integrate into their digital realities. Millennials and digital natives seek immersive and engaging online interactions that mirror their offline lives, fluidly blending both realms. They form communities that extend across digital and physical spaces, requiring churches to rethink traditional structures and adapt to online platforms. Unlike digital immigrants, digital natives process information rapidly, favor multitasking, and engage in nonlinear, hypertext thinking, necessitating a shift in the Church's approach to engagement and communication. As digital natives become the dominant global population, churches must evolve to meet their expectations and integrate faith into their digital ecosystems (Prensky 2001).

Digital natives prioritize social platforms over traditional media and value authenticity over professional branding. In an "Interactive Community of Disciples," faith integrates with daily life through smart devices, from inspirational messages on mirrors and refrigerators to Bible study in autonomous vehicles. Technology enables constant connectivity, allowing believers to engage in spiritual practices and community interactions across digital and physical spaces.

This is just a foretaste into the future of the "Interactive Community of Disciples," and the Church can play a role by embracing life-changing gospel messages and using innovative methods to make them available. As a missionary, take the Church off the wall and bring it to the people (Caston 2015).

Moreover, there are those known as digital immigrants—individuals who were not born into the digital era but have embraced technology as part of their lives. Like all immigrants, some adapt more easily than others. However, they often retain certain habits that reflect their transition into the digital world. This "digital immigrant accent" can be seen in behaviors such as preferring printed materials over digital ones, writing down website addresses instead of bookmarking them, or struggling with new technological interfaces (Prensky 2001).

Digital immigrants, while gradually adapting to digital communication, continue to engage socially in ways distinct from their digitally native children. They often remain skeptical about the effectiveness of learning through platforms such as YouTube or social media as they struggle to engage with these tools for educational purposes. Campbell (2020), through over 120 interviews with online missionaries, theologians, and technology specialists in the USA and Europe, identifies an emerging religious phenomenon she terms "religious digital creativity." This concept describes how individuals utilize digital media to innovate within ministry while exploring its relationship with institutional churches. Campbell raised critical questions regarding whether churches acknowledge this evolving religious experience, perceive it as a challenge or competition, or seek to integrate it into their broader mission and objectives.

6.6. Theological Fruitfulness

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model serves as a rich space for theological exploration, providing a platform for faith communities and scholars to engage in meaningful theological reflection. This digital space allows theologians to reconsider fundamental aspects of theological anthropology, mainly what it means to be human in a cyber-mediated world (Brazal 2014, 199-220). Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg—a hybrid of human and machine—raises profound theological questions about embodiment in cyberspace.

If digital technology becomes an integral part of human identity, then theological discourse must grapple with the implications of Christ's embodiment in virtual spaces. Can we conceptualize a "Cyborg Christ" as part of cyber-theology (Vicini and Brazal 2015, 148-65)? Furthermore, liturgical and sacramental theology must address whether Christ's real presence extends to the online masses (Labenek 2014). In missiology, the cyber-

context redefines mission, prompting reflection on what it means to be a cyber-missionary in an increasingly digitized world.

Beyond theology, the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model fosters inclusivity and interfaith dialogue, promoting engagement beyond traditional church boundaries. Inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan, this model recognizes grace even among those marginalized or outside the Christian faith. Platforms like Belief.netfacilitate interreligious dialogue and challenge internal church inequalities, including clericalism and sexism. The fruitfulness of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model lies in its ability to build bridges between diverse religious traditions, creating meaningful connections between Christians of various denominations, non-Christians, and secular humanists through digital engagement.

6.7. Capacity to Foster Good Relationship with Those Outside Their Group

The conceptualization of the Church as an "Interactive Community of Disciples" underscores its intrinsic ability to nurture constructive relationships not only among its members but also with those beyond its ecclesial confines. This openness is rooted in a theological recognition of grace operative outside the Church's visible boundaries, as exemplified in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Within this model, the Samaritans—symbolizing those marginalized or traditionally excluded from religious or societal acceptance—are seen as vessels of divine grace.

In this digital age, cyberspace emerges as a critical avenue through which religious communities can embody this openness. Platforms such as Belief.net provide a space for dialogue and engagement that transcend denominational and doctrinal divides. These digital interactions serve as a corrective to systemic imbalances within the Church, such as clericalism and gender inequality, while simultaneously fostering relational depth with individuals of other Christian traditions, adherents of non-Christian religions, and even secular humanists. Thus, the Church's digital engagement not only mirrors its theological commitment to inclusivity but also manifests its capacity for meaningful, grace-filled interactions in an interconnected world.

7. Conclusion: Towards an Interactive Community of Disciples

This study has critically engaged with Avery Dulles' ecclesiological models in light of the digital age, proposing a necessary re-envision of these frameworks to address the transformative realities of online faith communities. Traditional ecclesiology, while rooted in historical and doctrinal continuity, must evolve to remain relevant in a world where digital interactions shape social, relational, and even spiritual experiences. The proposed model of "Interactive Community of Disciples" serves as a theological response to the shifting contours of ecclesial life in cyberspace, emphasizing relationality, shared mission, and adaptive ecclesial structures that transcend physical limitations while maintaining the Church's identity and mission. This model aligns with the Church's incarnational and sacramental nature, affirming that God's presence is not confined to sacred buildings but is dynamically mediated through digital encounters.

Dulles' Institutional Model, traditionally centered on hierarchical leadership and doctrinal authority, must adapt to the digital landscape's decentralized and participatory nature. The Church's engagement with digital platforms requires a more synodal approach, fostering shared leadership and co-responsibility, ensuring that authority structures are flexible and responsive to the needs of online communities. Meanwhile, the Mystical Communion Model, which highlights relational unity in Christ, finds new theological depth in the interconnectedness of virtual faith communities. These communities, despite existing beyond physical spaces, can facilitate genuine ecclesial communion, demonstrating that the Spirit's work is not bound by geography but is present wherever believers gather in faith.

The Sacrament Model, while raising theological challenges regarding presence and participation, invites a renewed understanding of sacramentality in the digital age. While the materiality of the sacraments remains essential, digital interactions offer new possibilities for spiritual encounters, reinforcing the belief that grace is not confined to physical proximity. Theologically, this affirms that sacramental life, while rooted in tangible signs, can be complemented by online liturgical participation, pastoral engagement, and faith formation. Similarly, the Herald Model is revitalized by digital media, which expands the Church's prophetic mission beyond traditional spaces. The internet serves as a contemporary Areopagus, where the proclamation of the Gospel can engage diverse audiences in dynamic,

interactive ways, making evangelization more accessible and responsive to contemporary spiritual needs.

The Servant Model is perhaps the most naturally aligned with digital ecclesiology, as online platforms provide new avenues for social justice, advocacy, and pastoral outreach. The digital Church, reflecting the kenotic (self-emptying) mission of Christ, must engage with marginalized voices, promote justice, and cultivate spaces of healing and support in cyberspace. Whether through online solidarity movements, virtual pastoral care, or digital humanitarian initiatives, the Church's mission to serve the world is significantly amplified in the digital age.

The application of Dulles' ecclesiological criteria provides a systematic framework for assessing the legitimacy and efficacy of online churches. These criteria encompass fidelity to Scripture, continuity with Christian Tradition, a coherent communal identity and mission, the cultivation of virtues and values, attentiveness to contemporary religious contexts, theological profundity, and a commitment to inclusivity. The New Testament underscores the indispensability of the assembly of believers, whether in tangible or virtual realms, affirming the ecclesial unity that is grounded in Christ.

Conceptualized as the body of Christ, the "Interactive Community of Disciples" embodies the spiritual unity of believers, in accordance with the ethos of early Christian ecclesiology. Digital faith communities exemplify this by fostering a shared ecclesial identity and mission through dialogue and outreach initiatives that reflect Christ's compassion. Moreover, online churches advocate for inclusivity and equality, confronting hierarchical tendencies and providing platforms for marginalized voices within the ecclesial body.

These digital ecclesial expressions cater to diverse audiences—both digital natives and immigrants—through personalized and interactive modalities of engagement. By doing so, they challenge conventional ecclesiastical paradigms to adapt to the evolving digital milieu. Digital platforms, furthermore, serve as loci for innovative theological reflection, addressing novel constructs such as human-cyborg identity and the manifestation of Christ's presence in the digital sphere.

The notion of "Interactive Communities of Disciples" also prioritizes interfaith dialogue and an openness to the other, thereby addressing structural inequities such as clericalism and sexism. When aligned with Dulles' criteria, these "Interactive Communities of Disciples" uphold doctrinal

integrity, foster inclusivity, and maintain theological relevance, presenting themselves as authentic ecclesial realities that effectively minister to the spiritual needs of today's interconnected society.

While Dulles' models remain valuable, they require theological adaptation to fully engage with the interactive, participatory, and relational nature of digital ecclesiology. The proposed "Interactive Communities of Disciples" model does not seek to replace existing models but to expand them in ways that honor both tradition and innovation. This model affirms that online churches, when properly grounded in theological reflection, can maintain doctrinal integrity, inclusivity, and spiritual vitality, ensuring that the Church remains a relevant and transformative presence in the digital world. By re-envisioning Dulles' ecclesiology, this study asserts that the Church must not only exist in digital spaces but must actively shape them as spaces of authentic discipleship, theological reflection, and communal engagement. This vision ensures that the Church continues to be a living, dynamic, and mission-driven body, effectively responding to the spiritual needs of a digitally connected society.

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Confucian Values and Their Contemporary Applications on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the ethical implications of using social media and fostering interfaith dialogue across religious traditions and cultures, utilizing Confucian principles as a framework for analysis. This research delves into the nuanced exploration of the Confucian Golden Rule within the Analects focusing on the Confucian concept of Ren, a central virtue emphasizing humaneness, benevolence, and social harmony, which offers valuable guidance for ethical media practices. By examining specific case studies and analyzing the ethical implications of media portrayals, this research aims to identify areas for improvement and offer recommendations for more ethical and responsible media practices by employing the analytical perspectives of Alfredo Co, Richard Ang. Co's meticulous examination unveils the cultural and historical context shaping Confucius' moral paradigm, elucidating the subtle interplay between filial piety and ethical conduct. Ang's critical lens adds depth by dissecting the linguistic nuances embedded in the Analects, deciphering the layered meanings behind Confucius' aphorisms and their implications for moral conduct. Key findings include the challenges of misinformation, online

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harassment, and commercialization in social media. The research highlights the importance of using social media responsibly, promoting religious open-mindedness, and fostering community engagement. This research shows the moral framework created by Co and Ang and investigates the multifaceted pathways of Confucian philosophy, highlighting significance of Confucius' teachings as foundational guidelines for ethical behavior in modern society. It offers valuable insights for religious people, educators, and media professionals seeking to promote ethical and responsible online practices.

Keywords: *religious education, social media, Confucian virtues, ren*

1. Introduction

In today's society, individuals appear to be neglecting moral principles by disregarding fundamental ethical requirements in their communication, interactions, and relationships with others. As technology has advanced and social media platforms have become pervasive, the way we communicate and interact with others has fundamentally changed. This shift has led to a decline in empathy, a crucial component of healthy relationships and a functioning society. However, social media has become an integral part of contemporary society, revolutionizing communication, information sharing, and social interaction. Its impact is particularly significant in education, where it offers new opportunities for learning, collaboration, and engagement.

This research aims to analyze the distinct perspectives of Alfredo Co and Richard Ang. Co's work on Confucian ethics emphasizes the importance of *Ren* (humaneness) in fostering social harmony, their practicality in the fast-paced, often impersonal world of social media requires careful consideration. In his analysis, Co explains, *Ren* can be applied to modern contexts, such as social media, to promote ethical behavior and mutual respect. This aligns with my research as I explore how *Ren* can guide online interactions and interfaith dialogue. Ang's interpretation of Confucian virtues, particularly *Ren* and *Yi* (righteousness),

highlights the importance of self-cultivation and community responsibility. His insights are particularly relevant to my study, as they provide a framework for understanding how Confucian principles can be applied to social media to combat misinformation and promote ethical communication.

The Confucian Golden Rule, preserved within the Analects, has served as a foundational ethical principle shaping societies for ages. The rule is encapsulated in the famous saying, "Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you" (Analects, 15.23) is a fundamental principle that underscores the importance of empathy, compassion, and mutual respect. This principle aligns closely with the Confucian virtue of *Ren*. As Co (2009) explains, *Ren* is not merely a virtue but a foundational principle that guides ethical behavior in both personal and social contexts. This principle is particularly relevant in the digital age, where social media often lacks the empathy and respect that *Ren* promotes. It is the foundation in which we can see the *Zhong* as the positive aspect of the *Ren* and the *Shu* as the comforting reminder or prohibitive advice which is also known as the Confucian Golden Rule.

Confucian morality is deeply relational, emphasizing the interconnections of individuals within a social context. The Confucian virtues *Ren*, *Yi*, *Li*, *Zhi*, and *Xin* underscore this relational aspect, guiding individuals in their interactions and shaping the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Among these core principles, *Ren* stands out as the most fundamental. It is the foundation upon which other virtues are built. *Ren* encompasses a wide range of qualities, including kindness, compassion, love, respect, and empathy (Co 2009). The cultivation of *Ren* involves personal moral development, aiming to create a harmonious and compassionate society.

This research is significant because it addresses a timely and important issue in today's world. As social media continues to play a crucial role in education and communication, it is essential to consider the ethical implications and explore ways to use it effectively for religious education. Using Confucian principles, this research offers a framework for promoting positive and responsible use of social media in this context.

Confucian *Ren* influences social media by promoting ethical technology use, encouraging respect and responsibility while avoiding harmful behaviors like cyberbullying. It fosters interfaith dialogue through respectful online discussions and helps build supportive communities for social communication. Confucian principles help create and share good religious educational materials. However, challenges remain, such as

misinformation, religious extremism, harassment, and distraction from spiritual pursuits. Commercial interests can also affect the spiritual significance of religious content. By adhering to principles of respect, harmony, and responsibility, individuals can influence social media to enhance religious understanding and community, while also addressing these potential issues.

This paper concentrates on Confucian *Ren* providing a valuable framework for understanding the ethical implications of using social media and religious traditions. Applying Confucian principles, individuals can use social media in a way that promotes positive values, fosters community and contributes to a more harmonious and just society. Let us now elaborate on the fundamental function of Confucian principles.

2. Confucian Ethics and Morality

2.1. The Philosophy of *Ru Jia*

The *Ru Jia* is a system of thought and social order; it is often described as a philosophy rather than a religion, as it focuses on ethical and social principles rather than supernatural beliefs. In the history of China, there has been no such thing as Confucianism. Confucius says, "A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old *P'ang*" (Analects 7.1). While the West refers to this as Confucianism, the Chinese term is *Ru Jia*, or the School of Literati. This 'Literati' school represents the philosophy of the lettered class, which, though often equated with the 'educated class' in the West, carries a distinct meaning within *Ru Jia*. Specifically, it's crucial to distinguish between those 'who know' and those merely 'educated,' as true education in *Ru Jia* is understood as a comprehensive cultivation of the self. In Confucian teachings, prophetic characteristics are represented throughout history by wise sages and role models. Profound ethical understanding and knowledge are frequently acquired through their grasp of the principle of harmony, righteousness, and propriety. Confucius is widely regarded as a wise individual whose teachings on ethics, good behavior, and societal balance having significant impact on East Asian culture and philosophy (Le Duc 2024). One of the key concepts in Confucian philosophy is the *Junzi*, translated as "gentleman" or "exemplary person." This is a person who,

though not necessarily possessing innate wisdom, diligently strives to embody Confucian values such as benevolence (*Ren*), righteousness (*Yi*), and propriety (*Li*). Through this dedicated effort, the *Junzi* becomes a moral role model within society, demonstrating a commitment to continuous personal growth and the consistent upholding of ethical principles, thereby demonstrating and pursuing a form of practical wisdom. They lead and inspire others through practicing Confucian values in their everyday lives and relationships (Le Duc 2024)

There are five core Confucian principles known as five Confucian virtues: *Ren* (仁): Humaneness, benevolence, or goodness. This is the central virtue in Confucianism, emphasizing empathy, compassion, and the importance of human relationships. *Yi* (義): Righteousness, justice, or duty. This refers to fulfilling one's obligations and acting by what is right. *Li* (禮): Propriety, etiquette, or ritual. This encompasses the proper way to behave in various social situations, including family, community, and state. *Zhi* (智): Wisdom, knowledge, or understanding. This refers to the ability to think critically, make sound judgments, and learn from experience. *Xin* (信): Trustworthiness, sincerity, or faithfulness. This emphasizes the importance of being honest, reliable, and keeping one's promises. Among these core principles, *Ren* serves as the foundational virtue upon which all others are built. *Ren* emphasizes the importance of human relationships and the cultivation of a moral character. By practicing *Ren*, individuals can contribute to a harmonious and just society.

2.2. Relationship of *Ren* and Confucian Golden Rule

Confucian ethics lies in benevolence or "*Ren*." Confucius regarded *Ren* as the ultimate virtue, emphasizing compassion, kindness, and love toward others. *Ren* involves treating people with empathy and fostering a sense of humanity. It extends beyond familial ties to encompass a broader social responsibility.

Ren has two dimensions: the universal and the particular. In the universal sense, *Ren* is the primary principle of human action. In its particular dimension, *Ren* is used as a principle of moral justification. Confucius considers the universal *Ren* as the first true moral consciousness in the reflection of humanity because the cognition of the other is people first moral awakening: I am not alone, for there is someone else other than I ready to receive me as much as they are prepared to receive attention from

me. For Confucius, the consciousness of *Ren* is not a difficult task as it is almost connected with one's consciousness. Confucius says, "I wish to be virtuous and lo! Virtue is at hand" (Analects, 7.29). *Ren* is, however, also a substantive principle of human conduct. It is love for humanity in the sense of conscious concern for the well-being of others. Confucius elaborates on this idea saying, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others" (Analects, 15.23). This principle, which also appears in Christian teachings, reflects a common human understanding of ethical behavior.

Confucius states that true learning extends beyond academic study or the mere accumulation of knowledge. It involves sincerely embracing virtues, committing fully to serving parents and leaders, and engaging sincerely with friends (Analects, 1.7). Confucius is saying that learning is more than intellectual, academic study, or the accumulation of facts. It is the process of manifesting one's *Ren* by developing oneself in self-reflection through the various types of human relationships.

Confucius' philosophy is founded on the premise of an inherent human nature, upon which he constructed his moral imperatives. In his effort to transform the inner moral consciousness of *Ren* into concrete form, he tried to elaborate on the overlying unity of his teaching. *Ren,* in a broad sense, denotes the *Zhong* and *Shu* concepts in Confucianism; these two related principles act as the concrete model and direction for achieving the ideal of *Ren*. Initially, the character *Zhong* 忠 is made up of two characters, the primary character *Zhong* 中, representing 'center', 'central', or 'middle'; and *Xin* 心, denoting 'heart' and 'mind,' leading to both emotions and logic. Similarly, the character *Shu* 枢 is an intricate ideogram consisting of two radicals: *Nu*, signifying 'woman'; *Kou*, meaning 'mouth'; and once more, *Xin* (Co 2009, 113).

Zhong reflects the positive traits of *Ren's* practice: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." A person embodying *Ren* is aware of others without pretension. It's not about selflessness but doing something both for oneself and for others, seeing others as extensions of oneself. In the Analects, Confucius says, "The man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, also seeks to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he also seeks to enlarge others...to judge others by what is nigh in ourselves; this may be called the art of virtue" (Legge 1893, 6.28). *Zhong* is also tied to *Li*, which governs relationships in society, dictating how individuals should treat each other, such as how a younger brother should treat an elder. It emphasizes kindness, empathy, and respect for others,

beginning with self and extending to family, relatives, and society. Thus, *Zhong* is seen as a 'moral injunction.'

On the other hand, *Shu* carries a negative aspect, focusing on caution or prohibition. When a disciple asked Confucius about perfect virtue, he replied, "It is not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself" (Analects, 12.3). This is a moral refrain, offering cautionary advice similar to a mother's guidance. *Shu* is associated with 'woman' or 'mother' and aims to prevent harm by doing the right thing and avoiding the undesired actions others may inflict. In *Shu*, one's conduct is measured by personal standards, not by others' responses. The practice emphasizes that actions should not depend on others' appreciation (Ang 2011). One should do the right thing, regardless of whether others reciprocate, as it is inherently the right way to behave.

Zhong and *Shu*, known as the 'principle of measuring square' or the Golden Rule of Confucius, stands to regulate conduct and behavior towards others. These principles are what a person of *Ren* adheres to in their moral life, making them the practical application of *Ren*..

The concept of *Ren* may have various aspects, depending on how it is taken, but it is also regarded as the cornerstone of all Confucian teachings (Moore 1951). It means that *Ren* has priority over the other concepts, such as *Li* or *Yi*, and also guides all of the teachings of Confucius, including his teachings on ethics and politics. Moreover, the concept of *Ren* can be identified as Confucius' life ideal: what a person should aspire for and what society should equally strive for to have lasting peace and harmony (Ang 2011).

Ren encourages religious educators to approach social media with compassion and empathy, recognizing the diverse backgrounds and beliefs of their audience. By fostering benevolence, religious institutions can create an inclusive online community that promotes mutual respect and understanding. Additionally, the principle of *Li* can help maintain propriety and ethical conduct in social media use. In an era of misinformation and sensationalism, adhering to propriety ensures the integrity of religious teachings. By following ethical guidelines, religious educators can deliver their messages respectfully and with dignity, free from the distractions and distortions of online discourse.

In conclusion, while *Ren* may be an aspirational ideal, we can make it more practical on social media by actively applying Confucian principles like the Golden Rule, *Li*, and *Yi*. These values provide a clear and adaptable

framework for ethical behavior in digital spaces, helping users navigate the challenges of social media while promoting empathy, respect, and social harmony. Let us now elaborate on the use of social media in relation to the Confucian principle.

3. Using Social Media in Relation to Confucian Principle

Social media consists of Internet-driven applications built on the principles of Web 2.0, which enables the creation and sharing of user-generated content. It facilitates social interaction, allowing users to exchange ideas, viewpoints, and information globally, regardless of time or location (Tartari 2015). Web 2.0 includes social networks like Pirate Bay and MySpace, blogs, and platforms like Facebook, where users create content. These platforms are the foundation of social media (Carlsson 2010).

Kreutzer and Hinz (2010) classified various types of social media platforms, including blogs, microblogging sites like Twitter, media sharing platforms such as YouTube, social bookmarking platforms like StumbleUpon, and discussion boards like Facebook. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) expanded this list to include virtual environments (e.g., Second Life), virtual gaming realms (e.g., World of Warcraft), and collaborative platforms like Wikipedia. These platforms offer entertainment and communication opportunities, especially for young people, and enable global connections that foster relationships and community engagement (Al-Sammak et al. 2024). They can also improve academic performance through collaborative learning, especially in areas like language learning and digital storytelling (Maher 2024). Additionally, social media provides a sense of belonging and support, which is important for personal development (Popovac et al. 2023).

In today's digital age, social media has become a key part of our daily lives, serving as a platform for communication, information sharing, and community building. Religious institutions have also embraced these platforms to connect with their followers and share their teachings. However, using social media for religious education brings unique challenges, especially in preserving the integrity and authenticity of religious teachings in the digital space.

The use of social media presents a complex mix of benefits and challenges that impact individuals and society. It offers advantages such as improved communication, education, and public engagement. However, it also brings risks like mental health issues and misinformation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for maximizing the benefits while minimizing the drawbacks. Social media also poses challenges like cyberbullying, privacy concerns, and addiction, particularly affecting children and teens, requiring effective strategies to address these risks (Tartari 2015).

In a connected world, the complexities of social media culture highlight the global interconnectedness of media and communication. It serves as a double-edged sword, fostering cultural exchange and understanding while raising concerns about homogenization and dominance. Social media facilitates the broad dissemination of Confucian teachings, connecting diverse audiences globally and enhancing understanding of its principles.

Confucian principles present both opportunities and challenges in the realm of social media, particularly in shaping digital interactions and governance. While Confucian values can enhance social cohesion and ethical engagement online, they can also impose constraints on freedom of expression and individual autonomy. Confucianism emphasizes relationships and community, fostering a more respectful and harmonious online environment (Dennis and Ziliotti 2022). It promotes digital well-being through interconnectedness, suggesting individuals thrive within social structures (Dennis and Ziliotti 2022). Social media can serve as a platform to promote Confucian values, enhancing cultural identity and collective values on a global scale (Lingzhi 2022).

However, this potential for enhancing digital well-being is challenged by the tension between individualistic social media practices and Confucian ideals, which prioritize community and social order (Wong 2013). The integration of Confucian principles into technology policy, such as China's digital governance, raises ethical concerns about privacy and state control, revealing the complexities of aligning modern technology with traditional values (Kirk et al. 2020). Ultimately, the challenge is to reconcile the individualistic nature of social media with the collectivist ethos of Confucian teachings, while leveraging its potential to enhance societal cohesion (Lingzhi 2022).

Despite the potential benefits, there are also challenges in using social media for religious education about Confucian teachings. One primary challenge is the risk of misinformation and misinterpretation. Social media

is a decentralized platform where anyone can create and share content, leading to the spread of inaccurate or misleading information about Confucian teachings. This can distort the original teachings, mislead followers, and undermine the integrity of Confucian education (Co 2020).

Another challenge is the potential for digital distractions and information overload. The fast-paced, constantly evolving nature of social media can be overwhelming, making it difficult for followers to focus on deepening their understanding of Confucian teachings or engaging in meaningful dialogue. Moreover, the superficial nature of social media interactions may not always facilitate the deep reflection and contemplation required for studying Confucian principles (Victoria 2019).

To conclude, despite the global reach of social media, Confucian principles offer valuable guidance for ethical conduct in online interactions. Drawing on Confucian principle, I argue that the concept of *Ren* can serve as a guiding virtue for online behavior. Unlike Western approaches that often emphasize individual rights, Confucian ethics focus on relational harmony and mutual respect. This perspective is particularly valuable in addressing issues such as cyberbullying and misinformation, which flourish in environments lacking empathy and accountability.

This research will proceed by investigating the contemporary application of Confucian teachings, specifically through the analytical lenses offered by Alfredo Co and Richard Ang.

4. The Relevance of Confucian Principles and Their Contemporary Applications on Social Media

4.1. Alfredo Co's Perspective on Confucian Ethics

Alfredo Co, a distinguished Filipino philosopher, has made significant contributions to the field, particularly in exploring Confucian ethics within the context of Filipino cultural values. Co's work delves into the intersection of traditional Confucian principles or the Five Confucian Virtues: benevolence (*Ren*), righteousness (*Yi*), rituals (*Li*), wisdom (*Zhi*), Integrity or Sincerity (*Xin*), and the unique sociocultural landscape of the Philippines. One of Co's notable contributions lies in his analysis of Confucian ethics and its resonance with Filipino values. In ancient China, Confucianism emphasized moral virtues, social harmony, and ethical conduct. Co

skillfully interprets these principles through the lens of Filipino culture, recognizing the importance of familial ties, respect for elders, and communal well-being in the Philippine context. He explains that Confucian principles, particularly on *Ren,* can be applied to the ethical use of social media. Co emphasizes the importance of using social media to promote human flourishing and social harmony.

The start of social media has fundamentally transformed human interaction, creating new opportunities for connection but also introducing challenges such as misinformation and online harassment. In this context, Confucian principles like *Ren* and *Li* offer a valuable framework for navigating these complexities. It promotes peace, tolerance, and understanding among diverse faith communities (Mukherjee 2022). By facilitating cross-cultural dialogue, sharing religious knowledge, and fostering empathy, social media can contribute to a more harmonious and inclusive society. Nevertheless, it has also transformed into a channel for disseminating false information, promoting hate speech, and encouraging religious intolerance. To tackle these obstacles, it is essential to promote a culture of respect, tolerance, and understanding in digital environments. Confucian values, with their emphasis on humaneness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness, provide a valuable framework for understanding the ethical implications of using social media for religious purposes. The focus on humaneness (*Ren*) in Confucian values offers a helpful guide for navigating the challenges of social media and encouraging dialogue between different faiths.

Co's (2009) meticulous examination of Confucian ethics reveals the cultural and historical context that shapes Confucius' moral paradigm. He emphasizes the interplay between filial piety (*Xiao* 孝) and ethical conduct, which is crucial for understanding how Confucian values can be applied to modern challenges such as social media. Co's work provides a bridge between traditional Confucian thought and contemporary issues, offering a framework for ethical behavior in digital spaces. In the Filipino context, Co highlights the reciprocity inherent in the *Bayanihan* spirit—communal unity and cooperation. The ideal society of Confucius promotes a harmonious relationship among morally perfected individuals with a well-ordered structure based on citizen's mutual attachment to individual obligations.

Social media can promote religious tolerance by providing a platform for people to share their stories and experiences. As Co interprets it, this interconnectedness aligns with the Confucian ideal of fostering a

harmonious society through mutual respect and understanding. By sharing personal narratives about their religious beliefs and practices, individuals can make their faith more relatable, helping to dispel misunderstandings and stereotypes. A study by the Pew Research Center (2018) found that 53 percent of social media users have changed their views on an issue because of something they saw on social media. Thus, sharing personal stories on social media can be an effective way to challenge negative stereotypes and foster empathy and understanding among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds.

However, it is important to use social media responsibly and ethically. Confucian principles can guide individuals in navigating the complexities of the digital world. For example, the principle of *Yi* (righteousness) encourages individuals to use social media to promote truth and justice (Co 2009). This means avoiding the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and harmful content. By applying the principle of *Yi* to social media, individuals can use their knowledge and critical thinking skills to identify and debunk false information, promoting accurate and reliable information online. By following the values of integrity and transparency, people can encourage productive communication and prevent damaging actions such as online harassment and discriminatory remarks. Understanding the importance of privacy, individuals can be mindful of the information they share online and take steps to protect their own and others' privacy. By using social media to advocate for social justice and environmental sustainability, individuals can contribute to a more just and equitable world. As individuals, we should commit to verifying information before sharing it, producing truthful, respectful, and informative content, and consciously managing our screen time to avoid excessive social media use.. And lastly by embracing the Confucian principle of *Yi*, individuals can use social media as a tool for good, promoting understanding, compassion, and social justice.

In addition, practicing *Li* (propriety) as proper digital etiquette and responsible behavior online (Co 2009). *Li* refers to appropriate behavior and societal conventions. Within the realm of social media, it leads the way to ethical online conduct. *Li*, reminds us that online interactions, though virtual, are still social. Just as we adhere to etiquette in face-to-face encounters, we must uphold "netiquette" in online spaces, respecting community norms and engaging in civil discourse. Confucian teachings, with its emphasis on wisdom (*Zhi*) and trustworthiness (*Xin*) (Co 2009), offers a

valuable framework for navigating the complex landscape of social media. These two virtues, when applied to online interactions, can help individuals to use social media ethically and effectively. Wisdom, as understood in Confucian teachings, involves the ability to discern right from wrong, to think critically, and to make sound judgments. In the context of social media, wisdom can be applied in the following ways by encouraging individuals to critically evaluate information and to be wary of misinformation and disinformation. Promoting digital literacy skills, such as the ability to identify credible sources to recognize bias and use wisdom to make informed decisions about how to use social media, including the types of content to share and the amount of time spent online. The importance of trustworthiness (*Xin*) is another key Confucian virtue that can be applied to social media. By being honest, reliable, and keeping one's promises, individuals can build trust with others and contribute to a positive online environment. Some ways to apply *Xin* to social media include being genuine and authentic in online interactions. Engaging in respectful and civil discourse, even when disagreeing with others respecting the privacy of others, and avoiding sharing personal information without consent. By integrating the principles of *Zhi* (wisdom) and *Xin* (trustworthiness), individuals can use social media to engage in ethical and responsible social communication. This includes sharing accurate and reliable information, engaging in constructive dialogue, and fostering a sense of community. Eventually, the goal is to use social media as a tool for good, promoting peace, understanding, and spiritual growth. By applying Confucian principles, individuals can navigate the challenges of the digital age and use social media to benefit themselves and others.

Afredo Co's philosophy provides a crucial lens through which to apply these Confucian principles. Co emphasized the importance of contextualizing ethical frameworks, recognizing that abstract principles must be adapted to specific situations. This approach is particularly relevant to social media, a dynamic and ever-evolving environment. Co's work encourages us to move beyond a rigid interpretation of Confucianism, instead urging us to apply its core values in a manner that addresses the unique challenges of the digital age.

The framework proposed here, combining Confucian principles and Alfredo Co's contextual approach, offers a powerful tool for fostering ethical social media communication. By cultivating empathy, respecting online etiquette, promoting truth and justice, using wisdom and critical

thinking, and building trust, we can create a more positive and productive online environment. By grounding our online interactions in these timeless values, we can harness the power of social media for good, promoting connection, understanding, and positive change.

4.2. Richard Ang's Perception on Confucian Virtues

In the digital age, the ethical challenges presented by social media demand a healthy framework for moral guidance. Richard Ang, O.P., a respected Filipino philosopher and priest, offers a crucial perspective by bridging ancient Confucian wisdom with contemporary realities. Ang's scholarship, marked by a commitment to academic excellence and social responsibility (University of Santo Tomas, n.d.), delves into the enduring relevance of Confucian virtues, particularly benevolence (*Ren*) and righteousness (*Yi*), in navigating modern ethical dilemmas. Importantly, Ang's work goes beyond mere historical analysis, demonstrating how these core Confucian principles can be practically applied to today's complex social landscapes. This contextualization is especially pertinent to the realm of social media, where issues like misinformation, online harassment, and the cultivation of virtual communities require a nuanced ethical approach. By illuminating how Confucian values can inform our understanding of these challenges, Ang provides a valuable foundation for exploring the application of these principles in fostering ethical and harmonious online interactions.

Confucian teachings presents both opportunities and challenges in the context of social media, particularly in Confucian-influenced societies. On one hand, social media can facilitate the expression of Confucian values such as harmony and collective well-being, fostering connections with Confucian emphasis on relational roles within society (Dennis and Ziliotti 2022). This potential for enhancing digital well-being and community engagement is significant, as Confucian ethics advocate for flourishing through social structures (Dennis and Ziliotti 2022). Social media can help reduce conflicts stemming from religious differences by linking various people and promoting information sharing. To enhance its beneficial effects, users must be able to analyze, comprehend, and assess content while steering clear of biases (Jacoba 2023). Using Confucian values, emphasizing humaneness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness, provides a valuable framework for ethical social media use. By applying

Confucian principles, individuals can use social media to promote positive values and avoid harmful behaviors.

Ang's perspective on cultivating Confucian virtues is grounded in the belief that these qualities are not innate but must be actively developed through practice and reflection. He draws on the teachings of Confucius and his disciples to illustrate this point. For example, in the Analects, Confucius famously states, "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself." This principle, known as the Golden Rule, is a cornerstone of Confucian morality and highlights the importance of empathy and reciprocity in cultivating benevolence (Ang 2011, 561).

Ang explains that the development of benevolence requires both empathy for others and deep self-reflection. He emphasizes the importance of "self-cultivation" (*xiushen*), a process of introspection and self-improvement that enables individuals to develop their moral character. According to Ang, self-cultivation involves lifelong learning, self-reflection, and a willingness to acknowledge one's shortcomings and strive for improvement (Ang 2011, 553-558). The Confucian *Ren* involves recognizing and responding to the feelings and needs of others. It encourages individuals to extend their empathy beyond their immediate circle and act with kindness and understanding toward everyone. This compassionate attitude fosters harmony and strengthens social bonds, which are vital for a stable and just society.

Confucius stressed that *Ren* should be cultivated through practice and reflection, with the ultimate goal of creating a more humane and just world. Reaching the peak of self-cultivation involves seeing oneself as interconnected with others and prioritizing their needs over selfish desires. As Huston Smith remarks, shifting empathy from oneself to one's family helps overcome selfishness. Extending this empathy from the family to the community transcends favoritism, and moving from a local community to a larger nation helps overcome narrow-mindedness. Ultimately, shifting toward a focus on all of humanity combats extreme nationalistic pride (Le Duc 2023).

Confucian *Ren* emphasizes the importance of respecting others, even those with different beliefs. Social media can serve as a platform to foster interfaith dialogue and promote mutual understanding. Communication, within the Confucian framework, is not limited to humans, but ethical communication among individuals necessitates personal self-cultivation and transformation, striving to embody the traits that signify complete self-

realization (Le Duc 2023). Confucian principles can guide social media users to engage in respectful and constructive online discourse, helping to avoid harmful language and behavior.

Ang's insights into the practical application of Confucian ethics in contemporary contexts are particularly relevant in light of global challenges such as social inequality. He explains that Confucianism offers a unique perspective on these issues, emphasizing the importance of community responsibility and inter-generational justice. *Ren* as love or benevolence begins in the family but does not end there. It is continually extended to society until it covers all people. Confucius argued that the natural affection between relatives within one's family is the starting point of social morality. Ang explores the concept of filial piety (*xiao*), which he explains has important implications for environmental sustainability. According to Ang, filial piety involves a sense of responsibility for future generations, which can be extended to include environmental responsibility (Ang 2011, 548).

Ang suggests that Confucianism offers a unique perspective on human rights that emphasizes community responsibility and interdependence. Ang explains that Confucianism emphasizes the importance of balancing individual rights with community responsibilities, highlighting the need for individuals to act in ways that promote social harmony and benefit society, particularly on social media.

Social media can create online communities that support spiritual growth and provide opportunities for shared learning and reflection. This viewpoint examines the possibility of nurturing spiritual development by acknowledging the relationship between humans and Artificial Intelligence (AI). By taking a balanced approach, recognizing the distinctiveness of human intellect, and comprehending the intricate dynamics between humans and with the use of AI, we can foresee a future in which the rise of robots, especially in this time of digital advancements, does not endanger humanity but brings about a period defined by harmony and coexistence (Jacoba 2023). One of the most significant benefits of social media is its ability to reach a wider audience. By utilizing platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, religious organizations can connect with people from all over the world. This can be particularly beneficial for smaller religious groups or those with limited resources. In the Philippines, they have begun integrating Confucian principles like *Ren* and *Li* into their social media strategies. For instance, the University of Santo Tomas has used Facebook to promote interfaith dialogue, emphasizing respect and empathy in online

discussions. This approach aligns with Confucian values and demonstrates how traditional ethics can inform modern digital practices. By engaging with people of different faiths, individuals can learn from one another and build bridges of empathy and respect. This aligns with the Confucian principle of *Ren*, which emphasizes the importance of humaneness and compassion. In the online world, this means being respectful, kind, and empathetic towards others. Individuals can cultivate digital empathy by considering others' emotions before posting or commenting online, and foster online compassion by utilizing social media to support and encourage others and spread positivity. Furthermore, preventing cyberbullying requires discouraging any online harassment or bullying and stressing the negative impact it can have. The concept of Confucian *Ren* stresses the importance of human kindness, goodwill, and understanding, providing a useful guide for dealing with the challenges of social media. Through the utilization of *Ren* principles, people can encourage empathetic communication, facilitate comprehension, and reduce the adverse effects of online interactions. Knowing one's cultural heritage can boost empathy, enhance communication, and promote collaboration in varied environments. When individuals neglect their cultural heritage, they are more likely to overlook its importance. Due to the impact of mass media, it is challenging to reclaim the role of our culture in influencing our identity. The truth is that although we are not as unified, coherent, consistent, and enduring as we often think, we are still genuine and unique (Placido 2024).

Empathy is a central belief of *Ren*, involving the capacity to comprehend and resonate with someone else's emotions. In my view, Confucian *Ren* goes beyond mere empathy; it calls for active engagement in fostering social harmony. This principle is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where anonymity often leads to a lack of accountability. By applying *Ren*, individuals can create more respectful and inclusive online communities. It also stresses the significance of showing respect towards others. In the digital era, this means showing considerate behavior online by refraining from cyberbullying, hate speech, and personal attacks. Treating others with dignity and respect helps create a positive and constructive online atmosphere. Growing hours of screen usage among young people has a detrimental effect on their language abilities and social engagements, especially if they spend over two hours per day on screens (Dy et al. 2023).

Excessive social media use among youth can disrupt sleep, lower academic performance, and increase anxiety. While media like anime promote

values such as friendship, concerns about violence and inappropriate content make their impact on youth uncertain. Medina's research links sexual content in mass media to increased sex crimes, and the accessibility of online pornography has contributed to a rise in 'cybersex' among youth (Nuncio, 2019). This misuse of social media can lead to mental health issues like depression and anxiety, pushing young people toward violence to resolve problems. Confucian philosophy advocates for responsible and ethical technology use. In social media, this means avoiding misinformation, protecting privacy, and promoting positive change. Applying Confucian principles can help foster understanding, build community, and support social justice.

In conclusion, Ang's work on Confucian virtues and moral development has provided valuable insights into the enduring relevance of Confucianism in modern society. His emphasis on self-cultivation and community responsibility offers a unique perspective on social justice, human rights, and environmental sustainability. As we grapple with global challenges such as social inequality, especially in Social media Ang's insights offer a valuable resource for understanding how traditional philosophies can inform contemporary debates about morality and social responsibility.

Social media, while offering many benefits, also presents challenges such as the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, and addiction. By applying Confucian principles, individuals can mitigate these challenges and promote a more positive online experience. Countering misinformation by critically evaluating information and avoiding the spread of false or misleading content, individuals can help combat the spread of misinformation. Promoting digital citizenship using Confucian principles can guide individuals in becoming responsible digital citizens, respecting others' rights, and promoting online civility. By balancing digital and real-world relationships by maintaining a balance between online and offline interactions, individuals can avoid excessive screen time and prioritize real-world relationships. Confucian principle emphasizes the importance of respecting others, even if they hold different opinions or beliefs. This can be applied to social media by avoiding personal attacks, engaging in constructive dialogue, and promoting respectful debate. By engaging in respectful dialogue, individuals can foster positive relationships and promote a more inclusive online community (Berling 1996). Encouraging honesty and truthfulness, *Ren* advises people to be genuine and truthful in their dealings with others. In the realm

of social media, this involves refraining from sharing false or misleading information. By providing truthful and dependable information, people can help enhance a well-informed and enlightened conversation. Confucian principle highlights the significance of social harmony and peace. In today's digital era, this involves utilizing social media to advance comprehension, acceptance, and collaboration. Individuals can help create a more peaceful and harmonious online space by promoting constructive dialogue and avoiding divisive language.

Lastly, Confucian ideas about *Ren* offer a helpful way to manage social media. By focusing on empathy, respect, and responsibility, as described by Alfredo Co and Richard Ang, people can use social media to create positive change and build a kinder online community. While existing research has explored the application of Confucian principles to social media, there is a need for a more systematic approach to integrating these values into digital platforms. I propose that social media platforms adopt 'Confucian Ethical Guidelines,' which would encourage users to prioritize empathy, respect, and responsibility in their online interactions. These guidelines could be implemented through features such as content moderation algorithms that prioritize respectful discourse and educational campaigns that promote digital literacy and ethical behavior.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how Confucian values, particularly *Ren* (humaneness), intersect with social media in the context of religious practices. It highlights the importance of ethical considerations and the application of Confucian principles when evaluating the advantages and challenges of using social media for religious purposes, drawing on the analytical perspectives of Co and Ang.Confucian *Ren* provides a valuable framework for navigating the complexities of social media. By emphasizing empathy, compassion, and social harmony, *Ren* can guide individuals to use social media responsibly and ethically. Through the lens of *Ren*, people can foster dialogue among different religions, combat misinformation, and build a sense of community. However, it is also crucial to recognize the potential challenges associated with social media, such as the spread of false information, cyberbullying, and addiction. Individuals must develop digital

literacy skills, apply critical thinking, and remain mindful of their online behavior to effectively address these issues.

In summary, when used wisely, social media has the potential to promote religious education and facilitate discussions between different practices. By adhering to Confucian teachings, individuals can use these platforms to create a more equitable, compassionate, and peaceful society. We are encouraged to explore further research on how social media shapes individual and collective religious identities and practices. By continuing to investigate these areas, researchers can enhance our understanding of the intricate relationship between religion, technology, and society.

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Rabbis in Israel, Public Relations and Advertising

Yoel Cohen[1]

ABSTRACT

This article discusses public relations (PR) and advertising in the work of the rabbi in Israel. The rabbi's influence is felt within the religious population such as through the Sabbath sermon from the synagogue pulpit to congregants, but the media is an additional channel to spreading the rabbi's religious message. The traditional, and secular Israeli Jewish population—as distinct from religiously observant (25 per cent of the Israeli Jewish population)—have no regular daily or weekly interaction with the synagogue, which raises the question of the rabbis using extra-synagogual channels to reach them, notably mass media channels.

In order to throw light on rabbis' attitudes to public relations, the author carried out a survey of Israeli rabbis. Overall, differences were found between rabbis' attitudes to PR and actual practice. The actual appearance of rabbis in the media is less. In attitudinal terms, Haredi or ultra-Orthodox rabbis scored highly in rating the importance of PR, compared to rabbis from other streams, even though Haredi rabbis live in cultural ghettos and Jewish life for

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them is focused on the synagogue and Torah learning. Reaching beyond the pulpit was also important for the more intensive substream of modern orthodoxy, "Hardal". By corollary, it was surprising that PR among the non-Orthodox rabbis—notwithstanding that their arena of religious outreach was secular Israel—was rated lower.

Keywords: *Israel, rabbis, advertising, public relations*

1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) and advertising have a closer connection to theology, including Judaism, than might otherwise be thought. Notwithstanding that Judaism does not have a pro-active agenda of proselytisation, Judaism seeks to promote monotheism and recognition of God Himself. Miraculous events in the Bible—the Israelite Crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus, Chapter 15), to name but one—had an undeniable agenda of publicising the event as a means to win acknowledgement and blessing from Almighty God. When earlier, God appointed Moses—who had a stutter—to be the leader of the Israelites in Egypt, Aaron was appointed as his spokesman (Exodus, 6:30). In addition, the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai were, according to the Jewish Bible commentator, Rashi, given in seventy languages for all humankind to understand.

The traditional framework for rabbis' communication over hundreds of years has been the address from the pulpit in the synagogue (Jewish house of worship). After the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple, Jerusalem, in 70 CE and Jews were exiled from Jerusalem, the ancient rabbis came into their own as teachers of the Torah (the Bible), with the task of interpreting the Torah—the ethical rules for humanity's relationship with God, and relationship among people, including the rabbinical discussions and rulings in the tomes of the Mishna and Talmud (Cohen 2001).

Rabbis draw their thinking and inspiration from the Bible. However, like spiritual leaders in many other faith traditions (Biernatzki 2006; Johnstone 2009), rabbis today recognise the value of using mass media channels to communicate their messages, supplementing the synagogue pulpit (Bigman 2011; Cohen 2024). For example, in modern Orthodox and non-

Orthodox streams in Judaism today, the internet enables synagogue communities to keep in touch with their members and strengthen ties with congregants. So, in the competitive market within mass media channels, Judaism is just one of a multitude of ideas waiting in the marketplace for 'purchasers' who behave and react according to the desire for personal enrichment and enjoyment. This impacts upon religious identity today.

Since the Middle Ages, as the post of rabbi became even more institutionalised, a community rabbi took on additional tasks beyond merely reading from the Torah from the Scrolls of the Law during the Sabbath and holy day services in the synagogue, and also representing the community to outside organs of the state. In doing the latter, the rabbi required general knowledge, far beyond Jewish religious learning, as well as interpersonal communication skills.

In Israel, rabbis do not enjoy a monopoly in being a single focus of Jewish identity, as they do in the Jewish diaspora. The Jewish state itself, its official organs and other non-official institutions, have replaced the synagogue as a focus of Jewish identity to a considerable extent. The media themselves play an important role in building mutual perceptions between religious and secular communities.

2. Jewish Ethics, Public Relations, and Advertising

While the question of public relations and advertising in relations to religion has been treated generally (Bivins 2004; Cohen 2012b; Einstein 2008; Nardella 2014, 2023; Tilson and Chao 2002; Tilson and Venkateswaran 2006; Usunier and Stolz 2014), it has received scant attention in the Jewish context (Dorff 1997; Green 1997; Levine 1981).

This article discusses public relations in the work of the rabbi in Israel. In the contemporary world, PR and advertising are considered distinct. PR often involves spokespersons, such as rabbis, to convey messages. In contrast, advertising typically utilizes purchased space in media channels to promote products and institutions, which can include information about synagogues and the Jewish community. However, ancient Jewish texts do not make this distinction between public relations and advertising. Instead, they discuss both under the general concept of 'persuasion.'

Judaism looks positively on the accumulation of wealth—as long as the rich acknowledge that wealth is a blessing of God (Tamari 1997). Indeed, advertising, such as that appearing prior to Israeli Jewish holy days featuring content associated with religious commercial goods, contributes, in one sense, to Jewish religious identity (Cohen 2018, Chapter 16). However, Judaism does place limitations on modern advertising and PR when offering rules of behavior that aspire to be suitable for the needs of a modern, complex society (Pava 1998). While advertising may play a positive role in providing customers with information, there are moral limits to what may be done in advertising and PR themselves.

Friedman (1984) argues that, as far back as the age of the Talmud, Jewish values impacted marketing and business ethics. The Ten Commandments—the foundation of Jewish ethics—prohibit stealing (Exodus 20:13). The Book of Leviticus states, "Do not steal, do not deny falsely, and do not lie to one another" (Leviticus 19:11-13). The juxtaposition suggests that giving bad advice in advertising and PR is a transgression of the Torah. Reflecting that truth is regarded as a foundation of the world. The Book of Proverbs (12:19) states, "Truthful lips shall be established forever, but a lying tongue is only for a moment." So important is truth in all the monotheistic religions that lying is a fundamental breach of the monotheistic code—or, in the case of Judaism, akin to idol worship (Cohen 2001).

The Talmud and its accompanying work, the Mishna, discussed trading practices in depth. Many laws of the marketplace have their origins in these scriptures. Drawing upon Leviticus 25:17, which states, "In selling….do not be distortionate," Judaism prohibits the trader, in promoting his products, from creating a false impression (termed g*enevat daat* in Hebrew). The trader is required to divulge to a prospective customer all defects in his product, but he is permitted to draw the buyer's attention to the good features of a product as long as these are accurate. Levine (1981) argues that projecting the quality of a good or service is regarded positively in Judaism. But goodwill obtained deceptively through a false impression is forbidden. However, a trader is not obligated to correct an erroneous impression that is the result of self-deception. Showing the defects of the opponent's products is forbidden—as distinct from pointing out the positive aspects of one's own products—and is tantamount to slander and falsehood.

Methodology. In order to throw light on rabbis' attitudes to public relations, the author carried out a survey of Israeli rabbis. The author's survey asked whether the media was a "very good means" or "good means" for spreading religion; whether religion should "not appear in the media"; whether rabbis saw being quoted in the media as "a positive thing"; and whether media inaccuracy in covering religion was due to a lack of success in explaining themselves. In addition, the survey provides data on how many times they had been interviewed or quoted, or had written a press article or blog over the preceding twelve months in the secular media and religious media.

A total of 310 filled questionnaires from Israeli rabbis were received between 2020-2022. The rabbinical profession may be broken down into two types: first, community rabbis; second, rabbis teaching in schools or at higher institutes of religious study (*yeshivot*).

3. Religious Controls in Advertising

Beyond the narrow Haredi or ultra-Orthodox Jewish market, comprising 10 per cent of Israel's Jewish population, and to a lesser extent, the modern Orthodox market, some 15 per cent of the Jewish population, it is difficult to find in practice how Jewish values have impacted modern Israeli life. In the case of religious populations, advertising is qualified by rules regarding pictorial modesty—in the Haredi case, not portraying women. True, the modern state of Israel, established in 1948, draws upon the twin goals of Democracy and Judaism, and against a growing trend of religiosity, including after the October 7, 2023 Hamas massacre, in practice Jewish ethical rules have not taken hold in an explicit sense beyond the need for modesty in advertising.

Different Jewish religious streams have perceived Jewish rules on advertising from their religious perspective. The Reform branch of Judaism has campaigned against the sexploitation of women in advertising. The Ultra-Orthodox Haredim have taken to the streets more than once to protest against what they regard as immodest advertising. They have demanded that advertising in public places, such as on public transport, not be immodest. In 1992, Haredim torched 40 bus shelters that had a picture of a model promoting female swimwear. In 2012, the Haredim achieved a victory

when they succeeded in negotiating with Egged, one of the largest transportation companies in Israel, that all advertising on Jerusalem buses would require the approval of a Haredi body called the "Committee for Purity and Sanctity in the Camp." The Israeli statute book includes a law regarding what is acceptable in the broadcasting of sexually oriented content.

4. Rabbis' Critique of Mass Media

There is a dichotomy because, while the media has become an alternative channel for rabbis, mass media is under serious criticism from rabbis themselves, to the extent of critiquing the media's very legitimacy in society. Fifty-seven per cent of all Israeli rabbis surveyed by the author agreed that advertising damages religious values to a "very great extent" or "largely." Only 24 per cent of all rabbis disagreed "completely" or were inclined "to disagree" (19 per cent agreed "to some extent"), even distancing their followers from exposure to the media.

Considerable tension exists in Israel between religious Jewry and the general media, which is regarded by many in the former, in particular the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community as anti-religious, and secular; and among the modern Orthodox as left-wing and anti-nationalist. For all rabbis, the perceived distance between the media and Judaism—indeed the media antagonism—exists because the media presents a selective and often negative image of religion and religious people.

Recognising, perhaps realistically, that the mainstream media is Western, commercial, and democratic, Haredi communities and, to some extent, the modern Orthodox-cum-Hardal have taken the path of escapism to create their own alternative religious media, in accordance with what rabbis believe the media should and should not be.

The teacher-rabbi in the religious state school system has an important pedagogic function in influencing the outlook of religious children and youth towards the wider society, including the media and such values as freedom of speech and tolerance. These include taking positions on whether children and youth should be exposed to the media, particularly to television and the internet. Reflecting its philosophy of withdrawal from modernity, and seeking to maintain religious values in a cultural ghetto framework, Haredi rabbis have over the years issued religious decrees

(*pesuk din*) against mass media as being a threat to Torah family values. From the appearance of newspapers in the nineteenth century, through to the development of radio and television, and latterly video, computers, the internet and portable phones, Haredi rabbis have enacted decrees against media (Cohen 2011a; 2015). Rabbis in the modern Orthodox community have not issued official Jewish legal rulings regarding media use, but instead have offered a thoughtful yet critical response towards the internet by advocating for the need for media literacy in order to create a balanced and acceptable relationship between the Torah world and the world of modern media.

Yet some modern Orthodox rabbis, notably those identified with the 'Haredi Leumi' sub-stream (or *Hardal* in short), share with the Haredim a separatist view towards modern, non-Jewish culture (Lavie 2019), including limits on exposure to secular media, television, and controls on the internet.

All Orthodox rabbis—including the mainstream modern Orthodox—favour some form of supervision. Sixty-eight per cent of Haredi rabbis in the author's survey favoured this "to a great extent" or "largely," and 15 per cent "a considerable degree." Only 5 per cent of Haredi rabbis opposed it completely or were inclined to. Even more rabbis in the mainstream modern Orthodox stream (67 per cent) supported this: 33 per cent "to a very great extent," and 34 per cent to "a large extent." This is even more noticeable among the *Hardal* rabbis given their outlook of suspicions of non-Jewish culture—59 per cent of *Hardal* rabbis supported this to "a very great extent" and 19 per cent to "some degree."

Among Reform rabbis, 59 per cent opposed it "wholly" or were "inclined to oppose it," as did 46 per cent of Conservative rabbis. Nineteen per cent of Reform rabbis "largely agree[d]" and 18 per cent of Conservative rabbis agreed to a supervision of broadcasting media, and a further 12 per cent of Conservative rabbis did "to a very great extent." There was little difference in terms of age between older and younger rabbis.

5. Advertising Tools Used by Rabbis

A rabbi's influence is felt within the religious population, such as through the Sabbath sermon from the pulpit to congregants, but the media is an

additional channel for spreading the rabbi's religious message, even if this tends to occur much more in the religious media than in the secular Israeli media (Cohen 2012). Notwithstanding that rabbis have yet to maximise the plethora of media techniques, evidence exists that certain use is made of them. Haredi rabbis have long used wall posters (*pashkevil*) tacked up in Israeli religious neighbourhoods to attack or excommunicate those individuals or companies whom they regard as behaving inappropriately. Another recent phenomenon of rabbis' communication through the media is synagogal bulletins (*alonei beit knesset*)—weekly pamphlets distributed free of charge, sometimes extending to many pages, which are distributed in synagogues on the Sabbath. These comprise light and popular discussions by rabbis of the weekly Bible reading in synagogues and discussion of topical Jewish issues on the public agenda, including state-religion issues—offering rabbis a seemingly uncontrolled channel. One of Hassidism's branches, Chabad, has become one of the most active Jewish movements involved in outreach work. The mass media were harnessed for the objective. Already in the 1960s, the Lubavitcher Rebbe had a regular weekly programme on a New York radio station, WEVD (Fishkoff 2003).

The age of the internet has revolutionised the structure of religious communities of different faith through community websites (Horsfall 2000). In the Jewish case, participation in forum and chat discussions of religious belief, and participation in *shiurim* (religious lessons) conducted on the Web, contribute to creating virtual communities. To be sure, online and offline rabbinic communication to their flock is not identical. There is no similarity between a rabbi's answer to a question via the internet or oral interpersonal one-to-one communication. In the former, the rabbi is less able to take into account the specific circumstances of the questioner. Also an internet answer is itself short and does not go into detail. The rabbi may not be able to understand the specific circumstances of the questioner—sometimes anonymously online. The ruling will be more reactive than one given privately by the community rabbi to an individual in his own community, given that Jewish law often in practice has a number of options.

The traditional and secular Israeli Jewish population—as distinct from the religiously observant (25 per cent of the Israeli Jewish population)—have no regular daily or weekly interaction with the synagogue in Israel, which raises the question of rabbis using extra-synagogal channels to reach them, notably mass media channels. The presence of rabbis is felt in the Israeli public sphere. Individual rabbis are not afraid to speak out and

critique Israeli public bodies like the courts, the Army and the *Knesset* (Israeli Parliament), and politicians and businessmen consult rabbis on a host of public policy questions such as foreign affairs, economics and crime. Yet Yedidya Stern, co-editor of *Rabbis and Rabbinate: The Challenge* (2011), is critical of the extent to which Israeli rabbis as a whole do not themselves feel competent to speak out about public issues. Rabbis have a self-interest to enter into a dialogue with the journalistic world. For rabbis, the perceived distance between the media and Judaism—indeed the media antagonism—exists because the media presents a selective and often negative image of religion and religious people. But the chances of dialogue are not high.

6. Public Relations as a Rabbinical Tool

The survey focused on rabbis' attitudes towards the role of the media in rabbinic public relations. Thirty-nine per cent and 27 per cent of all rabbis said that the media was a "very good means" or "good means," respectively, for spreading religion. A further 17 per cent said so to a "certain extent." Only 10 per cent and 8 per cent said this was true "to a little extent" or to "no extent," respectively.

On the question of "the role of the media in contributing to religious identity," Haredi rabbis rated the highest: 55 per cent of Haredi rabbis replied that the media contributed to strengthening religious identity "to a very great extent," and a further 21 per cent "to a great extent." *Hardal* rabbis were the next highest: 43 per cent and 20 per cent of *Hardal* rabbis replied that the media contributed to strengthening religious identity "to a very great extent" or "to a great extent," respectively.

In one sense, it reflected a pro-activist approach to spreading Judaism which Haredim and *Hardal* in general held (the 43 per cent *Hardal* was slightly higher than the 36 per cent of mainstream modern Orthodox, and a further 37 per cent of *Hardal* rabbis said so "to some extent"). Yet, the high figure for Haredi rabbis was nevertheless surprising since Haredim tend to be conservative and see Judaism very much focused on the synagogue or *yeshivot* (religious college)..

More surprising was the relatively lower figures for Reform and Conservative rabbis—which, while the major streams of Judaism, notably in the US, have mostly failed to become significant streams inside Israel,

which remains a mostly Orthodox Jewish rabbinate. In contrast to the Haredi and *Hardal* rabbis, only 23 per cent and 31 per cent of Reform rabbis said the media had a role in religious identity formation "to a very great extent" or "to a great extent." And 25 per cent and 19 per cent of Conservative rabbis said so, respectively. A further 25 per cent of Reform rabbis and 28 per cent of Conservative rabbis said so to "some extent." The lower figures for the Conservative and Reform rabbis were surprising given that these two groups identify with mainstream Israeli society—which while traditional, is not strictly observant in the minutiae of Jewish religious law.

Asked if religion should "not appear in the media," rabbis overwhelmingly disagreed: 59 per cent disagreed completely, and a further 20 per cent agreed "to a small extent." Only 5 per cent agreed and 2 per cent "to a very great extent" or to a "great extent," respectively.

But rabbis saw being quoted in the media as "a positive thing": 28 per cent and 28 per cent saw it as "a very good thing" or "a good thing" to be quoted. A further 24 per cent agreed "to some extent." Only 14 per cent and 6 per cent saw being quoted in the media as "not very desirable" or "not desirable at all," respectively.

Yet, rabbis did not agree that media inaccuracy in covering religion was due to a lack of success in explaining themselves. Twenty-six per cent and 22 per cent believed this to "a small degree only" or "not at all," respectively. A further 26 per cent of rabbis agreed "to a certain extent." Only a quarter of rabbis believed this was true to "a great extent" (19 per cent) or to "a very great extent" (7 per cent), respectively.

However, asked how many times they had been interviewed or quoted over the preceding twelve months, 64 per cent of rabbis had not been interviewed or quoted even once; 14 per cent once or twice; 8 per cent 7 to 10 times. Similarly, 73 per cent had not been interviewed once on secular radio stations in the previous twelve months; 10 per cent had 1 to 2 times; 7 per cent 3 to 6 times. Regarding appearances by rabbis on television: 80 per cent had not appeared on television, 10 per cent had appeared 1 to 2 times on television; and 3 per cent 3 to 6 times.

In the case of the religious media, one might have expected a greater interest in interviewing rabbis, but there was no significant increase on the number of times rabbis had appearances in the religious media compared to the secular media. Sixty-six per cent reported that they had not been quoted in the religious media even once in the previous twelve months. Thirteen per cent had been quoted once, 9 per cent 3 to 6 times. This was

even truer on religious radio: 85 per cent had not been interviewed or quoted once; 14 per cent had been interviewed once; and 8 per cent 3 to 6 times.

Yet another means of appearing in the press than being quoted or interviewed was to write a press article or op-ed blog, such as a comment on the weekly Bible reading or about a *halakhic* (Jewish religious law) issue. But 79 per cent had not written once in the previous twelve months in the secular press; 10 per cent had done so once, and 4 per cent had done so 3 to 6 times. This was surprisingly also true in the religious press, where otherwise one might have expected that the religious press would be open to rabbis' appearances: 75 per cent had not written once in the religious press in the previous twelve months; 11 per cent had done so once, and 5 per cent more than once.

These various findings may be broken down into three categories: differences according to religious stream; age of rabbis; and where the rabbi was born.

Religious Streams. The author's survey of rabbis covers rabbis of four main branches of Judaism—Haredi, modern Orthodox or *dati leumi*, Reform, and Conservative. In addition, a fifth grouping, *Hardal* (or *haredi leumi*) is a sub-system of the modern Orthodox/*dati leumi*. Rabbis themselves were asked to define the stream to which they belonged.

Whether or not rabbis had actually appeared in the media, higher ratings were found among the non-Orthodox (Reform and Conservative) than the Orthodox (Haredi, *Hardal*, mainstream modern Orthodox) were found. Only 44 per cent of Reform and 49 per cent of Conservative replied that they had not been quoted in the general secular Israeli press in the previous twelve months in contrast to 74 per cent, 69 per cent, and 61 per cent of *Hardal*, mainstream modern Orthodox, and Haredi rabbis, respectively. In the case of interviews or being quoted in public radio, however, non-Orthodox rabbis were less quoted or less interviewed than in the general press. Sixty-seven per cent of both Reform and Conservative rabbis said they had not been interviewed once on radio in the previous 12 months. In the case of the Orthodox rabbis (Haredi, *Hardal*, and modern Orthodox), there were no differences between appearances on radio and appearances in the general press.

Notwithstanding that non-Orthodox rabbis are inclined to complain that they are mostly shunned by the mainstream media—including public

broadcasting—this reflects the small number of non-Orthodox rabbis inside Israel and the much larger number of Orthodox rabbis. But, statistically, with a limited number of media outlets in Israel, only a small number of the many Orthodox rabbis appear.

In the case of television appearances, 81 per cent of all categories of rabbis—apart from the Reform (63 per cent)—reported not having been interviewed or quoted once in television over the previous twelve months.

In the case of the religious media there was a noteworthy difference between Haredi rabbis and the other four categories (*Hardal*, and mainstream modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform). Religious media may be broken down between the religious printed press and the religious radio stations. Seventy-three per cent of *Hardal*, and 66 per cent of mainstream modern Orthodox rabbis had not been quoted or interviewed once in the previous twelve months in the religious press; by contrast, only 47 per cent of Haredi rabbis had not. This reflected that much of the religious press was in fact Haredi-oriented—and comprised four daily Haredi papers, two Haredi weekly magazines, and a range of Haredi magazines—which seek by definition to distance themselves from secular Israeli the broadstream society. To be sure, under the "religious media" category were also a few modern Orthodox or *Hardal*-orientated publications.

Given the delegitimisation of non-Orthodox Judaism, by the Orthodox establishment inside Israel, it was not surprising that Conservative and Reform rabbis were not quoted or interviewed in the religious press. A similar trend was found with religious radio—which comprised two important Haredi radio stations, Radio Kol Chai and Radio Kol Berama.

Another feature of rabbinical public relations is to write articles in the press or blogs on the Web. This may be divided between the secular mainstream Israeli media and the religious media. Non-Orthodox rabbis were more inclined than Orthodox rabbis—Haredi, *Hardal*, and mainstream modern Orthodox—to appear in the secular press. Yet Orthodox rabbis fared little better in the religious press. Seventy to seventy-four per cent of rabbis of all three Orthodox streams (Haredi, mainstream modern Orthodox, *Hardal*) reported not having an article in the religious press in the last twelve months. It suggests that rabbis, notwithstanding their aspirations to spread Torah, failed to try this media channel.

Asked whether rabbis were successful or not in conveying their message, mainline modern Orthodox and *Hardal* were more inclined than other streams to agree that they did not succeed in explaining themselves.

Twenty-seven per cent and twenty-four per cent of *Hardal* and mainstream modern Orthodox rabbis agreed that to a great extent rabbis failed to explain themselves in contrast to 7 per cent of Reform rabbis, 17 per cent of Conservative rabbis, and 11 per cent of Haredi rabbis.

Social background. Does the background from which the rabbi was born influence the rabbis' views on and their practice in public relations? Rabbis of all four backgrounds—Israeli-born, Western-born, East European born, and Sephardic (Oriental) born in Arab countries—were inclined to agree that the mass media were important for strengthening religious identity. Between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of all four categories agreed that the mass media were important to "a very great extent" or "to a great extent."

Age breakdown. It was found that younger rabbis (those born after 1980) were more inclined than those born earlier to recognise the importance of the mass media as an agent for strengthening religious identity. But older rabbis in practice were more inclined to be quoted and interviewed, or to write for the mass media.

Overall, differences were found between rabbis' attitudes to public relations and actual practice, as reflected in the survey. In attitudinal terms, Haredi rabbis scored highly in rating the importance of PR, compared to rabbis from other streams, even though Haredi rabbis live in cultural ghettos and Jewish life for them is focused on the synagogue and Torah learning. Reaching beyond the pulpit was also important for the more intensive branches of modern orthodoxy, *Hardal*. By corollary, it was surprising that PR among the non-Orthodox rabbis—notwithstanding that their arena of religious outreach was secular Israel—was rated lower.

The actual appearance of rabbis in the media is less frequent. In terms of production, older rabbis were more successful in being quoted and interviewed than the younger rabbis, even though the latter replied that they gave more importance to PR. It reflected that the older, well-established rabbi was more senior, and better known in the public eye; in part, it also reflected the public's perception—whether true or false—that the authoritarian-type rabbinical personality is unsuitable for the one-on-one dialogue that characterises reporter-source relations in modern mass media.

7. How the Israeli Public View Rabbis' Usage of Public Relations

Public relations in practice, is a two-way relationship. Rabbis are seldom sought out by the general media in Israel, reflecting the perception that rabbis are not important sources of information for the media. Also, while in some countries, for example the United States, clergy are often approached for commentary on news developments of the day, this is less common in the Israeli case. There is a need for the rabbi to become a true leader by engaging with the intellectual challenges of the state, secularism and liberalism, in order to elucidate a "Jewish position" on these.

To be sure, the synagogue has gradually lost its monopoly on promoting moral values since the time of the Emancipation. The clash of cultures depicted here is not surprising given that the rabbi emerges from a conservative culture representing established traditions and religious structures, and is confronted with accelerated cultural change exemplified by, amongst others, the media.

But the relationship between the media and rabbis is further complicated because the journalistic community, in contrast to the hierarchical structure of the rabbi-community relationship, has a tradition of campaigning against those in power—under the banner of the public's right to know—including the obligation of rabbis and religious structures to be accountable to the public.

Moreover, the extent to which media channels have become an "alternative pulpit" for reaching secular Jews should not be exaggerated. Hoover (2006) has argued that today many draw their religious identity not from formal religious institutions like the synagogue but from the wider social environment, and in particular the media. Yet, in the Israeli Jewish case, according to the Gutman Survey, only 17 per cent of Israeli Jews (2571 respondents) polled in 2009 used the internet for material on the Bible, the Talmud, and other Jewish resources. There is, therefore, no evidence in the Israeli Jewish case to support the theory that non-religious Jews look for their religious identity via the internet. Only 5 per cent of "non-religious but not anti-religious" reported using the net "a lot" or "considerably" for Jewish religious information like the Talmud and Bible. Moreover, zero per cent of non-religious anti-religious said so. Just 12 per cent of "traditional" (i.e., not strictly religious but observing some religious rituals) said so. By contrast, religious Israeli Jews were more engaged. Twenty-six per cent of modern Orthodox Jews said they accessed online Jewish religious

content "a lot" or "considerably." The biggest group was the more intense form of modern orthodoxy, *Hardal:* 41 per cent of *Hardal* did so a great deal or considerably.

The gaps in observance and belief between religious Jews in Israel, traditional Israelis, and secular Israelis was also reflected in rabbis' use of public media channels themselves, with the latter looking askance at the projection of Torah through the media.

In a separate poll of the Israeli public (550 respondents) by the author, it was found that secular Israelis opposed the rabbis' usage of public channels like media. Seventy-four per cent and 12 per cent of Israelis defined themselves as secular atheist and opposed usage "completely" or "to a great extent" (14 per cent to "a certain degree") of mass media channels by rabbis. There was, however, a noticeable difference between secular-not-atheist Israelis and secular atheist Israelis. Thus, in contrast to secular atheist Israelis, 28 per cent and 33 per cent of secular-but-not-atheist opposed "completely" or "to a great degree" that rabbis use the media (5 per cent and 21 per cent secular-but-not-atheist Israelis were even inclined to agree "completely" or "to a large extent" that rabbis should use the media to communicate).

Both Israelis who defined themselves as Reform and Conservative were overall inclined to oppose usage of public channels like media. Thirty-one per cent and 37 per cent of Israeli Reform Jews opposed "completely" or "a lot" (26 per cent agreed to some degree) as did 33 per cent and 15 per cent of Israeli Conservative Jews, respectively (25 per cent of Conservative Jews agreed to "some degree" that it was inappropriate to use the media to communicate).

By contrast, it was not surprising that 16 per cent and 26 per cent of the public who defined themselves as modern Orthodox agreed "entirely" or "mostly" that rabbis should use media channels to explain their views. A further 35 per cent "agreed." This was even truer of the *Hardal*—who are proactive in Judaism being promoted and spread to other Jews: 17 per cent and 32 per cent favoured "entirely" or "mostly" that rabbis should be quoted.

Yet, Haredim opposed this. Only 8 per cent and 4 per cent of non-Hasidic Haredim favoured "entirely" or "almost entirely" that rabbis use media channels. Meanwhile, 50 per cent and 27 per cent of Hasidic Haredim, and 32 per cent and 28 per cent of non-Hasidic Haredim did not agree "at all" or "agreed only a little," respectively, that rabbis should

explain their views through the media. This is difficult to understand since Haredim want to turn Israel into a Torah observant community. Perhaps this is because they see the media itself as unclean and illegitimate.

8. Conclusion

Rabbis do recognise the potential role of mass media channels as additions to the traditional ones of the lectern in the synagogue and the *yeshiva* (a religious college for advanced Jewish legal studies), but rabbis' success in penetrating mass media channels in practice—with the exception of those media channels directly controlled by rabbis—has been limited. Moreover, given the reservations the broad public in Israel still holds today about rabbis in the media and public sphere, the traditional and authoritative frameworks for rabbis like the synagogue and *yeshiva* remain key traditional platforms for delivering the rabbi's message—suggesting that rabbinic media relations appear to remain mostly supplementary to the synagogue structure. Additionally, strictures in the Jewish faith regarding advertising and fair trading remain largely disconnected from the functioning of the country's modern economy and commerce.

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An Ecosystemic Approach to Digital Christianity: How Faith and Identity Formation Evolve Among Youth in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This sociological and ethnographic study develops and employs an ecosystemic approach to examine the effects of digitalization on religious beliefs and practices among young Christians in a Pentecostal megachurch in Singapore. Through extensive fieldwork and qualitative data analysis, this paper uncovers how the religious identity of young Christians evolves within a dynamic ecosystem shaped by indirect and direct digitalization. It outlines how Christian beliefs and practices transform indirectly through the digitalization of faith-based communities and religious authorities, and directly through individual engagement with social media and communication apps. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between religion and digitalization in the lives of young Christians in Southeast Asia, which calls for further exploration in this diverse cultural context. Conceptually, this paper proposes a framework for a more systematic and comprehensive study of the blended nature of online and offline religion, digital religion.

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Keywords: *digital religion, digital Christianity, religious identity formation, religious authority, religious communities, ecosystemic approach*

1. Digital Religion in the Singapore Context

The widespread integration of digital technology into daily life has transformed various sectors of society, including religious practice. As digital media continues to evolve, the intersection of religion and technology is an increasingly prominent subject of inquiry in both academic and popular discourse. This digital revolution, as Negroponte (1995) observed, extends beyond the mere transmission of information; it reshapes the social, cultural, and behavioral dynamics of individuals and communities.

How does the pervasive nature of digital media influence religious life and spiritual engagement? To what extent has digital technology altered religious practices, particularly for younger generations? As digital spaces grow more central to communication and community life, what implications does this shift have for traditional religious institutions and the roles they play?

This study aims to address these questions through a case study of a Pentecostal megachurch in Singapore, anonymized as "SG Church". Using ethnographic methods, including participant observation and digital textual analysis, this research examines how digital media and technology shape the religious practices, beliefs, and identities of young people in SG Church. Conceptually, the study proposes an ecosystemic framework for understanding the intertwined impact of digitalization on religious life and identity formation. The methodological approach combines ethnographic research with digital ethnography. The increased use of social media by young people, coupled with their active participation in church activities, provides a rich opportunity for ethnographic inquiry. The concept of "virtual ethnography" (Hine 2000, 2008) enables the observation of digital spaces without disrupting the natural flow of online interactions, allowing for a deeper understanding of the hybrid nature of contemporary religious engagement.

Featherstone (2009) and others have noted that the boundaries between online and offline realms are increasingly difficult to maintain, especially

in an era of "ubiquitous media." This blending is evident in everyday religious practices, where digital technology mediates activities such as pilgrimages, rituals, and spiritual healing (Lim 2009; Cho 2015; De Sousa and Da Rosa 2020). Campbell (2013) coined the term "digital religion" to describe this new reality where religious experiences unfold across both digital and physical environments.

While digital religion has become a growing field of study, much of the existing literature has focused on institutional and global perspectives, often overlooking the diverse and localized experiences of religion in Asia. This study contributes to the expanding body of work on digital religion in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, where the intersection of religion, media, and technology is uniquely shaped by local cultural and religious contexts (Han and Kamaludeen 2016; Lim 2018; Gomes and Tan 2020).

Singapore presents a particularly fascinating case due to its high levels of digital connectivity and the dynamic religious landscape, which is both diverse and increasingly syncretic (Mathews et al. 2021). Despite global trends showing declining religiosity, Singapore maintains high levels of religious engagement, making it an ideal setting for exploring the evolving role of digital technologies in shaping religious identity.

This research aims to deepen the understanding of digital religion by focusing on the lived religious experiences of youth in SG Church, exploring how digital media and online communities intersect with traditional faith practices and beliefs. By doing so, it seeks to offer new insights into how digitalization influences religious identity formation within a unique and highly religiously diverse context like Singapore.

1.1. Selection of Field Site(s)

SG Church was selected as the primary field site for this research due to its unique demographic and digital engagement. Founded in the late 1980s with a vision to "raise up a generation of young people who would take Asia by storm," at one point, SG Church grew from 20 youths to over 32,000 members, with a significant youth population—about 40% under 25. It's vibrant youth ministry, largely organized into cell groups, provides an ideal context for examining how digitalization shapes youth interactions with religious authority.

As an independent Pentecostal megachurch with charismatic leadership, SG Church enjoys flexibility in shaping innovative religious practices and embracing digital tools. Its hierarchical structure allows for swift adaptation, making it a fitting site to study digital culture in church contexts. Additionally, SG Church's extensive media ministry, including professional staff and volunteers, produces high-quality digital content for services and events. The church's strong social media presence, with pastors actively engaging congregants on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, further enriches the study of digital religious authority. These factors combine to make SG Church a rich site for exploring the digital transformation of religious beliefs and practices.

1.2. Selection of Sample and Data Collection

This research is part of a larger project on the religious experiences of young, English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans. While the broader study collected extensive data, this paper offers a focused analysis, with further insights to be shared in future publications.

The study combines ethnography with digital ethnography. Data was gathered through participant observation at in-person church services, small group meetings, and interviews with 30 youth (ages 13-24) and 5 pastoral staff. Participants were selected using snowball sampling, and pseudonyms ensured confidentiality. Digital methods included analyzing social media content from Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and the church's online presence.

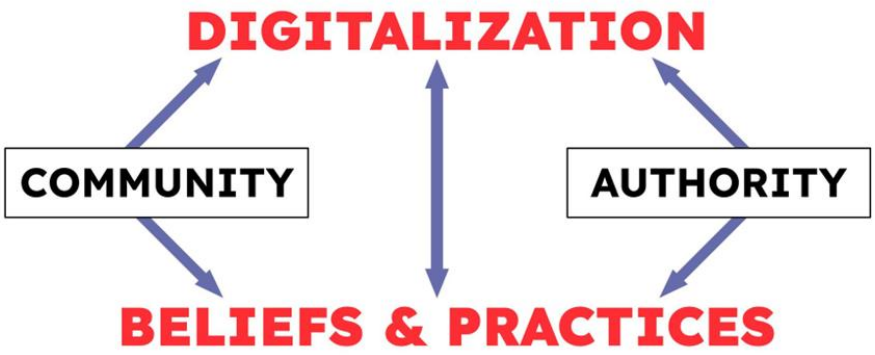
Data was collected across three periods: pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. A multi-method approach integrated qualitative interviews, participant observation, and digital textual analysis of social media activity to explore how digitalization impacts religious authority and young Christians' beliefs and practices.

2. An Ecosystem of Digitalized Religious Identity Formation

Through a process of abductive analysis, this paper presents an ecosystemic framework that elucidates the impact of digitalization on religious identity formation, by integrating empirical qualitative data and theoretical social science literature (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). It reveals that young

people's religious identity evolves within a dynamic ecosystem of direct and indirect digitalization. Specifically, it outlines how Christian beliefs and practices transform indirectly through the digitalization of faith-based *communities* and religious *authorities*, and directly through engagement with diverse social media and communication apps.

Diagrammatically this ecosystem of digitalized religious identity formation may be illustrated as follows:



Sociological identity studies tend to focus on collective identity and group membership, influencing individual roles and behaviours (Burke 2020). Psychological identity studies instead tend to emphasize individuality and self-concept (Buss and Cantor 2012). For this paper, religious identity is observed through an individual's religious beliefs and practices and is interpreted as both structurally shaped and individually negotiated.

The sociology of youth has developed a reflexive approach to studying young people, considering both the "socialization hypothesis" and the "individualized life course hypothesis", articulated by some as "structured individualization" (Plug et al. 2003, 140; Roberts et al. 1994). In my research, young people have shown awareness of the influence of digital media and technology and reflexive agency in their responses. For example, Yue Jing (junior college student, 18) strongly articulated her beliefs and religious identity as follows:

> *My belief is grounded in the Word of God and in my experiences with Him. A smartphone is just a facilitator of information to me... my belief must not depend on what other people share, or…are saying on social media, it must be a personal belief that is developed offline, with God alone…*

Qualitative responses like these also highlight the "mediation of meaning" among young respondents in this research, a concept attributed to Hoover (2002). This concept challenges earlier linear and deterministic theories on the mediatization of religion and emphasizes the agential interpretation and use of media in shaping religious beliefs, practices, and identities. A concept that aptly describes the observed phenomena among young people in this research.

The decision to conceptualize the digitalization of religious identity formation through an ecosystem approach is intentional. An ecosystem perspective recognizes the contextual influence on an individual and their active participation in that environment (Sullivan 2017). This dynamic interaction between the individual and the digital environment is crucial to understanding the relationship between young people and the digital environment in which they find themselves.

Religious community and authority shape religious identity, as seen in interviews with the youths and staff. Therefore, an ecosystemic approach that considers the interplay of community and authority is vital to an accurate understanding of how digitalization impacts religious beliefs and practices. Therein lies the salient contribution of abductive analysis to the scholarship on digital religion. Abductive analysis in digital religion scholarship integrates ground-up phenomenological ethnographic data and social scientific concepts. This leads to theories that (1) better fit empirical data, (2) are more plausible and contextually explanatory, and (3) are relevant to the larger bodies of work in digital religion, sociology of religion, and communication studies (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Building on this ecosystemic theory of religious identity formation, the rest of this paper presents and discusses the findings in the following sections: 1) Indirect effects of digitalization on religious beliefs and practices through smartphone-enabled communities of faith; 2) Indirect effects of digitalization on religious authority and its consequences on individual beliefs and practices; 3) Direct effects of digitalization on the beliefs and practices of young individuals through social media and communication apps. The paper ends with a reiteration of the need for further research on the effects of digitalization in each domain of the ecosystem and its relationship with individual religious identity in our rapidly evolving digital world.

3. Smartphone-Enabled Communities

Kai Ling (university student, 21) said:

> *No Christian is a lone ranger. It's a journey with God, but also one with fellow Christian peers… Having a strong community and godly relationships is important...*

The consensus among the respondents is that relationships and community are integral to their Christian faith in SG Church. This is institutionalized through its cell group system and is described as crucial for Christian identity formation. The church's mission statement also highlights the importance of "Experiencing Family" through cell groups. Riley (university student, 22) asserted:

> *Christianity is not just about a God that we serve, but also about the community that we are in, and the relationships that we foster with one another.*

Understanding the role of faith community and peer group socialization is imperative in comprehending religious identity formation among young individuals. What follows is the logical conclusion that digitalization is having an indirect but profound impact on the beliefs, practices and religious identity of Christian youths by affecting their highly-valued relationships and communities, which they affectionately refer to as "fellowship" and "cell group".

Existing research on the effects of digitalization on religious communities reveals valuable insights. For instance, Clark (2004) found that online friendships among teenagers complement and support offline religious interactions, influencing religious life. Gorrell (2016) highlighted how social media shapes communal life and contributes to religious identity formation. In Asia, marginalized religious minorities use the internet and social media to foster digital religious communities (Lim and Sng 2020). This study builds on Ling's (2014) concept of "Mobile Phones and Digital Gemeinschaft," interpreting young people's communities of faith as smartphone-enabled communities. While offline cell groups serve as a form of community, the young respondents also acknowledged the crucial role of smartphones in sustaining their fellowship and cell group communities as smartphone/digitally-powered gemeinschafts.

Part of the reason young people's faith communities are smartphone-enabled is due to the pervasive use of smartphones and consequent societal

expectations of constant accessibility. As Jun Xiang (university student, 24) highlighted (albeit with slight exaggeration):

> *It's the de facto form of communication of the modern era. Without our mobile smartphone devices, we [the cell group] won't be able to effectively communicate with one another.*

Given the centrality of community to Christian beliefs and core Christian practices, smartphones are not only reshaping religious communities but inevitably shaping religious beliefs and practices in the process. While further research into the effects of digitalization on religious community is warranted, the young respondents in this study revealed some of the prominent ways smartphones are changing their engagement, cultivation, and perception of Christian community.

Yue Jing (junior college student, 18), for instance, highlighted the role of smartphones in enabling her to care for and so "strengthen relationships" with her cell group:

> *…through Whatsapp-ing my church friends I can find out about how their exams were… If they didn't do so well and are feeling discouraged… I can make arrangements to meet them personally to encourage them… without a smartphone, is hard to accomplish… it is like a convenient "channel" to strengthen relationships.*

Examples like this illustrate how smartphones empower community engagement, reshape perceptions, and raise expectations of participation. However, some expressed caution and scepticism about their usefulness in this context. Shane (university student, 23) said:

> *…the bad thing about such devices is that it can also ruin relationships as people will get so used to this convenience that they are lazy in maintaining a physical face-to-face relationship. They will always feel that texting alone will suffice… we will never know if the conversations… are genuine as they can always draft their messages to perfection…*

Despite the risks, even sceptics of smartphones still prefer them in their communities due to the belief that the benefits of smartphone-enabled communities outweigh the drawbacks of shaping religious identity.

Another significant consequence of smartphone-enabled communities is that it allows young people to identify with a larger collective group identity. As Yue Jing (junior college student, 18) observed:

> *In modern times, I think mobile phones have shaped the way we "do church" - the way church members connect with each other, the way information is being passed down, the way communities are being*

> *constructed. There's a much wider online presence, so that you feel you are connected to many many many people of the faith all at once, from my cg, to my usher team, to my church... there's even a greater sense of the overall Christian identity, as being part of the global Body of Christ…*

The church/cell group communities in SG Church among the youth should be understood as smartphone-enabled communities or digital gemeinschafts, characterized by interactive spaces with porous boundaries where members share space, practices, resources, identities, and interpersonal relationships (Baym 2010).

Arguably, the most salient impact of smartphone-enabled communities on young people's religious beliefs and practices is that they provide them with access to a wider range of cultural tools for identity formation that were previously unavailable. The concept of a "cultural toolkit" describes how young people acquire cultural tools from their socio-cultural milieu that shape their evolving identity (Fine 2004). In the context of a digital cultural milieu, as Yue Jing aptly stated earlier, it positions young people in a much larger milieu online, giving them access to a much wider selection of resources, cultural tools, and scripts that they can accept, reject, and repurpose in the curation of their religious identities.

However, young people do not form their religious selves in communities without interruption. There are rules, conventions, and principles that guide their reflexive projects of identity formation. The reliability and authority of these guides and guidelines are important considerations in the ecosystem of digitalized religious identity formation and will be addressed in the next discussion.

4. Overlapping Spheres of Authority

The youth of SG Church, akin to young people in other faith communities globally, are leveraging the diversity and accessibility of new and alternative voices of religious authority in the wake of digitalization (Han and Kamaludeen 2016; Cheong 2017). This exposure allows them to shape their religious beliefs and practices with religious-cultural tools beyond their local faith community.

The young people in this study represent a distinct cohort of "new" digital natives, unlike earlier generations, who did not have the same level of

exposure and access. They have grown up in a world that is digitally very different from the one over two decades ago when the term "digital natives" was first coined by Prensky (2001). This generation of "new" digital natives is proficient in the language of digital technology and engages with religion and forms their religious identities in digital spaces (Wang et al. 2013). The relationship between spirituality and digitality for these "new" digital natives is best described as "embodied, embedded, and every day," echoing Hine's (2015) characterization. The symbiosis of spirituality and digitality is so intricate that even overt reliance on digital technology recedes into the background and fades into the subconscious.

Other religious communities and individuals may also be undergoing a similar digitally induced evolution of religious authority. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that digitalization can impact religious authority in diverse ways across and within different faith communities, resulting in unique dynamics of authority. Exploring potential contributing factors such as theology, community culture, age, and others that shape these nuanced differences in authority dynamics across religions is a promising area for future research.

The responses of young people in SG Church suggest that the digitalization of religious authority has both adversarial and supportive effects on traditional religious authority. This aligns with the struggle noted by Campbell and Garner (2016, 67) between "traditional religious leaders and… a new breed of religious authorities appearing online", as well as the internet reinforcing and extending the legitimacy and authority of established religious hierarchies, as Cheong (2013) noted. This section focuses on unpacking the effects of digitalized religious authority on the religious beliefs and practices of young people, as part of the ecosystem of digitalized religious identity formation.

Conceptually, existing literature on the impact of digitalization on religion and everyday religious life (e.g. Campbell 2013; Hutchings 2015; Cheong 2017) tends to lack nuance in the analysis of religious authority, often conflating multiple forms and sources of power. However, the data collected from respondents in this study suggests that they mainly refer to three distinct but overlapping spheres of authority—*systems*, *leadership*, and *theology*—when discussing the concept of "authority."

Each sphere will be further explained in the subsequent exploration and discussion of their interactions with digital culture. Briefly, "systems" encompass institutional structures of authority such as formal lines of

communication, clergical hierarchies, and traditional/officialized religious practices. "Leadership" refers to individuals who hold positions of authority or influence, whether through formal roles or informal means, but have sway over religious followers. "Theology" as a sphere of authority focuses on the intrinsic authority attributed to sacred texts and their interpretations, in this case, the authority Christians ascribe to the Bible and its teachings.

4.1. Subverting Systems and Structures

In SG Church, as in other megachurches in Asia, the cell group system and weekly church service are integral institutional practices with manifest functions and objectives. However, these systems also involve latent processes of socialization that occur in person and on-site, which are being disrupted by the adoption of digital alternatives.

The proliferation of social media and communication platforms has enabled church leadership to communicate directly and frequently with the congregation. Paradoxically, this ease of direct mass communication facilitated by digital technology has diminished the authority and perceived significance of structural systems such as the cell group and weekend service.

Previously, the cell group played a central role, alongside the weekend service, in facilitating communication of spiritual direction and religious knowledge from the senior leadership to the congregation. This was achieved through exclusive cell group leaders-only meetings and the provision of resources for cell group meetings. However, with the emergence of direct and media-rich means of engagement, such as YouTube videos, Instagram posts, and podcasts, the role of the cell group leader and cell group system can sometimes be inadvertently diminished as an unnecessary intermediary between the senior leadership and the congregation.

Digitalization has not only brought "religion online" as Helland (2000) described but has also led to a social (re)construction of the core Christian practice of "*going to church*". Traditionally, this practice involved physically going to a church building, but now it can also involve participating in online services through the internet. For instance, Zach, a 20-year-old national serviceman, expressed gratitude for the opportunity to "still get to go to church online" when he is "stuck in camp."

The sermon is a central element in the exercise of religious authority during the weekend church service. It serves as a cornerstone of the church

service experience, with individuals sitting under the guidance and authority of an appointed preacher. However, digitalization has disrupted this closed system, transforming it into a more open and accessible one. Online platforms now provide young people with options to participate in different church services, listen to teachings from various leaders, and explore different theological perspectives. Not only does this resemble the convenience of online shopping, but it also offers the option to easily disconnect and skip church services altogether.

The subversion of these two systems embedded into the structure of the church has led to the emergence of alternative processes of socialization and new systems of religious identity formation: digital discipleship. These disruptions to the authority structure of the church have multifaceted consequences that require further exploration. Nonetheless, digitalization has significantly impacted the structural systems of authority and the formation of religious beliefs and practices.

4.2. Innovating Leadership

The second sphere of authority concerns the leaders of SG Church, specifically pastoral staff and cell group leaders, whose perceived legitimacy and efficacy are affected by the media-saturated societies in which we live. While digitalization provides new opportunities for leaders to exercise authority through online channels, it also poses challenges. Digitalization offers new platforms for evaluating the competence of religious leaders and empowers the public and average churchgoers with alternative resources that may challenge a leader's interpretation of religious texts and teachings. As Roger (university student, 22) expressed:

> *Google has made everyone a pseudo-theologian, now everything can be googled, checked, verified… I have [cell group] members who sometimes ask me how come what they hear online is different from what is preached…*

Disconnecting from online platforms may seem like a way for church leaders to avoid scrutiny, but it also hinders their ability to engage with the youth who are actively present on these platforms. Connecting with youth through online platforms is essential for effective communication and ministry, as highlighted by Lisa, a youth pastoral staff:

> *The weekend service is about two to three hours, and cell group meetings another three hours, that's a total of six hours, we miss out on the what, hundred over hours in the rest of the week if that's all we do… They [the*

youth] spend more time on their phones, on Instagram, TikTok, than in CGMs and services… I think it's important that we meet them there too…

As noted earlier, being a digitally engaged leader comes with increased scrutiny and criticism, as illustrated by Yong Jie's (university student, 22) personal account as a youth cell group leader:

I am careful that I don't post shots of me drinking or anything… It's not that we are legalistic about it and that we cannot drink… I know my limits and I'm responsible enough to drink moderately… but I just don't want the parents of the youth I lead or the youths themselves to think that that's where I'm gonna bring them to fellowship!

Yong Jie's self-censorship on social media highlights the scrutiny leaders face in the digital era, prompting discussions on conventional leadership values like authenticity and integrity.

Furthermore, the observation of authority in the context of digitalization reflects parallels with Weber's concept of charismatic authority, but in a digitally transformed form. Traditional pathways of leadership within SG Church are no longer solely based on recognized rituals and legal-rational processes. In today's digital mediascapes, religious personalities who successfully navigate the online space are legitimized and authorized through likes, shares, and attention, exemplifying a unique brand of leadership and authority. This can be understood as charismatic authority in Weberian terms.

One example of an innovative religious personality/leader mentioned by respondents is Annette Lee (a local singer-songwriter and YouTube personality). Krystal (secondary school student, 16) commented on Annette Lee saying:

I feel like she's [Annette's] very real and she gets me…I personally feel like she connects… it is just more relatable? You know? Not just preaching…but like she's young and the way she talks and her experiences are just more…relevant? You know? Like she knows what's going on for us [youths] today?

Social media influencers like Annette Lee, despite not conforming to traditional religious leadership roles, hold significant influence over young people's religious beliefs and practices due to their prominent online presence. This decoupling of religious authority from traditional church structures, as argued by Hjarvard (2013), is a result of mediatization. Observing the young respondents of SG Church, there also seems to be a shift towards more personalized and independent forms of religious

leadership, resulting in "a multiplication of competing authorities" (Possamai and Turner 2014, 200). This requires religious leaders to adapt and evolve to remain effective in today's changing landscape of religious authority.

These observations prompt two key points for further exploration. Firstly, what qualities beyond digital innovation and online content creation are necessary for effective religious leadership in the digital age? Secondly, does the heightened scrutiny and accountability faced by leaders in the digital age have positive or negative effects on leadership quality for both leaders and congregants?

4.3. Tinkering with Theology

Drawing on the works of Berger et al. (1973), Turkle (1997), Wuthnow (2010), and McClure (2017), the youth of SG Church exhibit a "tinkering attitude" towards theology, practice, and religious affiliations, in line with the increased use of technology and online engagement. As "new" digital natives, tinkering is a normative skill in their cultural toolkit, and is evident in their approach to various aspects of life, including spirituality and theology.

The argument is that digitality fosters tinkering, leading individuals to evolve and edit their religious beliefs, affecting the authority and stability of established theological beliefs or local church teachings. While church leaders may view internet use as problematic "because it encourages multiple voices and personal freedom" (Campbell 2007, 1053), the youths tend to perceive this diversity as less problematic, as evident in the interviews. Jian Wen (secondary school student, 13) stated:

> *"I think it's ok… I mean it is their personal opinions and they can do what they want in their life."* According to Jimmy (secondary school student, 17), *"Freedom of choice… Everyone has their own personal views on different things."*

Young people often engage in tinkering with established theological doctrines and teachings, as highlighted in Cornelio's (2016) study of "creative Catholics" that attend evangelical church services, adopt evangelical worship songs, and welcome non-Catholics into their community. However, in this paper, I argue that digitalization further encourages and intensifies this practice. While the authority of theology in Christianity remains largely intact, what constitutes a young person's theology is less certain and should be understood as fluid in the context of digitalization.

It is worth remembering that religious authority is just one aspect of the wider ecosystem of digitalization that influences young people's religious beliefs and practices. A noteworthy observation among the youth of SG Church is that the theology that shapes their beliefs and practices is not solely determined by airtight logical coherence and reasoning, but also by how tightly they are attached to their faith community. Grace (university student, 20) mentioned:

> *I think that a lot of this right, is based on the [church] culture that we are in, like the groups that we belong to… social media and all can…influence the way we think… I think a lot of it still comes from "Is this what my church agrees with?" And "Is this what my zone, my cell group practises?" … I personally will not do it if like… my community doesn't do it.*

The level of attachment and trust the youths have with their community affects the authority attributed to a particular set of theology, beyond its doctrinal soundness or logical articulation.

When considering the overlapping spheres of authority—systems, leadership, and theology—one observes the process of meaning mediation among the youth (Hoover 2002). Digitalization impacts the beliefs and practices of young people as they discerningly interpret, select, and apply religious authority. We now take a closer look at how young people negotiate their Christian beliefs and practices as digitalization and digital culture seep into their every day (religious) lives at a more direct and immediate level.

5. Digitalized Beliefs and Practices

In earlier discussions, we examined how the digital realm interacts with Christian identity formation, particularly through community and authority. Building upon these insights, this section focuses on the direct influence of digitalization on the religious beliefs and practices of young people within SG Church. By exploring the usage of two key categories of smartphone applications—social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) and communication apps (WhatsApp, Telegram)—we investigate how digital tools directly shape religious engagement.

5.1. Digitalized Beliefs

The young people in this study highlighted how smartphone apps play an influential role in the formation and articulation of their Christian beliefs. These platforms offer access to a wide range of religious content, enabling users to expand their spiritual horizons far beyond the physical boundaries of SG Church. In this way, digital media act as a vehicle for believers to reimagine and redefine their religious identities in dynamic and rapidly evolving ways.

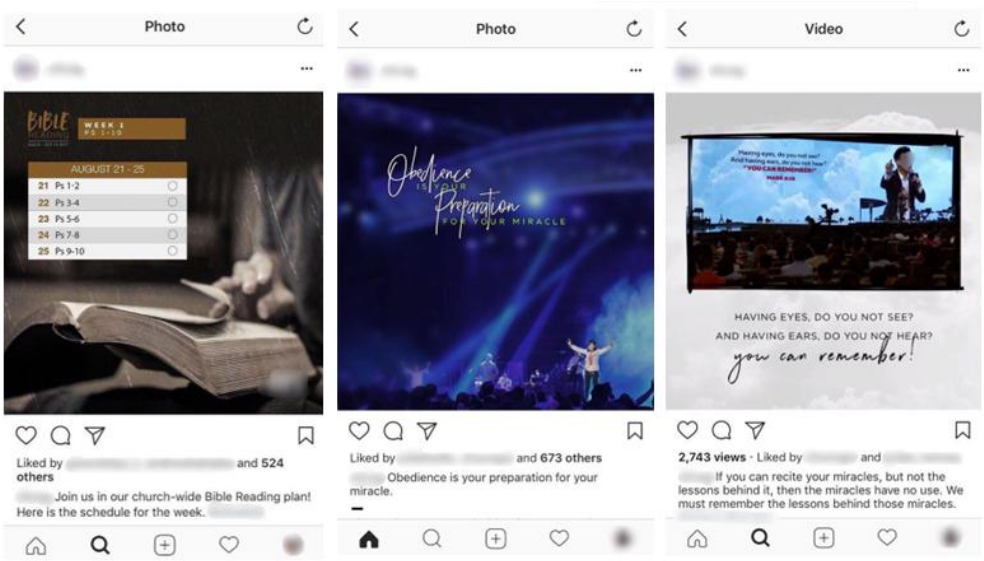
Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) concept of "mediascapes," which underscores the empowering role of media in facilitating self-imagination across geographic boundaries, it becomes clear that digital platforms allow the youth to engage in self-reflection and identity work. For example, Wei Qian, an 18-year-old junior college student, explained:

> *I listen to preaching on podcasts and YouTube as a way of "feeding" myself spiritually because I think that more than just being exposed to preaching on the weekend, I could gain more by renewing my mind from a steady, healthy flow of input through the week… Regarding my identity as a Christian, I think that at the very basic level, being intentional about downloading and listening to other preachers and sermons – on top of your own church's weekend sermons – shapes and affects the way we identify ourselves as mature believers that take ownership of our own spiritual growth; to feed myself rather than always wait to be fed…*

Wei Qian's reflections demonstrate how consuming digital sermons extends beyond the immediate church environment, fostering a more personalized, autonomous approach to spiritual development. In a similar vein, social media platforms like Instagram play an important role in reinforcing and reminding young people of key Christian teachings. As Agnus, a 16-year-old secondary school student, shared:

> *[Social media] posts from the church also help me keep updated of the season we as a community are going through and align myself with it…sometimes we forget sermons we've heard and their [SG Church's] posts provide a good and short reminder.*

Below are three examples of how SG Church uses Instagram posts: the leftmost post reinforces the importance of Bible reading and the church's reading plan; the middle post highlights a key point from a previous week's sermon; and the rightmost post features a video snippet from a past sermon. These posts shape and align the thoughts and beliefs of the audience, as Agnus described earlier.



Through these channels, church messages reach the youth at any time, reinforcing their beliefs and aligning them with the larger community. However, the influence is reciprocal, as many young people also create and share content, thereby shaping their beliefs and the beliefs of others (Zelizer 2002). Thomas, a 19-year-old polytechnic student, noted:

> *I use it [Instagram] to share my revelations and thoughts…times when I come across an inspiring faith-building Instagram post I will share it…or repost it… I would also post my own devotions to share and encourage anyone…*

The following are examples of posts from two respondents:

Despite the profound impact of digital media on belief formation, the youth exhibit a degree of agency and discernment in navigating these platforms. Agnus and Krystal (16) acknowledged that digital media can shape beliefs but also emphasized the importance of critical engagement:

Agnus (secondary school student, 16) stated:

I'm sure that using all these [social media] platforms for religious purposes will shape our beliefs to a certain extent or even subconsciously because we use it so much... But I also feel that beliefs are deeply rooted foundations and difficult to change or impact immediately.

Krystal (secondary school student, 16) said:

…there are certain beliefs that may differ from the different churches…not everything on Instagram may be true and we must be wise to listen to the right stuff…

Both respondents indicate the strength of agency that young people do exercise in the face of an increasingly digitalized formation and expression of Christian beliefs.

5.2. Digitalized Practices

The integration of digital tools has also redefined common Christian practices like evangelism and prayer among SG Church youth. Evangelism in the digital age can take many forms, from overt to subtle expressions of faith. Thomas (polytechnic student, 19) explained:

By sharing posts on Instagram my own [Christian] beliefs get expressed to my followers and the community at large whether or not they are Christians... Another way to evangelize is by posting [outreach/evangelistic] events and use that as a platform to invite people to church.

Many young people believe that posting/sharing their beliefs on social media can evangelize and influence others. However, not all youth engage in overt evangelism. Some, like Tong En (18), adopt a more cautious approach, stating:

I wouldn't express my religious beliefs excessively through my smartphone, as it may appear insensitive to non-believers and ineffective to reaching out [evangelism].

Youths like Tong En and Shi Ya perceive showcasing their daily lives on Instagram as a form of evangelism, aiming to "bear a good testimony" by exemplifying the values and lifestyle of a devout Christian. Shi Ya (secondary school student, 15) expressed:

> *What I post [on Instagram] is not always super "Christiany"… but they know that I am a believer and how perhaps I deal with things the way I do with God… hopefully, in these little ways I can be a testimony to them and be able to bear a good testimony…*

This notion of "bearing a good testimony" aligns with Lim and Sng's (2020) study, which found similar behaviors among Christians in the workplace in China. While subtle evangelism through social media is not new, its reach and visibility have significantly expanded, making everyday expressions of faith more accessible to a broader audience.

Prayer, a foundational practice in religion and Christian identity, has evolved through the adoption of communication and messaging apps, as studied by scholars such as Young (2004), Campbell (2013), and Dugan (2019). Among the youths in SG Church, digitalized prayer using apps like Whatsapp has revolutionized personal devotion/prayer and intercession/prayer for others. This form of prayer is perceived positively as it enables easy, frequent, and rich communication through real-time text, audio, and video, transcending geographical boundaries. Respondent interviews reveal how digitalized prayers facilitate their practice of prayer and contribute to their personal growth in prayer.

For instance, Jian Wen (secondary school student, 13) shared how a cell group chat on Whatsapp helps him pray for others, stating, *"…it helps me know what's going on in their lives better and can better pray for them."* Similarly, Sarah (university student, 21) highlighted how the group chat is a platform for sharing reflections and prayers:*"…every other day a different one will send their reflections and prayers for us to receive."*

More than being just another avenue for youths to pray, digitalized prayer is changing the practice of prayer itself. Jian Wen (secondary school student, 13) noted how the prayers of others in the chat group shape his own practice of prayer: *"…when I see how Nic and Nee respond and send their prayers in the group… it inspires me to pray myself… I learn how to pray better myself too."* Other respondents shared new and creative expressions of prayer, such as Jie Si's (secondary school student, 15) use of her iPad for drawing during prayer as a form of expression, which she then sends digitally to those she prays for.

Furthermore, digitalized prayer has transformed the way people ask for and request prayer. Agnus (secondary school student, 16) and Zach (national serviceman, 20) hold regular "prayer conferences" via video chat apps, transcending geographical boundaries. Instagram's interactive

features, such as the "Questions" sticker, allow for easy feedback and communication, creating opportunities for requesting and receiving prayer from others. Grace (university student, 20) shared how she posts "questions" on her Instastories to ask for prayer requests from her followers. This highlights how digitalized prayer enables communication, connection, and a richer knowledge of the prayer needs of others while providing novel ways of practising prayer.

This section underscores the transformative influence of digitalization on the religious beliefs and practices of SG Church's youth. Digital tools do more than serve as supplemental outlets for religious content; they actively reshape how beliefs are formed, expressed, and practiced. As Turkle (2011) aptly put it, technology doesn't just facilitate communication; it actively shapes our intimate and spiritual lives. In a similar vein, digitalization isn't merely a tool for Christian youth; it profoundly influences the very essence of their religious identities.

6. In Lieu of a Conclusion…

This article highlights the effects of digitalization on religious beliefs and practices among young individuals in a Pentecostal megachurch in Singapore. Developing and utilizing an ecosystemic approach, the study reveals the direct and indirect impacts of digitalization on religious identity formation, which includes changes in faith-based communities, religious authority, and individual engagement with social media and communication apps. Adopting an ecosystemic approach to appreciate the lived experience of digital religion (the blending of online and offline religion) provides a more holistic and compelling perspective for understanding the dynamics and lived religious experiences of young Christians and holds potential relevance for examining other religious groups and individuals.

The study underscores the significance of smartphones in facilitating community engagement, thereby reshaping perceptions and expectations of community participation. While smartphones are seen as instrumental in strengthening religious communities and providing access to religious resources beyond the local church, caution is expressed regarding the potential negative impact on face-to-face relationships. The study also examines the challenges and opportunities of digitalization for religious

authority in a nuanced manner, in contrast to existing literature that often discusses authority in overly broad terms. Specifically, the paper identifies three overlapping spheres of religious authority: systems, leadership, and theology. Furthermore, the study delves into how religious authority in the context of digitalization is subverted, innovated, tinkered with, and negotiated. The analysis of the respondent data also reveals that digital media platforms enable young people to (re)imagine their Christian identities in novel ways. This is achieved through the consumption, production, and sharing of content on social media and communication apps, resulting in salient changes to their religious beliefs and practices.

In lieu of a conclusion, the ecosystemic approach to studying digitalized religious identity formation in this paper raises important sociological questions regarding the impact of digitalization on community dynamics, religious authorities, and the dynamic relationship between digitalization and individual religious identity. This conceptual framework serves as a foundation for future research and application in diverse religious contexts and communities, with the aim of advancing our understanding of the complex effects of digitalization on religious beliefs, practices, and identities in our rapidly evolving digital world.

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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.

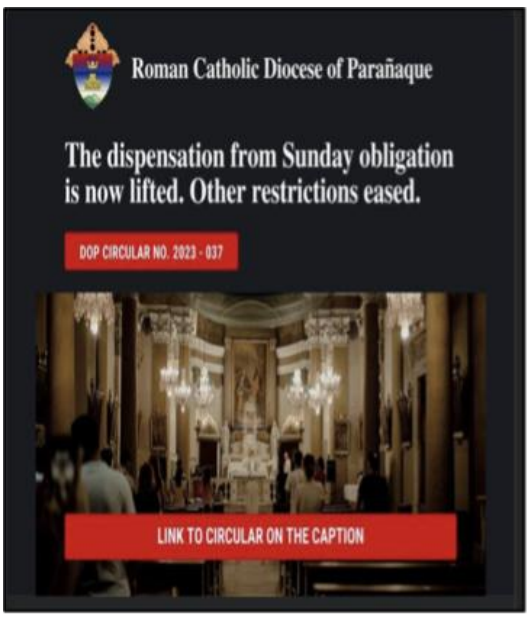
Table 1. Purposes of Parish Facebook Posts

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 followership 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, uplifting, 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 addressee, 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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Understanding News Avoidance in Social Media: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

In the age of digital media, news avoidance behaviour is continually increasing. This behaviour has brought new challenges for society and democracy. Research on news avoidance has recently experienced a surge, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are many uncertainties on this topic, and this systematic literature review attempts to resolve them. This research uses the PRISMA framework to answer the research questions. Two databases are used for this study: Web of Science and Scopus. The study uses the inclusion criteria of research papers published in English and the exclusion criteria of review papers. The research study is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 23 selected articles from both databases. Quantitative results show a sudden increase in the number of news

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avoidance studies in 2023. The analysis also revealed a dominance of quantitative methods and non-probability samples. The regional distribution of the studies underlines the concentration of research in Europe and North America. The qualitative analysis highlights the causes of news avoidance, the profile of news avoiders, the connection between news avoidance and news overload, social media and engagement, the disadvantages of avoidance, and solutions to avoidance. The study concludes that trust in news, interest in news, enjoyment of news consumption, news curation and constructive news provide a solution to news avoidance behaviour.

Keywords: *news avoidance, digital media, social media, democracy, PRISMA*

1. Introduction

The boost in internet penetration has led to an increased reliance on digital platforms to access news. Social media is now one of the most-used news platforms worldwide (Watson 2023). This has created new challenges related to news consumption. The continuous news updates on social media create a feeling of news overload among people and lead them to avoid news content. Increasing news avoidance has necessitated research into the phenomenon, and researchers are trying to understand it. Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) define news avoidance as limited news consumption over a long period of time. This can be due to either a dislike of the news, called intentional news avoidance, or a stronger preference for other content, called unintentional news avoidance. Toff and Palmer (2019), on the other hand, considered news avoiders as people who follow news less than once a month. According to Lee, Holton, and Chen (2019), selective scanning, news avoidance, and media denial/resistance are examples of conscious and unconscious behavioural reactions to information overload. Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2021) identified three dimensions of news avoidance: avoiding journalistic topics or media, avoiding news-related technologies that are considered uncontrollable, and avoiding news to reduce overall media consumption.

News avoidance is continually increasing worldwide. It is an emerging area of research. According to Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020), research on news avoidance is hampered by a lack of shared understanding of the phenomenon. There is no systematic literature review on news avoidance. Particularly, we try to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive overview of existing research on news avoidance behaviour, which will help to build a shared understanding of news avoidance. The study specifically focuses on news avoidance on social media, as research shows that users experience greater news overload when they consume news via digital devices (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017). This research study aims to highlight the key insights on news avoidance through a systematic review of the literature.

The phenomenon of news avoidance has recently attracted considerable attention from both scholars and practitioners, as more and more people appear to be turning their backs on the news (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022). Recent advances suggest that the news media's pervasive negativity is causing many people to avoid the news altogether, undermining the media's ability to keep the public informed (Overgaard 2023). It brings new challenges for an informed society and democracy. A deluge of news from multiple sources and platforms leaves news consumers feeling overloaded, with negative consequences such as fatigue and indifference to news (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017).

The Reuters digital news report for 2023 (Newman et al. 2023) shows that selective news avoidance is at 36 per cent, an increase of 7 per cent from the level of 2017. Selective news avoidance is the tendency to avoid selective types of news content. News avoidance is often viewed as a challenge for society, as people with lower news consumption are associated with less political engagement (Ohme et al. 2023). Furthermore, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022) note that news avoidance is challenging because news consumption brings benefits at individual and societal levels.

In a high-choice media environment, politically interested people may consume more news, while disinterested people are more likely to avoid such content because they can consume the content according to their taste (Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen 2020). It will widen the knowledge gap between informed and uninformed citizens in a democratic setting.

1.1. Research Questions

This research study attempts to understand the phenomenon of news avoidance in the social media space. It will also shed light on various

aspects of news avoidance discovered by scholars working in the field. By linking the different findings, an attempt is made to build a comprehensive understanding.

RQ1. What are the methodological approaches used to understand the phenomenon of news avoidance?

RQ2. What are the key findings on news avoidance?

RQ3. What are the major gaps in existing literature?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The level of news avoidance behaviour is rising globally, and concerns about the repercussions of this behaviour are also increasing. However, there is a lack of comprehensive conceptual understanding of news avoidance in the existing literature. Based on the systematic literature review, this study addresses this gap by building a conceptual understanding of news avoidance. It provides a structured overview of findings that can guide future research on news avoidance. This research study highlights the causes of news avoidance, the profile of news avoiders, the connection between news avoidance and news overload, social media and engagement, the disadvantages of avoidance, and solutions to avoidance.

2. Methodology

The relevant research articles for the study are selected from the Web of Science and the Scopus database to ensure the quality of the research included. The two databases are leaders in the social sciences. This systematic literature review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al. 2009). The researchers used two keywords to search for relevant literature: news avoidance and social media, using the Boolean operator AND. The keywords were found appropriate to answer the research questions in preliminary searches. Synonyms for news avoidance were not used because synonyms like information avoidance and news aversion were not found suitable to explain the phenomenon.

Social media is now one of the world's most widely used news platforms, surpassing radio, print news publications, blogs and word of

mouth (Statista 2023). Therefore, the study focuses on news avoidance on social media. The keywords "news avoidance" and "social media" yielded a total of 145 results in the Web of Science and 109 results in the Scopus database. After excluding review articles and including articles written in English, 143 articles remained for screening in Web of Science and 101 in Scopus. Further, 53 duplicate files were removed from Scopus. For the screening process, 143 articles were included from the Web of Science and 48 from the Scopus database.

In the title and abstract screening, 109 articles were excluded from Web of Science, and 35 from the Scopus database; the research articles were excluded because news avoidance was not the central theme of the papers. A total of 47 articles (34 articles from Web of Science and 13 articles from Scopus) went through the full-text screening. After the completion of full-text screening, 14 articles were excluded from Web of Science and 10 articles from Scopus. A total of 23 articles (20 articles from Web of Science and three articles from Scopus) were included in the systematic analysis of research papers on news avoidance from both databases.

The research timeline was not decided in advance before searching for relevant articles because news avoidance is an emerging research area, and therefore, very little literature is available on it. The articles included are published in the timeline from 2014 to 2023. Data extraction from the databases was conducted in October 2023.

The data analysis is based on a quantitative and qualitative approach. First, quantitative analysis is carried out by taking into account the annual distribution of the studies, the publishers of research papers, methodological aspects, the geographical focus, sampling methods, and theoretical frameworks used in the studies. RQ1 is answered by the quantitative analysis. The qualitative analysis is based on thematic analysis.

A total of seven themes were developed using a thematic analysis approach from selected studies (N=23). RQ3, which aims to find research gaps, is answered from the combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. RQ2 is answered from the qualitative data.

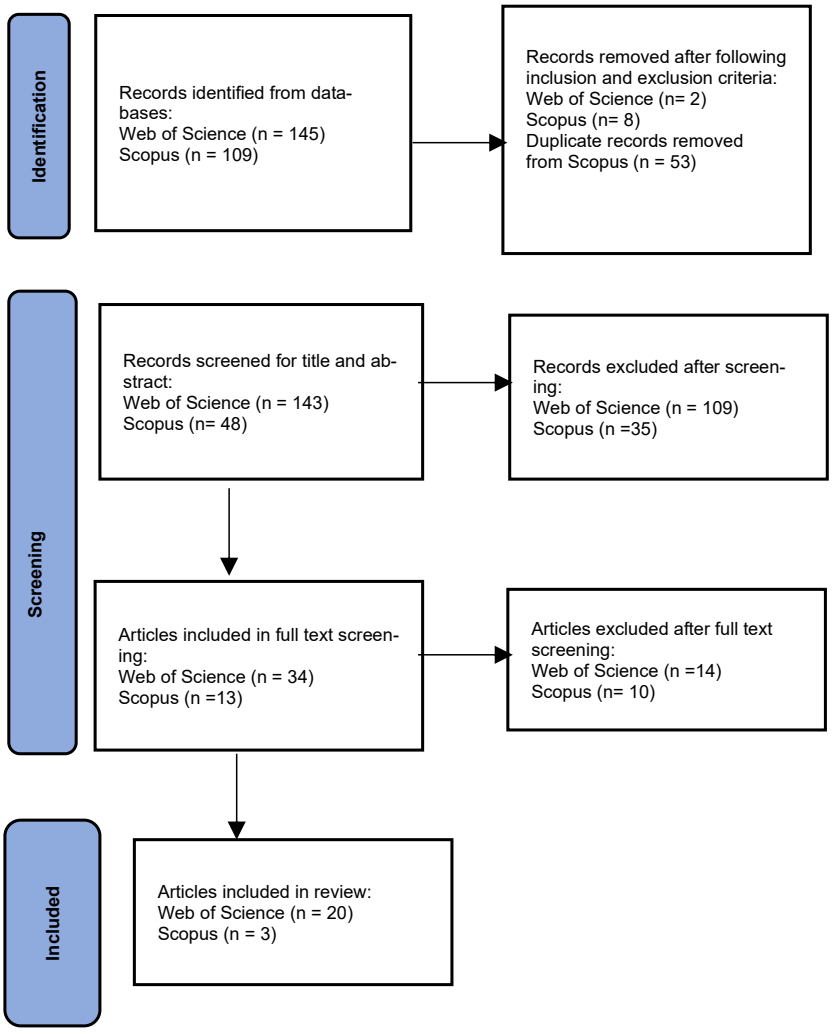

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

3. Graphical Representation on the Focus of the Selected Studies

The graphical representation is based on the keywords of the selected research studies (N=21). Two studies are excluded from this presentation because no keywords were provided in the studies. It shows the focus of the research included in the analysis. The selected studies mainly revolve around news avoidance, overload and social media. The researchers intended that the research studies should focus on news avoidance on social media, and this is also reflected in the graphical representation of the selected studies.

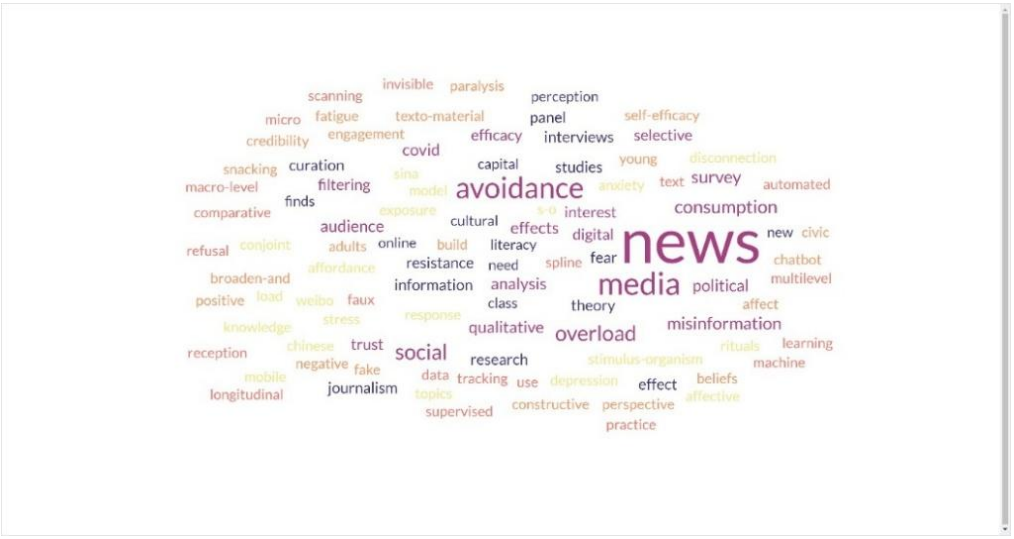

Figure 2 Wordcloud representing the focus of the selected studies

4. Quantitative Analysis of Studies

This section describes the quantitative analysis of selected studies found relevant to the research objectives.

4.1. Year-Wise Distribution of Studies

In 2015 and 2016, no relevant article was found that met the objective of the present study. The annual distribution of the selected studies shows a gradual increase until 2022, and then a sudden increase was observed in 2023. In the selected studies, nine studies were conducted in 2023 alone, suggesting that the news avoidance phenomenon is now gaining traction. The research began in 2014, but not much attention was paid to it until 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to be one reason for the sudden increase in the number of studies on news avoidance. De Bruin et al. (2021) found evidence in their study that news avoidance behaviour increased during the COVID-19 crisis. This increase in avoidance behaviour led the research community to pay more attention to the phenomenon.

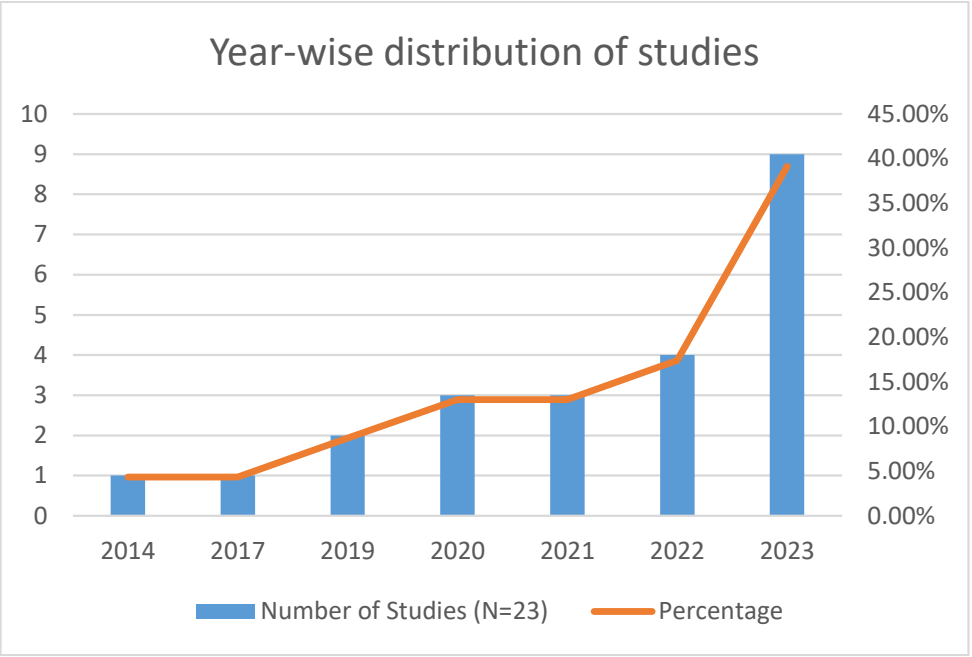

Figure 3 Year-wise distribution of studies

4.2. Distribution by Publication

Most of the selected research studies are published in journals of communication research like *Digital Journalism, Journalism Studies, Communication, Communication Research, International Journal of Communication, Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Journalism, Public Opinion Quarterly, Political Communication, International Journal of Press/Politics, Social Media and Society*.

Only four papers are published in journals other than the communication field, which are *Public Health, Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, Frontiers in Psychology,* and *Sage Open*. News avoidance is directly related to the field of communication, but also has an impact on democracy and society. Therefore, the phenomenon needs to be discovered from the perspective of other disciplines, such as political science and sociology.

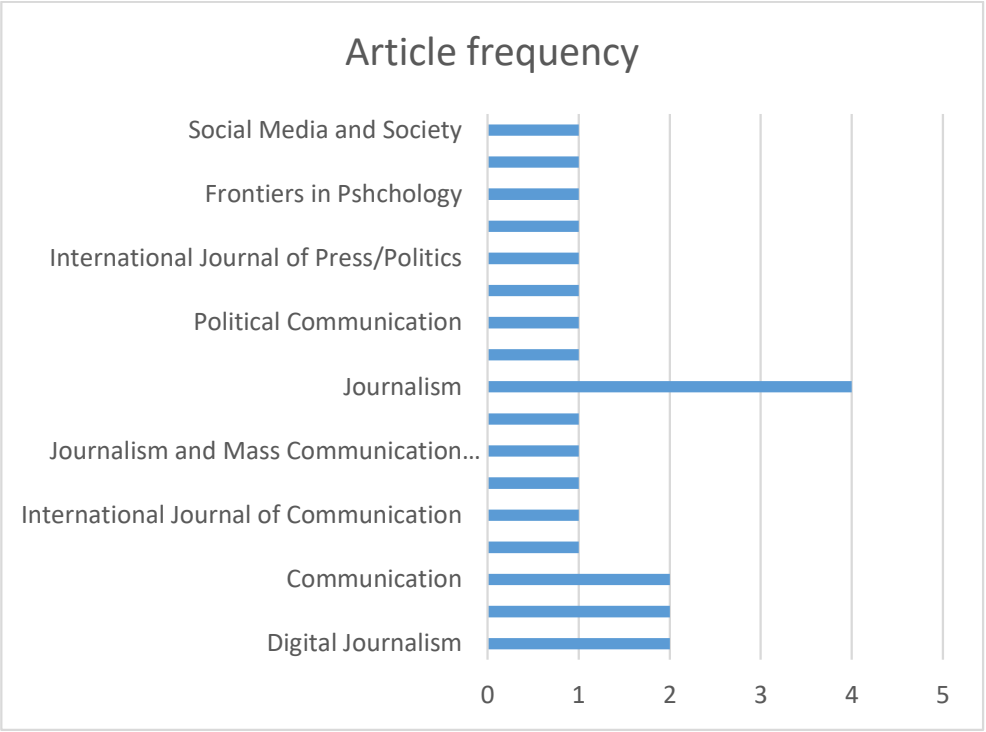

Figure 4 Distribution of studies in various journals

4.3. Methodological Aspects

The systematic analysis of 23 research papers found that research studies on news avoidance predominantly use quantitative methods. In the selected studies, 15 studies relied on quantitative methods for data collection, including surveys (used in 9 of the selected studies), panel surveys (4 studies), and experiments (2 studies). In most research studies on news avoidance on social media, surveys and panel surveys are clearly at the forefront. Qualitative research methods are used in only 4 of the studies; all qualitative studies adopted interview methods for data collection.

Secondary data sources were used in 4 of the selected studies. These studies used quantitative survey data. It appears that the proportion of qualitative studies corresponds to secondary data sources used to understand news avoidance on social media. It clearly shows that the use of the qualitative method has not been given much emphasis. Some factors associated with news avoidance can be uncovered using quantitative methods, but

others require qualitative methods for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

4.4. Sampling Techniques

This study tries to shed light on the sampling methods mostly used in research studies on news avoidance. It was found that in the selected studies (N = 23), four studies used secondary data, and the remaining 19 studies relied on primary data. In these 19 studies, 11 studies have used non-probability sampling techniques, whereas only 1 study has used probability sampling for data collection. The remaining seven studies have not mentioned the sampling methods used for collecting relevant data.

Most research studies rely on non-probability samples to collect data. It limits the understanding of the phenomenon in different populations. By using probability sampling techniques, researchers can help make generalisations about news avoidance that are still missing from existing research on the phenomenon.

4.5. Geographical Focus of the Studies

In the selected studies, ten studies focus on the European region, although according to Worldometer (2024), this region hosts only 9.32 per cent of the total world population. North America is second with six studies; all studies in the region focus only on the USA. Other countries in the region are completely ignored in research on news avoidance. The Asian region is home to 59.22 per cent of the total world population, but only six studies focus on the region. In the Asian region, two studies focus on China, two on South Korea, and one on Israel and Singapore. In Asia, India is the world's most populous country, yet there is a lack of research on news avoidance. One study brings together countries from the North and South American regions.

Africa and the Australian continent are completely ignored in existing research on news avoidance. Although Africa is home to 18.15 per cent of the world's total population, this is more than the total population (16.71 per cent of the world's total population) of Europe and North America. Nevertheless, the majority of existing research on news avoidance focuses on the European and North American regions. Researchers studying news

avoidance should focus on the ignored regions of Asia and Africa. This will help build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

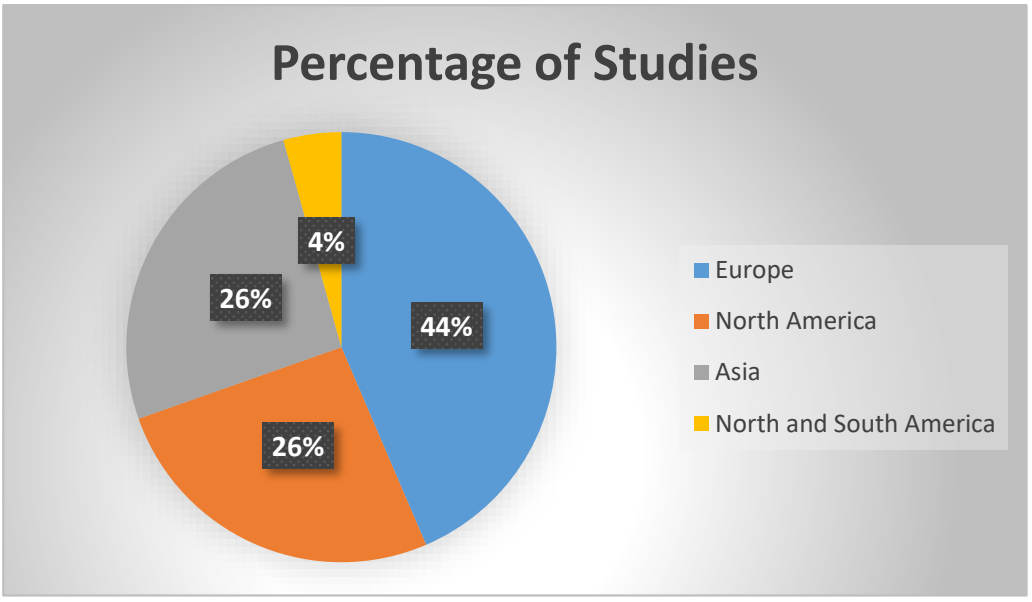

Figure 5 Geographical distribution of the selected studies

4.6. Theoretical Linkage with News Avoidance

In the selected research studies on news avoidance, most studies (17 studies) did not use a theoretical framework. In the selected studies, only six mention the theoretical framework used. The theoretical frameworks used by researchers are Bandura's self-efficacy theory, Carey's theory of communication as ritual, new media theory, extension and construction theory, practice theory and selective exposure theory. Few studies have used a theoretical framework, and the theories used are different in nature, so creating a pattern does not help.

5. Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the selected studies tries to get a deeper understanding of the existing body of research on news avoidance. This qualitative analysis is based on a thematic analysis approach, which is based on the most occurring themes in the selected papers.

5.1. News Overload and Avoidance

Researchers have tried to understand the link between news overload and news avoidance. This theme describes a linkage from the existing body of literature. In the digital media age, a person is getting news constantly; these constant news updates create a feeling of news overload. According to Park (2019), individuals who feel overloaded by news have lower confidence in their capacity to locate and comprehend news on social media, and this diminished news efficacy results in avoiding consuming news on social media. The news overload created by news bombardment leads people to take some measures to relieve the cognitive burden, and people relieve this burden by avoiding the news content. Ni, Zhu, and Krever (2023) find the direct influence of news overload on the affective load (negative reactions such as anxiety or stress) of users and the direct influence of the affective load of users on their avoidance behaviour. News overload is a strong, significant indicator that people say they consume little news due to avoidance motivations (Ohme et al. 2022).

Tian (2022) states that when people feel that they are being overloaded with news, they will either avoid searching for news or prefer to filter out the relevant news from the multitude of news available. In this way, news overload is linked with two subsequent behaviours: avoiding news and filtering out news to find the most appropriate content. Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2023) found that in an environment where media is overly saturated, news avoidance may be interpreted as a coping mechanism for perceived news overload and an effort to free up cognitive resources.

It is crucial to understand the underlying mechanism which makes a person prone to avoid news content. Tandoc and Kim (2023) explain this mechanism in their study; they describe that information overload was associated with news fatigue and difficulty in analysing and processing relevant information. News fatigue and analysis paralysis subsequently led to news avoidance. Song, Jung, and Kim (2017) state that people utilise news avoidance as a coping strategy when they experience cognitive burdens due to perceived news overload. They also found a link between news overload and digital devices in their study. They explain that those who consume news through digital platforms are more likely to perceive news overload. People using mobile devices, in particular, had a higher level of perceived news overload. Younger people were also found to experience more perceived news overload. Studies have tried to understand the factors

associated with perceived news overload. Lee, Holton, and Chen (2019) found that political news contributes to the highest level of perceived news overload. As per the research findings, overall, news overload is most likely determined by news topics and news attributes rather than who the news consumer is. Respondents deal with this news overload by avoiding the news completely instead of engaging in selective scanning.

From the present research, it can be inferred that news overload in the digital media age causes a person to avoid news content. A person engages in avoidance behaviour to alleviate the cognitive load associated with news overload. The flood of news is, therefore, a challenge for the media industry and society as a whole.

5.2. Agents/Factors of News Avoidance

Most of the earlier research studies have tried to understand the major agents or factors which make a person prone to avoid news. This section tries to shed light on those major agents linked with news avoidance. According to Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2023), people who hold a 'news finds me perception' (a perception that they do not need to follow the news actively as the news will find them) are more prone to news avoidance behaviour. Although people holding this belief may be motivated to be informed, they perceive the process of obtaining information to be different. It is found from the analysis of the selected studies (N=23) that it has recently emerged as a factor of news avoidance; therefore, a smaller number of studies focus on it. People who are politically disinterested are somewhat more likely to avoid the popular online press (Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2023). Similarly, another study finds that political interest is an important predictor of news avoidance, but its effect does not increase over time (Gorski and Thomas 2022).

According to Mukerjee and Yang (2021), avoiding news posts with out-party cues is more evident than selecting news posts with in-party cues. It clearly establishes the impact of political ideology on news avoidance behaviour. Another study finds that one motivation for avoiding news is its perception as biased (Aharoni et al. 2021). Trust in the news is a major factor linked with news avoidance behaviour; Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) also confirm this in their study. The study also explains media genre preferences as among the strongest predictors of news avoidance at the individual level.

Palmer and Toff (2020) stated that news avoiders perceived news consumption as a bad deal. They believed that it offered limited informational benefits and high costs in terms of time, emotional energy, and mental effort, particularly when compared to readily available alternatives. News avoiders also believed that news was particularly useless in facilitating meaningful political action because it tended to concern itself with far-flung issues that had little to do with their daily lives. Lor, Oh, and Choi (2023) found in their study a connection between the amount of news consumed and the feeling of powerlessness experienced. Therefore, the feeling of powerlessness caused by news consumption could also lead people to avoid news.

It indicates that avoiders associate different types of motivations with news avoidance behaviour, which triggers them to avoid news content. Woodstock (2014) also found some other motivations linked with news avoidance; news resisters explained that they feel calmer, more purposeful, and willing to work with others. Lottridge et al. (2022) explained that lack of time, the omnipresence of news, the negativity of news and distrust in the news content are agents of news avoidance behaviour. The factors found linked with news avoidance behaviour will help to better understand the phenomenon and also to deal with it to a certain extent.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged from the selected literature as an agent for news avoidance behaviour. Buneviciene et al. (2021) found that one-third of study participants lost interest and avoided news about the COVID-19 pandemic. These results suggest that COVID-19-related fatigue may lead to desensitisation and avoidance of news about the pandemic.

5.3. Profile of News Avoiders

News avoidance is considered a complex phenomenon; researchers are working to arrive at a common understanding of it. However, by identifying the news avoider, we can get an understanding of the phenomenon to some extent. Researchers have tried to understand the characteristics which make a person prone to news avoidance. Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge (2023) found in their study that people in less privileged social positions are more likely to report completely avoiding news online. The study suggests that social class, as measured by individuals' access to economic and cultural capital, explains why people avoid certain types of online news platforms. Further, being a woman and older age is linked with higher

avoidance of quality press online. Ohme et al. (2022) also found that women had lower general news consumption as well as news topics. This clearly establishes the fact that women are more prone to news avoidance behaviour.

According to Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen (2020), women, young people, and less educated people are more likely to avoid news content. An increase in news avoidance was generally present in groups with low socioeconomic status. It clearly establishes a link between the low socioeconomic status of a person and subsequent news avoidance behaviour. The longitudinal study finds that the number of news avoiders increased significantly in the group of people with low levels of education. However, according to Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020), education has no significant association with levels of avoidance. Younger people, women, people with left-leaning ideology, and those with lower internal efficacy or trust in the news were significantly more likely to say they actively avoid news (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). However, Ni, Zhu, and Krever (2023) found that age, gender, education, or occupation have no impact on users' avoidance behaviour. The contradictions in the research findings require more research on these aspects to reach a clear understanding. The factors associated with news avoiders might help identify them. In addition, it will also help to better understand the phenomenon and deal with it in the future.

5.4. Social Media and News Avoidance

Today, people have many platforms for accessing news content; with technological advancements, many users are relying on digital media platforms for news consumption. Social media is a major segment in the realm of digital media for news. Researchers have investigated its impact on news avoidance behaviour. Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) found in their study that individuals who primarily gathered news from social media were much more likely to report purposefully avoiding the news. Similarly, Tian (2022) also found that social media news overload will drive people to avoid seeking news. Due to the abundance of information available on social media, people are feeling bombarded with news, affecting their cognitive abilities and making them more likely to avoid news altogether. On the other hand, social media offers its users a wide range of choices effortlessly.

5.5. News Avoidance and Engagement

Ohme et al. (2023) state that news avoidance is often associated with less political engagement, posing a direct threat to a democratic society. Researchers have tried to explore this side of news avoidance, and the research revealed some unexpected findings contrary to the already-held belief about news avoidance. Ohme et al. (2023) conducted a study during COVID-19, and they found that news avoidance has a positive association with civic engagement in prosocial activities during a crisis. The study concludes that less news consumption is not necessarily bad news for democracy. Woodstock (2014) explains that news avoidance gave people an optimistic worldview, and some of them reported a renewed energy to engage in democratic action. These findings highlight some of the possible benefits associated with a person's news avoidance behaviour.

5.6. The Drawback of News Avoidance

Understanding the implications of news avoidance behaviour on individuals and society is crucial. Only then will some measures take place to address it. Literature suggests some drawbacks of news avoidance. According to Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2023), those people who do not actively seek news and take steps to avoid inadvertent exposure. They are unlikely to be able to learn about or discuss complex political issues, participate in collective action for social change or hold political elites accountable. Therefore, it becomes a challenge for a well-functioning democracy, which solely depends on an informed citizenry.

A study finds that intentional news avoiders scored lowest on accurate beliefs (Damstra et al. 2023). It makes news avoidance a problem for the knowledge of the avoiders. Misinformation is posing a new set of threats to society, particularly in the age of digital media. Avoiding news can make people who are frequently exposed to misinformation more likely to believe it (Tandoc and Kim 2023). Hameleers and Meer (2023) found in their study that participants who tended to avoid the news were more likely to have misinformation related to COVID-19 than news seekers. Therefore, it becomes crucial to take news avoidance seriously. According to Song, Jung, and Kim (2017), news avoidance has negative consequences at the societal level; it could also hinder the formation of civic and political knowledge. These challenges make it urgent to consider news avoidance as a serious threat to society.

5.7. Solutions to News Avoidance

From the findings of research studies, it is established that news avoidance is a big challenge for individuals and society at large. Earlier research studies tried to investigate some of the ways which can help deal with news avoidance. According to Park (2019), news overload can be removed by increasing citizens' belief in their news efficacy through literacy initiatives on news consumption led by politicians and educators.

Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2023) suggest in their research that the more you trust professional news, the less you avoid the news. Trust in professional news reduces news avoidance. Therefore, media houses can work on trust building to bring back news avoiders. A study by Ohme et al. (2022) highlights that high interest in politics and enjoyment linked with news consumption reduce the chances of not being aware of the news. Furthermore, they explain that news curation can be utilised to deal with news avoidance by increasing the relevance of news to its users. Song, Jung, and Kim (2017) also found news curation as a solution to deal with news avoidance. In his research study, Overgaard (2023) found that constructive social media posts enhance positive feelings, improve self-efficacy, and increase media credibility. Therefore, constructive journalism can be used to deal with some of the most common factors linked with a person's news avoidance behaviour.

People also try to deal with news avoidance behaviour caused by news overload on their own. As Park (2019) mentioned in his research study, some users are likely to rely on social filtering to alleviate perceived news overload. In social filtering, a person relies on friends to identify and access relevant news content. These facts clearly indicate that society can take some measures to deal with news avoidance at the individual level, and also with the help of initiatives from the media and policymakers.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The level of news avoidance behaviour is on the rise (Newman et al. 2023). It is imperative to take this rising level seriously because civic and political engagement is significantly lower among news avoiders than among news seekers (Edgerly 2022). Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022) also confirm that political knowledge and engagement are low among people who

consistently avoid news. It makes news avoidance challenging for society and democracy.

The quantitative examination of the selected studies shows some relevant patterns in the literature on news avoidance. Year-wise distribution highlights a sudden increase in the number of studies in 2023. However, work started on the phenomenon in 2014. However, it took 8 years for it to emerge as a key issue in the area of communication research. News avoidance behaviour increased during the COVID-19 crisis (de Bruin et al. 2021). It explains the rise in the number of studies on news avoidance. The analysis of published research papers (selected research studies) on news avoidance shows the concentration of research in the communication discipline. There is a need to understand this phenomenon from other disciplinary angles, considering its implications. The methodological analysis shows that 82.6 per cent of the selected studies (N=23) used primary methods for data collection, while the remaining 17.39 per cent of the studies relied on secondary sources for relevant data. The analysis shows a dominance of quantitative methods: 65.21 per cent of the selected studies (N=23) adopted quantitative methods for primary data collection. Only 17.39 per cent of the selected studies used qualitative methods. The remaining 17.39 per cent of studies use secondary sources. News avoidance is a behavioural phenomenon that can be better researched using qualitative research methods. Most researchers have used nonprobability sampling techniques when studying news avoidance. This prevents researchers from generalising their research results and also from assessing the severity of the phenomenon.

Geographical analysis of the selected studies shows that most research studies focused on the European region (43.47 per cent) and North America (26 per cent). The Asia region is represented in only 26 per cent of the selected studies, even though 59.22 per cent of the world's population lives in this region. On the other hand, the African region is completely ignored in existing research, even if it accounts for 18.15 per cent of the world population. This demonstrates the fact that the regional distribution of studies is disproportionate to the population in the regions. A clear and holistic understanding of the phenomenon can be built when each region is represented in the research.

The qualitative examination of the selected studies reveals significant insights from the existing body of research. The studies show how news overload is linked to subsequent news avoidance behaviour. Most of the

research studies consider it an important cause that results in news avoidance (Park 2019; Ohme et al. 2022; Tian 2022; Tandoc and Kim 2023). News overload is prominently found in people using mobile devices (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017). People avoid news when they feel overloaded in an attempt to free cognitive resources, so they utilise it as a coping strategy for news overload (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga 2023).

Researchers have identified the key factors of news avoidance. These agents make a person vulnerable to news avoidance behaviour. News finds me perception, political disinterest, trust in news, lack of time, the ubiquity of news, and negative news are some of the most common reasons that lead a person to avoid news content (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga 2023; Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2023; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020; Lottridge et al. 2022). In addition, there are also some individual characteristics that make a person more likely to avoid news. People in less privileged social positions, women, old age, young, less educated people, people with left-wing ideology, and people with lower internal efficacy are more likely to report news avoidance (Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2023; Ohme et al. 2022; Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen 2020; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). Social media offers an abundance of choices for news consumption, and researchers have investigated its impact on users' news consumption. Research has shown that social media leads people to avoid news (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020; Tian 2022). The primary reason behind this behaviour is the news overload experienced on social media.

It is critical to understand the factors that make news avoidance a threat to society. The research suggests that news avoiders are unlikely to discuss complex political issues, participate in social change and hold politicians accountable (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga 2023). Additionally, avoiders hold false beliefs and believe in misinformation (Damstra et al. 2023; Tandoc and Kim 2023). These factors combine to make news avoidance a challenge to democracy and society as a whole. Given the potential challenges of news avoidance, studies have found some solutions to deal with this behaviour. Researchers suggest trust in news, interest in news, enjoyment of news consumption, news curation, and constructive news to deal with news avoidance (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga 2023; Ohme et al. 2022; Overgaard 2023; Song, Jung, and Kim 2017). However, it is equally important to understand that news avoidance is associated with participation in prosocial activities during times of crisis (Ohme et al. 2023). Similarly, Woodstock (2014) also finds that news

avoidance actually gave people an optimistic outlook, and some avoiders engaged in democratic action with renewed energy.

With news avoidance increasing worldwide, media companies are planning to combat news avoidance in a variety of ways. Media companies are looking for better explanations for complex stories (67 per cent), solutions/constructive journalism (44 per cent), more inspiring human stories (43 per cent), a diverse presenting reporting team (35 per cent), simpler language/accessible formats (35 per cent), more positive news (21 per cent), more funny or entertaining news (18 per cent) (Newman 2024).

When studying news avoidance, it is important to consider news consumption by applications; otherwise, online news avoidance will be overestimated (Reiss 2023). Most research studies used quantitative methods. There is a clear gap in the qualitative understanding of news avoidance. The regional distribution of studies highlights the lack of research in Asia and Africa. The consequences of news avoidance behaviour are often linked in the literature to political implications for society, but may also have other effects that need to be discovered. Studies have proposed solutions to curb the effects of news avoidance, but none have tested the actual effects on avoidance behaviour. Experimental research into proposed solutions can help the research community find some proven solutions to news avoidance. The response of media companies to avoidance behaviour is also inadequate. It is important to understand how they perceive this phenomenon and how they try to deal with it. By leveraging media and audience data, a holistic understanding of its impact can be built.

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Understanding Pope Francis' Framing of Technology in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* in Light of Shannon Vallor's Technomoral Virtues

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ABSTRACT

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements, technosocial issues have emerged, positioning technology as a double-edged tool that can either foster human flourishing or contribute to moral and societal decline. These challenges provide an opportunity for the Catholic Church to reassess its moral teachings and establish guidelines for technology. Pope Francis addresses these concerns in his papal encyclicals Laudato Si' (2015) and Fratelli Tutti (2020), where he critically examines the ethical implications of technology and calls for its responsible and morally grounded application. This study analyzes Pope Francis' framing of technology through Claes H. de Vreese's (2005) Framing Theory, identifying the internal and external factors that influence his perspective. Additionally, it employs qualitative critical content analysis to extract key themes from the encyclicals and relational content analysis to relate them with Shannon Vallor's (2016) twelve Technomoral Virtues. The study's findings reveal that Pope Francis' framing of technology acknowledges both its benefits and risks while emphasizing moral responsibility as a guiding principle. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for ethical

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discernment in technological advancements, reinforcing Pope Francis' call for responsible and morally grounded digital engagement.

Keywords: *Catholic, ethics, framing, technology, virtues*

1. Introduction

The world continues to develop, especially in the realms of technology and communication. These advancements have not only transformed how societies interact and function but also bring ethical dilemmas and societal challenges. Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT), social media platforms, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are pivotal tools in modern communication, yet their misuse can lead to significant societal issues, including misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Environmental issues have, likewise, risen as the need for technological inventions require spaces and areas in which the larger eco-system has been affected. This dichotomy of technology, as both a tool for progress and a source of ethical concern, forms the foundation of this study (Hameleers and Minihold 2022, 1176-1199).

Despite their risks, technologies have become valuable tools for the Catholic Church. Priests, as moral guides, play a crucial role in shaping ethical technology use, balancing spiritual authority with their expertise in the usage of such innovations in both communication and pastoral aspects. The Church actively addresses these challenges, integrating technology into pastoral work while promoting its responsible use (Bolu 2012, 80-94).

Technology can reclaim its original good image and intended purpose as a tool for helping humanity. Constant education and sound teachings on the moral and virtuous use of technology must be continually imparted, as Shannon Vallor (2016, 1-13) emphasizes in her philosophy of technomoral virtues. The twelve technomoral virtues articulated by Vallor—honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, care, civility, flexibility, perspective, magnanimity, and wisdom—are adapted from Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist reflections. These virtues can help enhance humanity's capacity to flourish in an increasingly complex and unpredictable world shaped by technologies. Some of the greatest lessons

about technology's use often come from those who have experienced its negative consequences but have nonetheless managed to use it morally and for the good of their members, such as the Catholic Church herself.

How humanity views technology greatly affects how it will contribute to the development or deterioration of humanity. Thus, it is necessary to delve into framing analysis, as it helps in understanding why different users of technology interpret and evaluate it in various ways (Soliman and Tuunainen 2021, 473-519).

Before Pope Francis, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI had already emphasized the ethical use of Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT), urging the faithful to engage with them in a Christian manner. Both pontiffs explored Information Ethics in theology and communication, putting an emphasis on technology's potential to improve lives while stressing the need to safeguard human dignity. Pope John Paul II, in *Inter Mirifica*, discussed media as a tool for truth and education, while Pope Benedict XVI recognized its role in evangelization, particularly through emerging digital platforms (Sanchez-Camacho 2022, 319-414).

Before recent papal discussions on digital media, Blessed James Alberione, founder of the Society of St. Paul, had already emphasized its value for evangelization. He saw technology as a powerful tool for spreading truth, provided it was used ethically and purposefully. His teachings continue to inspire the Church's engagement with modern communication (Peña 2014, 1-24).

This study holds significant value in addressing a notable research gap by analyzing Pope Francis' framing of technology through the lens of Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues. While existing studies have explored the relationship between the Church and technology primarily from a theological perspective, there is a lack of research that examines how Pope Francis frames technology in a way that incorporates ethical and moral dimensions. By filling this gap, this study contributes to the broader discourse on technology and ethics, offering new insights that can guide individuals and institutions in their engagement with digital advancements. More broadly, it benefits all technology users by presenting a moral and virtuous perspective on navigating technosocial issues in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Furthermore, this study has practical implications for various stakeholders. For the Catholic Church, it provides a framework for understanding how Pope Francis envisions the ethical use of technology,

aiding Church leaders in shaping digital evangelization efforts. Environmental advocates can gain insights into the ethical dimensions of technology that align with sustainable development. Policymakers may find guidance in integrating moral considerations into technology-related legislation. Technology developers and ICT professionals can use this study to incorporate ethical principles into their innovations and workplace policies. Corporate leaders can align their business strategies with social responsibility, while Catholic media evangelizers can reassess how they utilize digital tools for spreading the faith. Lastly, media researchers can benefit from this study's contribution to understanding the role of modern technology in shaping human behavior and interactions across diverse religious and cultural contexts.

The study uses Framing Theory to examine how technological and moral messages are constructed (Vreese 2005, 51-62). By analyzing Pope Francis' writings, it aims to contribute to the Church's ethical discourse on technology, engaging with digital ethics and religious communication in the growing network society where capitalism, productivity, and profitability are inevitable (Castells 2010, 94). The research applies framing and content analysis to uncover insights into the Church's evolving view on technology.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Technology

Technology, defined by its physical and informational components, serves as both knowledge and a means for task accomplishment (Wahab et al. 2012, 61-71). While advancements like AI and social media enhance communication and simplify tasks, they also bring societal challenges. Hameleers and Minihold (2022, 1176) examine misinformation on social media in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, showing how partisan biases shape reality perceptions, with radical right-wing populists more likely to spread misinformation. Murdock (2018, 360) highlights the ethical concerns of digital technology's production and environmental costs. Gunkel (2012) critiques traditional communication studies, advocating for a revised approach that recognizes AI's active role in communication. Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2020, 276) reveal that media framing influences

political behavior, with individuals that resonates with partisan-friendly media while perceiving EU coverage as hostile. Framing studies, such as Laitinen and Valo (2018, 12-22) on virtual team communication, stress the need for tailored technological adoption, while Soliman and Tuunainen (2021, 474) identify two frames, gain and hedonic, hat shape user interactions. Weinstein and Przybylski (2019) find that motivational framing influences adolescents' concealment behaviors regarding technological restrictions.

2.2. Technology and the Church

The Catholic Church has historically contributed to scientific and technological progress, but its engagement with technology has declined. Green (2017, 106) argues that while past popes embraced scientific optimism, the Church now lacks a clear theology of technology and must not only support beneficial technology but also promote its moral use. Bolu (2012, 80-94) highlights ICT's role in Nigerian churches for evangelism and pastoral care, especially among younger members. Witman et al. (2010) explore how online social networks improve church engagement by collaboration and overcoming geographical barriers. Nyarko (2023, 11) reflects on the ethical use of technology through Romans 8:19–23, and its role in the Church's mission. Casayas (2023) examines Mabuting Balita, a digital program for OFWs, addressing their social and emotional needs, while Ugboh (2023, 99-78) introduces techno-theology, advocating for digitalizing church ministries to navigate disruptions and enhance theological practice.

2.3. Technomoral Virtues

Vallor (2016) argues that technology, when aligned with human values, can support flourishing, and opposing it equates to rejecting progress. In *Technology and the Virtues*, she advocates for a global ethical strategy through technomoral virtues incorporating Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist virtues, like honesty and wisdom (Barerra 2019, 128-131). Kawall (2017, 281-286) raises concerns about which virtues to prioritize as technosocial environments evolve. Beach (2021) discusses how technological advancements lead to "deskilling" but also offer opportunities for "upskilling" and "reskilling". Jin (2024, 21) stresses the need for a structured technomoral framework in AI development to align technology with ethical values. Together, these studies highlight the importance of

cultivating technomoral virtues to navigate the ethical challenges of emerging technologies.

2.4. Pope Francis and Encyclicals

Since becoming Pope in 2013, Pope Francis has gained global recognition for his humility and accessibility, earning *Esquire's* "Best Dressed Man of the Year" and holding a high public trust in the Philippines in 2015 (Pangilinan 2023, 8). Mills (2015, 45-55) analyzes *Laudato Si'*, and finds that Pope Francis critiques the technocratic paradigm and calls for integral ecology, while Neumayr (2017) discusses the Pope's political engagement on social issues, which sometimes lead to misinterpretations. Piscos (2021, 240-262) examines *Fratelli Tutti* and the Pope's use of digital media, respectively, inclusivity and connection in a global context, similar to Cardoso and Barraco's (2019, 777-782) study of Pope Francis' communication style on his Instagram posts. Papal encyclicals, as formal documents offering guidance on social and moral issues, play a key role in religious authority and communication (Neven and Peine 2017, 26). Studies by Zozimo et al. (2023, 383-399) explore the ethical and environmental tensions in the Pope's teachings. Pope Francis' environmental emphasis, in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti,* are built on the foundational work of Pope Benedict XVI, complementing his predecessor's efforts by expanding the theological and practical framework for ecological stewardship. While Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the moral responsibility to care for creation and initiated tangible sustainability projects, such as installing solar panels and promoting carbon neutrality, Pope Francis deepened this vision by integrating environmental concerns with social justice, global inequality, and the ethical dimensions of consumerism urging systemic change (Ivereigh 2020, 123). Together, their teachings highlight a continuity in Catholic environmental thought, with Pope Benedict laying the groundwork and Francis amplifying the call for systemic change and holistic ecological conversion.

2.5. Synthesis

The reviewed literature highlights studies on technosocial issues, exploring solutions through philosophical discourse or Church practices in digital technology. Many analyses focus on Pope Francis' societal messages, recognizing his influence on both Catholics and non-Catholics. While his voice is crucial in shaping discussions, most studies on the

Church and technology are theological reflections. Notably, no research examines Pope Francis' framing of technology in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* through Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues. Pope Francis focuses on tackling technosocial issues and urges everyone, including non-Catholics, to use technology ethically, but he does not explicitly introduce technomoral virtues. By incorporating Vallor's technomoral virtues, Pope Francis' messages on technology will be enriched, which is what this research aims to provide. By learning these technomoral virtues from *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti,* this study can offer a new perspective on how media content creators can frame their technological stance, like Pope Francis. Through this study, technology developers may also get knowledge on how they can make technologies more inclusive and ethical for all beings in our Common Home.

3. Statement of the Problem

This research aims to answer the problem: How does Pope Francis frame technology in his *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* encyclicals and how can this framing be understood in light of Shannon Vallor's tehnomoral virtues?

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following specific questions:

1. What are Pope Francis' themes on technology in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*?
2. What are the internal and external factors of Pope Francis that influenced his framing of technology in his encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*?
3. How can Pope Francis' framing of technology be understood through Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues?

4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

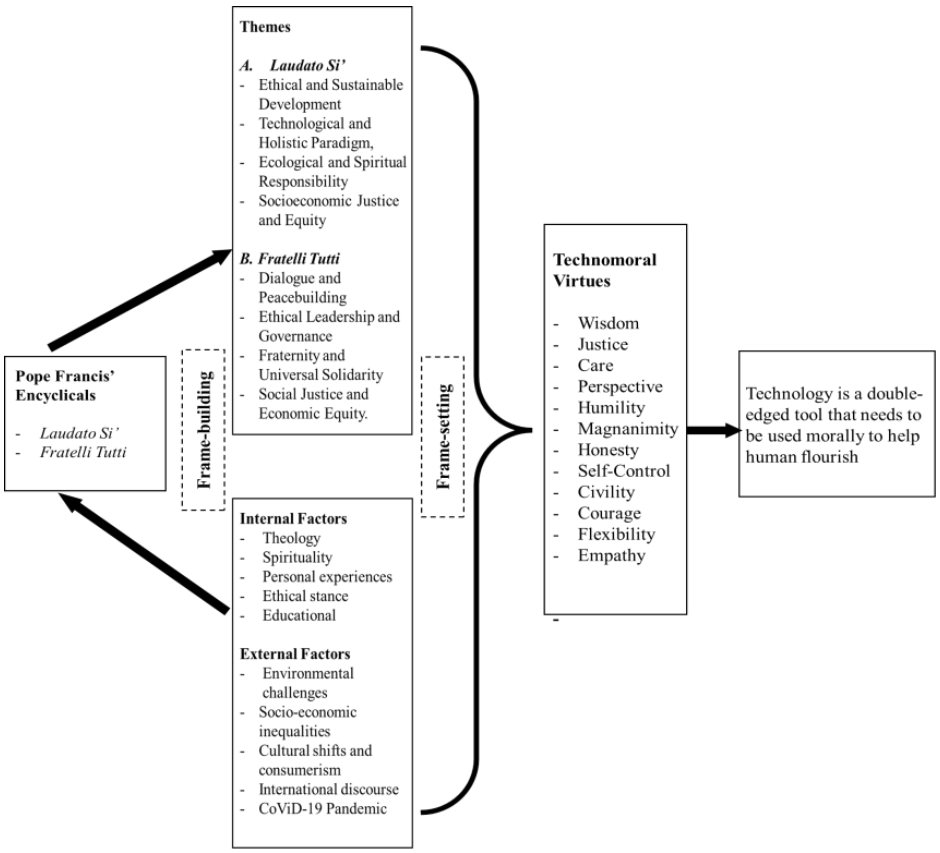

Figure 1. Researcher's Conceptual Framework. This Conceptual Framework is developed based on de Vreese (2005) Theoretical Framework process, consituting frame-building and frame-setting. The technomoral virtues of Shannon Vallor are incorporated in the framework as an overarching concept to understand deeper the contexts (factors) and the themes of Pope Francis framing of technology.

This study uses Claes H. de Vreese's (2005, 51-62) framing paradigm to analyze how Pope Francis frames his messages on technology in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*. Framing theory examines how media frames are built and how they influence public perception (D'Angelo 2011, 870-888; Entman 1993, 51-58). In this study, internal and external factors that affect Pope Francis' framing of technology in his *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* have been determined as seen in figure 1 above. The encyclicals serve as the analyzed media frames, with frame-setting exploring how these frames

interact with audience predispositions. Framing effects are evaluated through Shannon Vallor's (2016) twelve technomoral virtues, which provide an ethical framework for analyzing the Pope's messages on technology and morality in a digitally evolving world.

5. Methodologies

This qualitative study uses relational content analysis method of Luo (2019) to examine how Pope Francis frames technosocial issues in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, identifying relationships between concepts within the texts to reveal deeper meanings and patterns. Coding guide and sheet for the content analysis are developed, and another coding guide for relating the analyzed themes to Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues are made and used for a systematic analysis in categorizing Pope Francis' messages, their thematic analysis, internal or external framing factors, and alignment with Vallor's technomoral virtues to see the connections within paragraphs (Busch 2005; Supan 2022). The coding guide and sheet have been validated by three. Data collection follows Bhandari (2022) using AI software to code and categorize data into moral themes analyzed in relation to Vallor's virtues, validating tools, and all research instruments approved by the SPSF Institutional Review Board, following GREIP ethical protocols (Dooly et al. 2017, 352-356).

6. Presentation, Interpretation, and Analysis

This section provides a detailed examination of the data collected and its alignment with the study's research questions. The chapter begins by mapping the themes found in Pope Francis' encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti.* It then interprets these themes through the lens of Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues, identifying their frequency and contextual relevance. The discussion highlights significant resonances between Vallor's technomoral virtues and Pope Francis' messages on technology. Finally, the analysis synthesizes these findings to demonstrate how moral principles and virtues can guide technological progress while addressing

global challenges. This chapter thus bridges theological insights with contemporary ethical frameworks for responsible technological engagement.

6.1. Mapping the Themes: Insights from *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*

The following themes, as discussed in the methodology of this study, were analyzed using AI software (Atlas.ti and GPT-4). After extracting the themes, the researcher identified commonalities among them and formulated unifying themes that encapsulate the grouped concepts.

6.1.1. Laudato Si'

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* calls for ethical transformation, ecological stewardship, and socioeconomic justice to address modern crises. The themes analyzed are ethical and sustainable development, technological and holistic paradigm, ecological and spiritual responsibility, and socioeconomic justice and equity. Pope Francis critiques consumerism and technocracy, advocating for solidarity and the alignment of technological advancements with the common good.

Ethical and sustainable development

The first theme identified in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* is "ethical transformation and sustainable development." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: call for ethical transformation, responsibility to future generations, moral responsibility for energy transition, call for global consensus, ethical decisions in short-term solutions, moral imperative to align progress with human flourishing, call for generosity and sacrifice, combatting corruption and inequitable consumption, lack of ethical development, need for ethical restraint and cultural maturity, loss of ethical horizons, recovery of lost values and goals, integration of contemplation and action, theological perspective on humanity and nature, redefinition of progress, misuse of sustainability language, loss of identity and self-awareness, human creativity as participation in god's creative action, and dignified life through work.

Pope Francis advocates for ethical responsibility in technology, its long-term impact and alignment with the common good. He critiques shortcomings in development and sustainability, stressing global interconnectedness and the need to address ethics, corruption, and moral decline, particularly among leaders. He writes, "Every ecological approach

needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged," and links ethics and sustainability (Francis 2015, no. 93).

He also calls for recovering lost values and integrating diverse perspectives, including theology, anthropology, and metaphysics in decision-making. "Integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology and take us to the heart of what it is to be human" (Francis 2015, no. 11).

This theme encapsulates a multifaceted call to action, urging humanity to align technological and economic progress with moral imperatives and ecological responsibility. The theme highlights the interconnectedness of individual ethics and collective stewardship, addressing issues like energy transitions, equitable consumption, and the recovery of lost values. It advocates for a paradigm shift in human behavior, moral decision-making and a theological vision that harmonizes humanity's creative potential with divine action. These elements demonstrate the necessity of generosity, sacrifice, and a global consensus to combat systemic corruption and ensure the flourishing of future generations.

Technological and holistic paradigm

The second identified unifying theme in *Laudato Si'* is "technological and polistic paradigms." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: critique of technological solutions, technological reductionism as an epistemological paradigm, illusion of progress through power, overreliance on power without restraint, detachment from nature, technological advancements, failure of technological ingenuity to solve global issues, rejection of superficial innovation, domination of the technocratic paradigm, disconnect between economy and human well-being, misguided anthropocentrism and lifestyle, schizophrenia between technocracy and biocentrism, environmental and social consequences of technocratic dominance, role of science in public good, integration of faith and reason, ethical implications of technological decisions, gratitude for scientific efforts, and creation of God's design.

Pope Francis urges a re-evaluation of technological paradigms, advocating for holistic approaches over linear, profit-driven systems. In *Laudato Si'*, he critiques the "modern myth of unlimited material progress" and calls for technology to serve the common good rather than perpetuate exploitation (Francis 2015, no. 78). He warns, "Never has humanity had

such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely," and because of this, there is a need for ethical responsibility (Francis 2015, no. 104).

Pope Francis argues that technocratic paradigms reduce technology to a mere tool, neglecting its broader moral and ecological impacts. "Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience" (Francis 2015, no. 105). This narrow focus undermines the dignity of all life, requiring a "broader vision of reality." Pope Francis also critiques consumerism, warning that detachment from deeper values leads to material excess: "The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs to buy, own, and consume things" (Francis 2015, no. 204). He calls for reconnecting technology with ethics and spirituality to ensure true human and ecological flourishing.

Humans do not live alone in this world. Though Pope Francis, bearing a theological perspective, recognizes humanity as the apex of creation, he asserts that humans are not above all other forms of creation. He identifies the current problem of the technological age as a product of misguided anthropocentrism, which he describes as a tendency to "consider ourselves more important than others" (Francis 2015, no. 122).

He calls for a shift toward a holistic perspective in formulating technological paradigms, urging society to acknowledge its interconnectedness with all forms of life. "Everything is interconnected," he writes, "and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity" (Francis 2015, no. 240). This holistic approach challenges humanity to create technology that respects and enhances life in its totality.

This theme critiques the technocratic paradigm that reduces progress to technological advancement, detached from ethical and ecological considerations. This theme underscores the illusion of power-driven progress and the failure of technological ingenuity in addressing global challenges holistically. It advocates for a balanced integration of faith and reason, gratitude for scientific efforts while calling for responsible decision-making. This theme critiques misguided anthropocentrism and superficial innovations, the disconnection between economic systems, human well-being, and nature. Ultimately, it calls for an ethical framework that aligns technological progress with environmental stewardship and respect for God's creation.

Ecological and spiritual responsibility

The third identified unifying theme in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* is "ecological and spiritual responsibility." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: interconnectedness of all creation, world as a sacrament of communion, creation as a seamless garment, reverence for creation, integration of ecology and anthropology, spiritual and moral dimensions of ecology, aesthetic contribution, call to protect the Earth, protection of ecosystems, sustainable agriculture, waste disposal and recycling, reduction of pollution, sustainable resources management, and role of biodiversity in ecosystem stability.

He stresses the interconnectedness of all creation, urging leaders to integrate ecology, anthropology, and spirituality to prevent unjust technocratic systems. He writes, "the universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God," framing creation as a divine gift that deserves respect (Francis 2015, no. 86).

He asserts that a deeper sense of spirituality fosters care for the world, because "all creatures are connected" and must be "cherished with love and respect" (Francis 2015, no. 42). Francis challenges society to recognize the harm caused by industrial practices that exploit nature, calling for a shift toward ethical and sustainable stewardship.

This theme emphasizes the interconnectedness of all creation and the spiritual and moral imperative to protect and nurture the Earth. It presents the world as a sacrament of communion and creation as a seamless garment, calling for reverence and care for nature. By integrating ecological and anthropological perspectives, this theme highlights the intrinsic link between human well-being and environmental health. Practical considerations such as sustainable agriculture, waste management, pollution reduction, and biodiversity preservation are framed within a spiritual ethic that recognizes the Earth as God's creation, calling humanity to stewardship and sustainable resource management.

Socioeconomic justice and equity

The fourth identified unifying theme in *Laudato Si'* is "socioeconomic justice and equity." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: economic interests over the common good, responsibility for social decline, social exclusion and inequity, economic inequality and pseudo-freedom, balancing consumption and equity, critique of compul-

sive consumerism, forthright and honest debate, binding commitments and political realism, advocacy for ecological integrity, calling for dialogue and comprehensive solutions, and need for urgent and just policy development.

Pope Francis critiques profit-driven consumerism, social inequity and environmental degradation. He warns that prioritizing financial gain over the common good leads to elitism and exclusion, stating, "economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain" (Francis 2015, no. 56). He also condemns compulsive consumerism, which "promotes extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products" straining natural resources and deepening inequality (Francis 2015, no. 203).

To counter this, he calls for "an ecological conversion" toward mindful consumption and a lifestyle free from material obsession (Francis 2015, 222). He urges leaders to engage in ethical policymaking, because "a healthy politics… is sorely needed" to promote sustainability and justice (Francis 2015, no. 181).

This theme highlights the interconnectedness of environmental issues with economic and social injustices. It critiques the prioritization of economic interests over the common good and exposes the links between social exclusion, inequality, and environmental degradation. This theme calls for a balanced approach to consumption, equity, and the promotion of policies that prioritize ecological integrity and fairness. It advocates for forthright dialogue, binding commitments, and political realism to address these challenges. This theme underscores the moral imperative to foster socioeconomic systems that uphold human dignity and ecological responsibility.

6.1.2. *Fratelli Tutti*

Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* presents the themes dialogue and peacebuilding, ethical leadership and governance, fraternity and universal solidarity, and social justice and economic equity. Pope Francis emphasizes the need for truth-seeking through dialogue, responsible stewardship of technology, and fraternity to bridge cultural divides and promote global peace. By integrating charity, solidarity, and empathy, this theme advocates for dialogue as a transformative alternative to indifference and violence, that can help to build unity in diversity.

Dialogue and peacebuilding

The first identified unifying theme in Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* is "dialogue and peacebuilding." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: technology and hidden fears, inequality in technological progress, reality altered by technology, pursuit of truth through dialogue, manipulation of conscience and democratic process, digital campaigns of hatred and destruction, media's role in supporting terrorism, the internet as a gift from God, technology as a tool for human development, responsible stewardship of technology, digital infrastructure's environmental costs, culture of walls and isolation, dialogue as an alternative to indifference or violence, building fraternity through authentic encounters, bridging cultural components through technology, integration of charity in institutions, call for solidarity and empathy, and unity in diversity.

Pope Francis warns of technology's potential to instill fear, deepen inequality, and distort reality through misinformation and manipulation. He cautions that the digital world fosters "addiction, isolation, and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality" and enables the "shameless manipulation of information," eroding trust and fueling division. He also highlights the environmental impact of digital infrastructures (Francis 2022, nos. 43-45).

To counter these issues, Francis urges truth-seeking through dialogue and emphasizes technology as a gift that can foster solidarity when used responsibly. "The solution is not relativism" but engagement in "a process of encounter and dialogue" (Francis 2022, no. 206). He calls for fraternity built on integrity and empathy, asserting, "Life exists where there is bonding, communion, and fraternity" (Francis 2022, no. 87).

This theme emphasizes the necessity of authentic dialogue to counteract societal divisions and promote global peace. This theme critiques the misuse of technology for manipulation, hatred, and isolation, while acknowledging its potential as a tool for human development and fraternity. It calls for responsible stewardship of technology to bridge cultural divides, foster empathy, and support solidarity. By integrating charity into institutions and promoting unity in diversity, this theme highlights dialogue as a transformative alternative to indifference and violence, advocating for peacebuilding through authentic encounters and shared responsibility.

Fraternity and universal solidarity

The second identified unifying theme in Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* is "fraternity and universal solidarity." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: erosion of human dignity, loss of fraternity and human connection, superficiality in digital communication, anonymity and accountability, erosion of human empathy, loss of authentic relationships, failure to build bridges, individualism and community breakdown, hypocrisy in religious communication, sacredness of life and human dignity, global justice as a root cause of terrorism, call for universal peace, integration of technology and civic life, and role of international cooperation.

Pope Francis suggests that technology, while a tool for progress, often erodes human dignity. He critiques the spread of "fake news" and digital exposure, cautioning that "people's lives are combed over, laid bare and bandied about, often anonymously" (Francis 2022, no. 42). This culture of misinformation weakens fraternity, empathy, and connection. He also condemns hypocrisy in religious communication, stating, "Religious leaders are called to be true mediators… not intermediaries who seek their own interests", that can help ethical failures in leadership (Francis 2022, no. 284).

To counter these issues, He calls for ethical technology use, international cooperation, and policies serving the common good. "A better kind of politics… truly at the service of the common good" is needed (Francis 2022, no. 154). He stresses that "lasting peace will only be possible" through solidarity and cooperation, urging respect for human dignity and justice in the digital age (Francis 2022, no. 127).

This theme underscores the importance of reestablishing human connections and global unity. It critiques the erosion of human dignity and empathy brought about by individualism, superficial digital communication, and the failure to cultivate meaningful relationships. This theme calls for international cooperation to address the root causes of terrorism and global injustice and emphasizes the sacredness of life and the necessity of building bridges between communities. By integrating technology into civic life responsibly, the theme advocates universal peace and solidarity grounded in shared human dignity.

Ethical leadership and governance

The third unifying theme in Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* is "ethical leadership and governance." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: are moral deterioration and responsibility, silence amid injustice, weakening of spiritual values, loss of integrity in Catholic media, verbal violence and slander in digital spaces, moral responsibility in technological development, rejection of hatred and violence, charity as a driver of change, ethical responsibility of business, economic systems prioritizing efficiency over humanity, polarization and ideological echo chambers, media's influence in daily conversations, critique of technocracy, regulation of power, primacy of politics over economics, and role of legal systems in limiting power.

Pope Francis calls for collective responsibility in addressing moral decline, that leadership may extend beyond positions of power to everyday actions. He condemns silence in the face of injustice, particularly within religious institutions, stating, "Good politics combines love with hope and with confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts" (Francis 2020, no. 196). He also warns against religious hypocrisy, asserting that "violence is not encouraged by religion itself, but by its deformities" (Francis 2020, no. 285).

To combat these issues, Francis urges policymakers to regulate digital platforms to prevent violence and exploitation, because "regulating the legitimate use of power is an essential way to limit its excesses" (Francis 2020, no. 174). He calls for rejecting hatred and solidarity, stating, "Social friendship and universal fraternity… call for an acknowledgment of the worth of every human person" (Francis 2020, 106). Through empathy and moral accountability, societies can navigate technological challenges while preserving spiritual values.

This theme urges everyone to have integrity, responsibility, and morality in leadership across societal, political, and technological domains. It critiques the erosion of spiritual and ethical values, the rise of verbal violence in digital spaces, and the prioritization of economic efficiency over human dignity. The encyclical calls for leaders to reject hatred and polarization, embrace charity as a transformative force, and regulate power through ethical governance and robust legal systems. It emphasizes the primacy of politics over economics, urging leaders to foster justice and uphold the common good over self-serving technocratic or economic priorities.

Social justice and economic equity

The fourth identified unifying theme in Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* is "social justice and economic equity." This unifying theme is based on the categorized analyzed themes: economic inequalities and injustice, systemic marginalization of the poor, neglect of immediate human needs, business as a noble vocation, economic opportunism and inequality, rejection of utilitarianism, universal destination of goods, resource distribution and sustainability, technology's role in sustainability, digital infrastructure's environmental costs, sustainable use of technology, and indirect reference to sustainability.

Pope Francis points out the need to reject utilitarianism to combat injustices and inequality. He calls on humanity to hear the cries of both the environment and the poor, advocating for a holistic approach to progress and development that prioritizes inclusion. Inclusion, as Francis envisions, extends not only to marginalized people but also to all life forms on Earth, our Common Home. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he asserts, "Every human being has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally; this fundamental right cannot be denied by any country" (Francis 2020, no. 107). By rejecting utilitarian practices that favor profit over people, Francis urges a reimagining of progress that considers the well-being of all creation, recognizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment.

In the process of inclusion, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of equity, particularly in the distribution of common goods. Equity, he argues, entails prioritizing those most affected by societal and environmental challenges while warranting justice for all. Francis calls upon world leaders to embrace social justice as a guiding principle for decision-making. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he writes, "Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others" (Francis 2020, no. 115). This vision of social justice extends beyond economic policies, requiring leaders to adopt a moral commitment to addressing systemic inequities and environmental degradation. Francis's call for equitable progress serves as a moral imperative to uplift the marginalized and protect the natural world as part of a shared responsibility.

This theme emphasizes addressing economic inequalities and systemic marginalization through ethical and sustainable practices. The encyclical critiques the neglect of human needs, economic opportunism, and utilitarian approaches that prioritize profit over people. It highlights the universal destination of goods, advocating for equitable resource distribution and the

sustainable use of technology. By framing business as a noble vocation, the theme calls for economic systems that uphold dignity, justice, and the common good.

6.2. Pope Francis: Internal and External Factors

6.2.1. Laudato Si'

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* integrates both internal and external factors in framing the ethical dimensions of technology. Internally, his theological background, pastoral concerns, integral ecology, and educational background in chemistry shape his perspective (Mills 2015, 45-55). Externally, factors such as climate change, socio-economic inequalities, consumerism, scientific discourse, and weak international agreements influence his views (IPCC 2014; Harris 2016, 181-199). He critiques the "throwaway culture" that fuels environmental degradation and calls for global solidarity in addressing technological and ecological ethics (Francis 2015, no. 21).

6.2.2. Fratelli Tutti

Similarly, *Fratelli Tutti* reflects internal influences like Catholic social teaching, pastoral concerns over social division, and inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi. External factors include socioeconomic inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic, digital misinformation, and the lack of cyber regulations (Gaudet 2022). Pope Francis warns that "digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges" and calls for just technological policies (Francis 2020, no. 43). His ethical framework merges spiritual insights with global challenges, advocating for technology that promotes human dignity and unity.

6.3. Pope Francis and Shannon Vallor's Technomoral Virtues

6.3.1. Laudato Si'

Pope Francis' messages in *Laudato Si'* strongly align with Shannon Vallor's twelve technomoral virtues. Technomoral Wisdom appears most frequently (43 times), followed by Justice (35), Care (34), and Perspective (34). His call for "ecological conversion" and critique of unregulated technological progress reflect Vallor's emphasis on moral discernment and sustainability. Other virtues like Humility, Honesty, and Magnanimity highlight the ethical responsibility in technological advancements (Harris

2016, 181-199). Less frequent but still significant are Empathy, Flexibility, and Courage, reinforcing Pope Francis' emphasis on global solidarity and adaptive responses to technological challenges (Francis 2015, no. 91).

6.3.2. Fratelli Tutti

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Perspective (28 appearances) is the dominant virtue, reflecting the need to view technology within a broader ethical and societal framework (Francis 2022, no. 137). Justice (23), Technomoral Wisdom (21), Care (19), and Civility (19) also play key roles, reinforcing fairness, inclusivity, and responsible digital engagement. Pope Francis critiques misinformation and digital manipulation, advocating for honesty, humility, and flexibility in addressing technology's ethical dilemmas (Francis 2015, no. 45). His vision promotes a fraternal digital world, where technology fosters dialogue, respect, and human solidarity.

6.4. Two Minds, One Heart

Technology is a powerful force that can either uplift or harm humanity. Pope Francis and Shannon Vallor emphasize the need for ethical virtues to guide its use. Pope Francis calls for open and honest dialogue rooted in social justice and care for creation, while Vallor advocates for technomoral wisdom, civility, empathy, and justice to mitigate technology's divisive effects (Massaro 2023, 2-4).

A central theme in both perspectives is inclusivity, Pope Francis urges simplified, accessible technology for marginalized communities, while Vallor frames inclusivity as a technomoral virtue and an operational necessity, to ensure equitable technology design (Fonseca 2016, 50-60; Bergen and Robaey 2022, 168-170).

Both share a positive outlook on technology's transformative potential. Pope Francis views it as a divine gift, improving human life through medical, agricultural, and industrial advancements, but warns that it must be used responsibly to promote justice and reduce inequalities. Vallor has a similar view that technology's value depends on moral wisdom and human-centered values.

Their perspectives align with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 numbers 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). By integrating

ethical wisdom into technological progress, societies can achieve human flourishing alongside innovation.

7. Summary

This study on Pope Francis' framing of messages in his *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* aims to uncover the themes present in his messages and know the internal and external factors that affects Pope Francis' framing through de Vreese Framing theory. In addition, this study seeks to understand the analyzed themes through Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues.

Firstly, through critical content analysis of Pope Francis *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti,* this study presents eight main themes on technology namely, (1) Ethical and Sustainable Development, (2) Technological and Holistic Paradigms, (3) Ecological and Spiritual Responsibility, (4) Socioeconomic Justice and Equity, (5) Dialogue and Peacebuilding, (6) Fraternity and Universal Solidarity, (7) Ethical Leadership and Governance, (8) Social Justice and Economic Equity.

Secondly, this study reveals that Pope Francis' ethical perspective on technology in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* is shaped by both internal and external factors. *Laudato Si'* reflects his theological and scientific background, pastoral concerns, and commitment to integral ecology, while also responding to climate change, socio-economic inequalities, and weak international agreements. He critiques the "throwaway culture" and urges global solidarity in addressing environmental and technological ethics. Similarly, *Fratelli Tutti* draws from Catholic social teaching and St. Francis of Assisi's ideals, while addressing modern challenges like digital misinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic. Pope Francis warns that mere digital connectivity cannot foster true unity and calls for ethical technological policies that uphold human dignity and social justice.

Lastly, this study shows that Pope Francis' ethical vision in *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* aligns closely with Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues in which wisdom, justice, care, and perspective in technology's role in society are emphasized. He critiques unchecked technological progress and digital misinformation, advocating for humility, honesty, and global solidarity.

8. Conclusion

This study provides a critical content analysis of how Pope Francis frames technology through an ethical lens, and shows emphasis on the moral implications of it on this technological age. His moral teachings align with Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues, advocating virtues like humility, justice, and care in addressing digital misinformation, sustainability, and inequality. The findings call for global cooperation among policymakers, religious leaders, and technologists to ensure technology serves the common good. Additionally, this study encourages further interdisciplinary research on faith, ethics, technology, and philosophy to address modern digital and ecological challenges.

In addition, this study reveals that Pope Francis framing of technology is closely related to Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues. In addition, the applied communication style of Pope in his framing of technology embodies also the twelve technomoral virtues that Vallor encourages especially technomoral wisdom, honesty, courage and civility because Pope Francis courageously speaks about the external technosocial issues drawing from his faith, educational background, spirituality and ethics he believes as part of the internal factors that influenced his framing of technology. Both thinkers stress inclusivity, with Pope Francis urging accessible technology for marginalized communities and Vallor promoting ethical design. They share a hopeful view of technology's transformative power, provided it is guided by moral responsibility. Their perspectives align with UN Sustainable Development Goals, showing the need for ethical wisdom to ensure technology fosters justice, equity, and human flourishing. Understanding Pope Francis framing of technology in his *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti,* gives a better perspective through relating his moral teachings to Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues.

By incorporating Pope Francis' messages on technology and Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues in technology-related discussions educators and church leaders can guide individuals toward more ethical and responsible digital engagement. Furthermore, those who are engaged in writing and publishing on various media platforms are encouraged to follow the example of Pope Francis' communication style and his approach to framing issues, particularly technosocial issues, while maintaining courage and honesty at all times. With these findings, it has been found important to integrate technomoral virtues into digital literacy programs

within Catholic institutions, and this study also recommends that Internet and Communication Technology (ICT) developers ensure digital ethics that safeguard the privacy and safety of media users, as encouraged by Pope Francis, while bearing Vallor's twelve technomoral virtues.

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Understanding Media Consumption, Preferences, and Satisfaction of South and Southeast Asian Religious Online Media Consumers: The Case of Radio Veritas Asia's Website

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ABSTRACT

The way people communicate, gather, and process information continues to evolve in response to new communication technologies. With the rise of the internet and digital media, the use of traditional media platforms, such as radio, decreased. Radio Veritas Asia (RVA), a non-profit Catholic radio station, transitioned from shortwave broadcasting to a digital online format to address the decline in its radio listenership. With these changes in RVA, this study aimed to understand the media consumption patterns, preferences, and satisfaction levels of religious online media consumers in South and Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, with a specific focus on their engagement with the Radio Veritas Asia website. Through online surveys, the study found that media consumption patterns, preferences, and satisfaction levels vary moderately across the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The frequency of religious content consumption, such as news

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about the Catholic faith and daily Gospel reflections via the RVA website, ranges from three to seven days per week. While the internet offers multimodality—encompassing textual, visual, audio, and audiovisual formats—there remains a strong preference for written text among South and Southeast Asian audiences. Satisfaction levels were consistently high across all areas. This satisfaction is influenced by RVA's digital platform's characteristics, its usability, and its content, which effectively address the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of the audience.

Keywords: *media consumption, media satisfaction, media preference, religious media, religious online media*

1. Introduction

Communication technology and platforms have evolved rapidly—from print to broadcast, to online, and the creation of social media (Poe 2010). The rise of each communication platform, however, affects how society gathers and shares information, as well as how it builds connections and relationships. As people rely more on the internet for information and communication, many religious organizations, including the Catholic Church, have sought to adapt their communication methods and utilize the digital space.

In 2002, during World Communication Day, the late Pope John Paul II discussed the internet as a new forum for proclaiming the gospel. He explained that the internet is a public space where evangelization can take place if used properly (John Paul II 2002). However, he cautioned that while the said platform provides vast amounts of knowledge and information, it does not teach values, which are core to humanity. The pope, recognizing the potential of the internet, encouraged the Catholic community to promote Christian values through the digital spaces (John Paul II 2002). This acknowledgment underscores the dual responsibility of religious institutions to both engage digital platforms and uphold foundational moral teachings.

One example of a religious media organization that adapted to the changes brought by the development of communication platforms is Radio

Veritas Asia (RVA)—a Catholic media organization. From shortwave radio, RVA transitioned to digital and online platforms in 2018 due to the decreasing number of radio listeners across Asia and the increasing financial costs required to sustain their radio stations (Radio Veritas Asia 2018). While RVA was previously limited to radio for sharing news and information about the Catholic Church, the shift to online media allowed the organization to offer textual stories, visuals, photographs, and videos. The shift has also affected how RVA's audiences gather and process information, as well as how they engage with one another and with the media.

Five years after this digital transition, RVA conducted an internal audience perception survey in 2023 to assess the effectiveness of its online platform. However, given RVA's transnational audience spanning South and Southeast Asia—regions marked by varied dominant religions and distinct media cultures—questions remain regarding the nature and extent of audience engagement. Specifically, these include how regional audiences consume content, what types of content they prefer, and whether the website meets their psychological and communicative needs.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the media consumption behaviors, content preferences, and satisfaction levels of South and Southeast Asian users of the RVA website. While Radio Veritas Asia has embraced digital media to align with global communication trends, there remains a limited understanding of how audiences from culturally and religiously diverse contexts engage with such religious online media. This research specifically investigates whether there are regional variations in how the RVA website is used and whether it fulfills users' social, cognitive, and affective needs, as conceptualized within the framework of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT).

By foregrounding the UGT, the study evaluates how religious online media serves different functional roles in users' lives, including identity formation, knowledge-seeking, emotional support, and community connection. The findings aim to inform RVA's region-specific media strategies and contribute insights for religious media organizations seeking to design platforms that are culturally responsive, context-sensitive, and audience-driven.

2. Related Literature

The intersection of faith and technology has led to the emergence of new evangelization strategies, particularly through digital media platforms. Religious media organizations such as RVA have embraced this digital transformation to fulfill their role of providing information about the Catholic faith across different parts of Asia. However, high cultural diversity and a fast-changing digital landscape in Asia require religious media organizations to consider how content is developed to respond to the varying and emerging needs of their audiences.

2.1. Digital Media and Evangelization

Digital technology has allowed religious organizations to broaden their outreach and engagement. The use of digital platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, for example, not only increases the reach of evangelization efforts but also provides interactive media formats that enhance the participation of the audience (Banaszak 2022). Ruiz (2014) explained that the interactivity provided by the digital platform helps foster connectivity and community among audiences.

However, Banaszak (2022) noted that digital media can offer both opportunities and challenges for religious engagement. Media education, according to Chiemleski (2020), is fundamental to the new evangelization, noting that there is a need to understand digital culture and its impact on religious catechesis and engagement. Similarly, Ruiz (2014) stated that religious organizations must adapt to the ever-changing digital landscape.

Galang and Macaraan (2021) further explained that digital evangelization, or the use of digital or online space for evangelization and religious engagement, should not be a replication of traditional religious practices; rather, it should be a dynamic transformation of religious experience in the digital space. One digital evangelization strategy proposed by Danaan (2016) is the integration of faith and media to sustain mission-oriented engagement through incorporating user-generated content and participatory strategies to enhance satisfaction and interaction.

Despite the benefits of digital evangelization in reach and engagement, there are challenges associated with its implementation. In a study by Díaz (2021) examining the efficacy of digital technology in Christian religious education, results showed that while technology enhances engagement, it

also poses risks such as misinformation and diminished traditional faith practices. Časni (2022) added that while parish communities can use digital media for evangelization, there is still a need for responsible and ethical use of digital tools. These ethical considerations involve addressing the authenticity of online religious discourse and managing audience expectations.

2.2. Media Consumption, Preferences, and Content

Understanding how religious content is consumed in digital environments—and what drives audience preferences—is central to this study's examination of RVA's website. Within South and Southeast Asia, religious media use is shaped by complex interactions between tradition, digital literacy, youth identity, and pluralistic cultural norms. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a valuable framework for analyzing these behaviors, suggesting that audiences are not passive recipients but active users who select media based on specific psychological, social, and spiritual needs.

Slama and Barendregt (2018) explored how Southeast Asian Muslims engage with digital platforms such as blogs and YouTube not merely for education but for community validation and identity expression. Their study revealed that religious media consumption in this region is deeply intertwined with personal agency and cultural relevance, echoing UGT's claim that users seek media that aligns with internal motivations and external social conditions.

For younger audiences, Briandana et al. (2020) illustrated how millennials across Indonesia and Malaysia interpret Islamic content on social media platforms as both a source of spiritual knowledge and social engagement. These patterns suggest that faith-based media must be both pedagogically meaningful and culturally resonant—a balance that RVA aims to strike through its multimedia offerings.

Research by Le Duc (2019) on digital Christianity showed a similar trend among Southeast Asian Christian communities, where the shift from hierarchical preaching to reciprocal digital dialogue has reshaped how religious messages are received and trusted. Audiences now expect immediacy, interactivity, and media formats that align with their digital habits—criteria that directly impact RVA's content strategy and platform design.

Content itself has evolved to reflect hybrid religious-cultural identities. Mohamad (2024) argued that religious digital media in Malaysia and Brunei increasingly incorporates popular culture tropes, reflecting a cosmopolitan religiosity that appeals to younger, globally connected audiences. This blending of sacred and secular narratives enhances engagement but also challenges producers to maintain theological depth.

Han and Nasir (2015) proposed the concept of "networked religion" to describe how faith today is practiced through relational, real-time digital interactions. This means that media content must facilitate community-building, emotional resonance, and spiritual support, not just information delivery. For a transnational broadcaster like RVA, such dynamics are key to sustaining cross-border relevance.

Goh's study (2005) of Christianity in Asia further highlights the importance of localizing content for varied cultural and political contexts. He emphasizes that while digital platforms offer vast reach, their impact depends on culturally sensitive messaging and responsiveness to regional religious norms. This aligns with RVA's transnational mission to serve not just Catholic populations but broader, multi-faith audiences across Asia.

2.3. Religion, Internet, and the Uses and Gratification Theory

One of the foundational theories of mass communication is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). It is particularly used when examining the relationship between media consumption and consumer/audience needs. The theory mainly explains how people interact with different media platforms, including the internet, and how such interactions satisfy specific needs or gratifications of the audience. In the context of religion, the theory offers explanations on how people use digital media, such as websites, online discussions, and social media, to satisfy their cognitive, affective, and social needs.

In a study by Campbell (2006), she addressed the relationship of religion and the internet by looking at how digital media has transformed religious practices. According to Campbell, the internet serves as a virtual place for worship and community-building, which contributes to expanding the reach of religious groups. Aside from its reach, the platform also provides new avenues for religious expression and engagement, supporting a range of spiritual needs for individuals. With these new avenues provided by the internet, Ruggiero (2000) explained that there is a need for UGT

models to expand and incorporate new, internet-specific gratifications, such as interactivity and hypertextuality.

Nesbit (2000) applied UGT to the religious context, focusing on virtual church discussion groups. These virtual groups offer a space for religious dialogues and a sense of faith community, fulfilling the psychological and social needs of people who may not have access to traditional church settings. Similarly, Bentley (2012) investigated the role of Christian radio websites in offering spiritual content and forming an online community. Both studies emphasize the role of the internet in providing convenience and accessibility to religious content, allowing users to engage with their faith outside of traditional settings. The findings suggest that UGT is particularly effective in explaining how the internet meets the needs of religious users, who seek both informational and communal support.

As Ruggiero (2000) argued for the need to improve the UGT model to account for internet-specific needs, the research by Stafford et al. (2004) provided a categorization of gratifications for internet use. The study identified process and content gratifications, as well as a unique social gratification that emerges with online interactions. This distinction helps explain the multifaceted nature of internet use for religious purposes, where users not only access religious content but also engage in social interaction within religious communities. The same dynamics can be seen in Roy (2009), who also found that users in India derived varied gratifications from the internet, such as self-development and career opportunities, while simultaneously connecting with global religious communities. In this literature, community-building, connections, and relationships were highlighted as gratification provided by the internet.

LaRose and Eastin (2004) extended the UGT model by incorporating social cognitive theory, which explains internet usage behaviors through the lens of self-efficacy and habitual behavior. This extended UGT model explains how individuals engage with religious media, noting that faith-based content often brings a sense of 'self-efficacy' and 'mastery' over one's spiritual journey. This shows the internet's potential as a medium for spiritual empowerment and personal growth. However, despite its potential, Armfield and Holbert (2003) stated that there is a negative relationship between religiosity and internet use, wherein highly religious individuals may be less inclined to engage with digital religious platforms.

As the digital space evolved to include social media, recent studies like Ratcliff et al. (2017) and Brubaker and Haigh (2017) explained how

Facebook is used to access faith-based content for various reasons, including spiritual enlightenment, evangelization, and entertainment. Findings of both studies showed the complex motivations influencing religious engagement on social media, including its role in connecting individuals with faith communities.

Müller and Friemel (2024) proposed a theoretical model that explains the dynamics of digital media use in communities. The model explains that media selection and co-orientation between individuals and their religious communities are key to understanding the role of digital media in religious life.

2.4. Synthesis and Relevance to Current Study

Evangelizing through digital media offers innovative opportunities for audience engagement and expanding the reach of faith-based messages. However, challenges such as misinformation, ethics, and media literacy need to be addressed to maximize the use of digital media. Further, understanding user engagement and satisfaction is necessary to ensure that digital platforms, such as RVA, remain effective in their evangelization in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Moreover, as the literature suggests, the UGT remains an effective framework for understanding how individuals use the media, particularly the internet, in religious contexts. With its multimodality and interactivity, the internet can fulfill various religious needs, from spiritual growth to community connection, and provide users with both content and social gratification.

Collectively, these studies reinforce the need for a multi-dimensional understanding of religious media use in South and Southeast Asia. They reveal that media consumption is shaped not just by access or availability, but by user identity, regional context, and the emotional or spiritual gratifications sought through media. Content must be responsive, hybrid, and dialogical; platforms must be user-friendly, interactive, and ethically governed.

By applying these insights through the lens of UGT, the present study aims to evaluate how effectively RVA's website meets users' needs across affective, cognitive, and social domains. It also seeks to uncover regional distinctions in media use—how Hindu-majority India, Buddhist Myanmar, and Muslim-majority Malaysia, for instance, may engage with Catholic

content differently. The findings will help inform RVA's strategy for tailoring media outputs to diverse cultural contexts while staying rooted in its religious mission.

3. Theoretical Background

Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a framework for understanding how and why individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy their needs. Unlike other media theories that focus on the influence of media on audiences, UGT suggests that audiences actively select media content based on their personal motivations and needs. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of digital platforms, such as RVA, as it explains why and how audiences engage with the platform to fulfill their cognitive, social, and spiritual needs.

Literature on UGT presents different categorizations for needs. For this study, however, the focus is on cognitive needs, affective needs, and social needs.

a. Cognitive Needs: The desire for knowledge may reflect cultural values. In some cultures, there may be a strong emphasis on spiritual or religious teachings, while in others, more secular or scientific knowledge may be prioritized.

b. Affective Needs: Emotions evoked by media content can differ across Asian countries and cultural contexts. In highly religious cultures, emotional content that reinforces faith or spiritual values may be more sought after, while in other cultures, entertainment or emotional connection through secular content may take precedence.

c. Social Integrative Needs: Social interaction through media varies by culture. In high-context cultures like Japan, social media use is often subtle and indirect, focusing on maintaining group harmony, while in low-context cultures like the United States, social media interactions may be more direct and expressive.

4. Methodology

This study utilized a survey method to evaluate the media consumption patterns of the audience visiting the RVA website. The study was conducted in two parts, both of which were administered online.

The first survey was conducted by the RVA organization through posting an online survey on their website between the period of January-June 2023. It was up to the visitors to decide if they would participate. During the period the survey was available, a total of 226 visitors participated. The survey included questions about media consumption, media preferences, content preferences, and aspects that could be improved. The results of this survey served as secondary data for the study.

Out of the total 226 respondents, only 121 who completed the entire survey were included as samples for the study. The respondents were categorized into three regions: (1) South Asia, which includes India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; (2) Southeast Asia, comprising Myanmar, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia; and (3) the Philippines. The Philippines was excluded from the Southeast Asia group, as more than half of the respondents (51.24%) were from the Philippines. South Asia accounted for 39.67%, while Southeast Asia represented 9.09%. Furthermore, the Philippines was considered a special case due to its predominantly Catholic population, and it also houses the RVA headquarters.

To better understand the respondents' satisfaction with the website, a follow-up online survey was sent to participants via personal email. Of the 121 respondents who completed the first survey, only 35 provided an email address in their contact information. Informed consent and invitation to participate were sent to these 35 respondents for the second survey, which focused on audiences' uses and gratifications related to the RVA website. Out of the 35 invited participants, 15 responded. The second survey, between September 1-10, 2024, contained open-ended questions, which were thematically analyzed to understand how the needs of the respondents were satisfied by the RVA website. The results of the first survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented in graphs, while the second survey was analyzed through coding and thematic analysis.

Participation in the study was voluntary. No participant was forced to complete the survey. The number of respondents for the first survey was determined by the willingness of website visitors to participate. For the

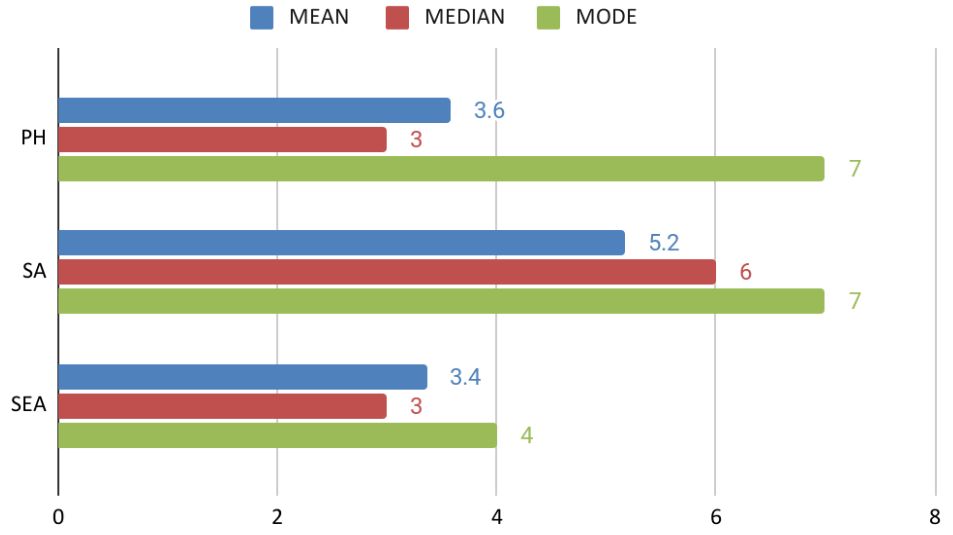
follow-up survey, only those who voluntarily provided their contact information in the first survey were contacted and invited to complete the second survey. The names of the respondents were not disclosed in any part of the study.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Media Consumption, Preferences, and Satisfaction

5.1.1. Media consumption

Media consumption of RVA audience was measured by the number of days per week they visited the RVA website. Among the three groups considered in the study, South Asia had the highest average, with respondents from the region visiting the RVA website 5.2 days out of 7 in a week. The Philippines and Southeast Asia had similar engagement, with respondents spending an average of 3.6 days and 3.4 days, respectively, on the RVA website. Since the Philippines is part of Southeast Asia, the results suggest that South Asian consumers engage more frequently with the RVA website than their Southeast Asian counterparts. It is important to note that South Asia is predominantly Hindu, and their consumption of the RVA

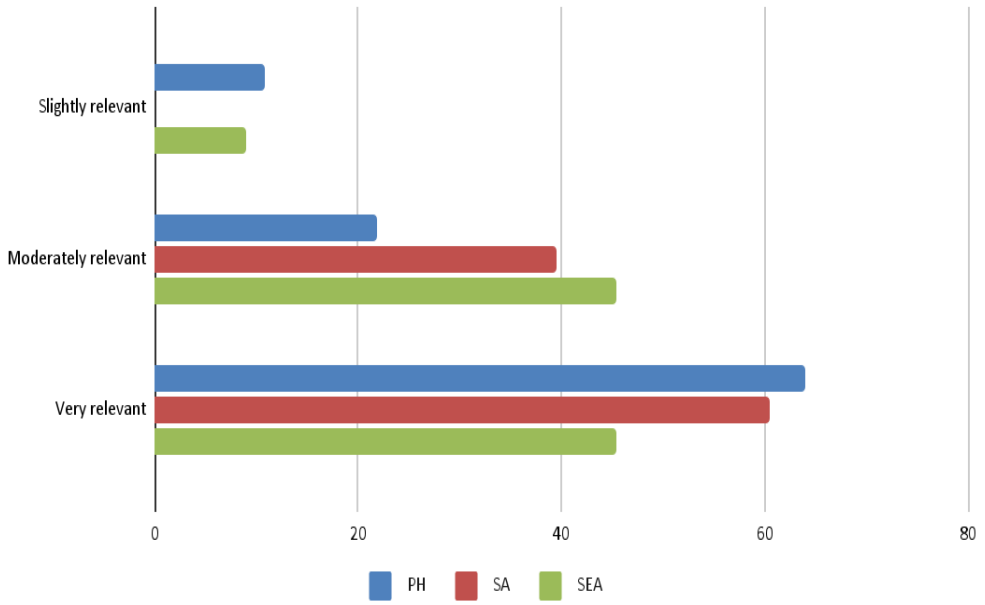


website is significantly higher than in the Philippines, which is a Catholic country.

Relevance of content found on RVA website

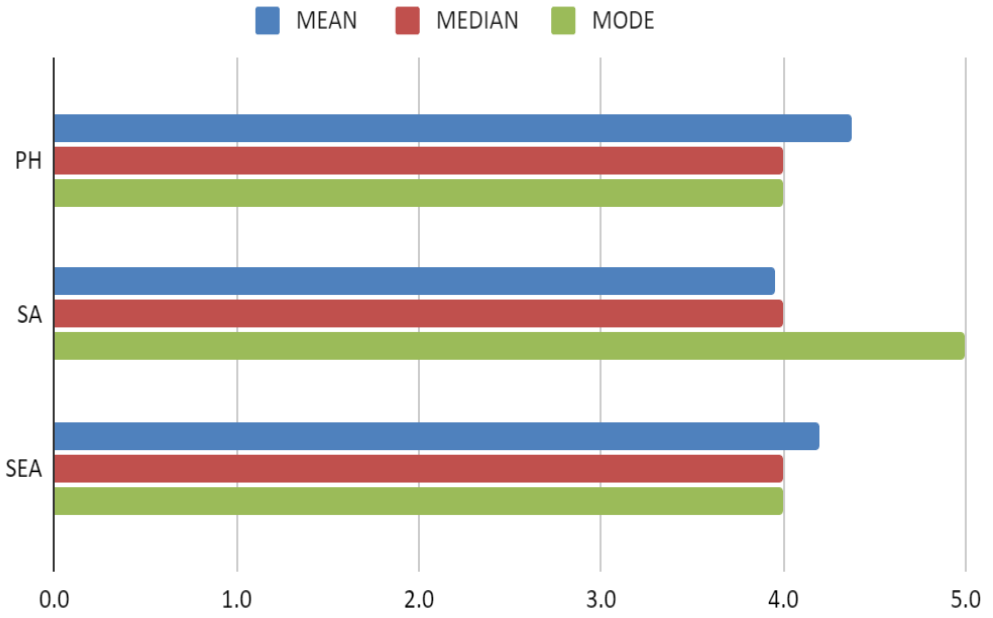
Among the three groups, 64.1% of respondents from the Philippines indicated that the content of the RVA website is "very relevant" to them, while 60.4% of respondents from South Asia and 45.5% from Southeast Asia shared the same perspective. The relevance of content could be influenced by the quantity of regional stories shared on the RVA website. Additionally, as RVA is based in the Philippines and the country is predominantly Catholic, the stories most closely associated with RVA are those originating from the Philippines

It is important to note, however, that only respondents from the Philippines and Southeast Asia indicated that the content was "slightly relevant" to them. In contrast, respondents from South Asia consistently stated that the content was relevant to them. The high level of consumption among South Asian respondents of RVA website aligns with their perception of the content's relevance.



Feelings about the program on the website

Feelings were measured using a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 representing a more negative feeling and 5 representing a more positive feeling.



All three groups reported positive feelings about the website, with the Philippines having a mean score of 4.4, followed by Southeast Asia with a score of 4.2, and South Asia with 4.0. Overall, respondents expressed positive feelings about the website.

5.1.2. Media preference

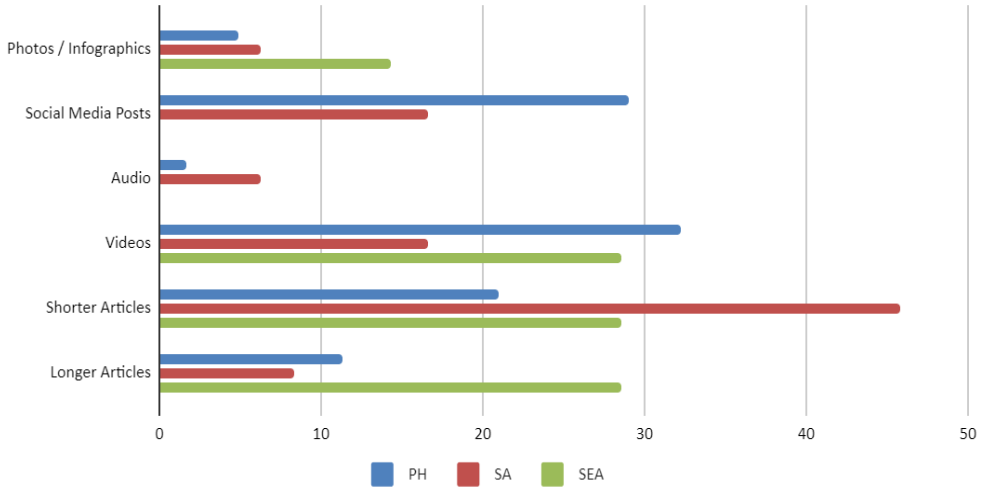
What online format do you prefer to know most of RVA contents?

Participants from the Philippines showed a preference for video content (32.3%) and social media (29%). In South Asia, 45.88% of respondents preferred shorter articles, while 16.7% preferred social media posts. In Southeast Asia, respondents favored written content, with both longer and shorter articles being equally preferred at 28.6% each. Content from the website is cross-posted to social media accounts, which are particularly preferred by participants from the Philippines and South Asia. This suggests that these respondents are connected to the RVA website by following its social media pages.

As suggested by the literature, the internet is interactive and hypertextual (Ruggiero 2000), encouraging audiences to be more participatory in obtaining information. When engaging with social media, users encounter

images and texts with links that are of interest to them. These links often lead to the RVA website, where the audience can read the full story. On the website, there are additional suggested links that may also attract the audience's interest. The way people acquire and process information changes as platforms evolve and expand their capabilities.

Across all regions, there was a low preference for audio content and a higher preference for video content and shorter articles. This trend also extended to photographs and infographics. This reflects the current tendency to favor formats that are easy to consume. Shorter articles are quicker to read, while videos make it easier for audiences to visualize and understand the information or story. Photographs and infographics, however, may be open to multiple interpretations without appropriate textual context. It is also worth noting that there is still a preference for written text, particularly in the South and Southeast Asian regions.



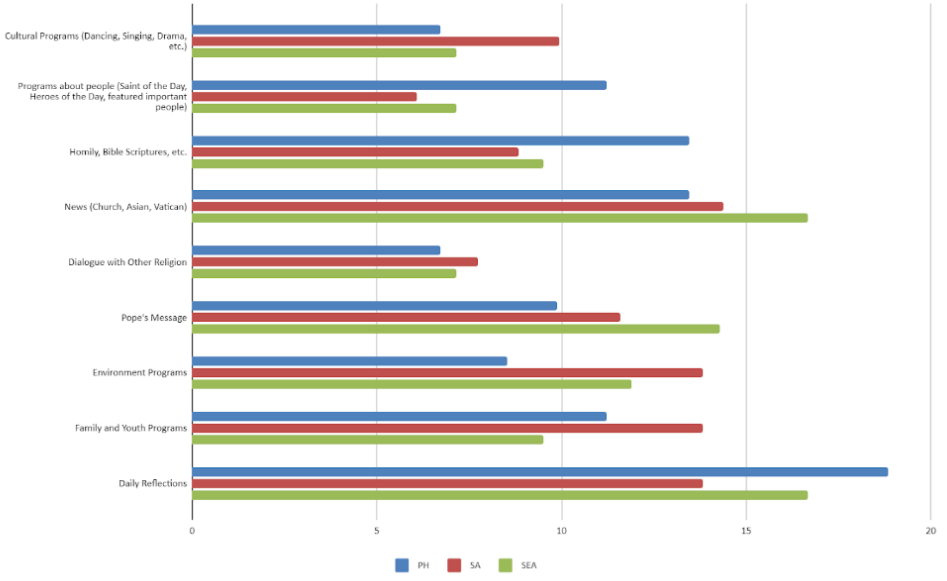
What programs do you like the most?

RVA offers a variety of content, ranging from news to religious material, including daily gospel reflections, homilies, the pope's messages, religious dialogues, and the lives of saints. It also covers cultural programs, environmental programs, and family and youth programs.

In the Philippines, the most preferred content is daily reflections, with 18.5% of respondents choosing this option, followed by news about the church and homilies, each with 13.5%. In South Asia, 14.4% of respondents preferred news about the church, while Southeast Asians, similar to

those in the Philippines, also preferred daily reflections and news about the church, each with 16.7%.

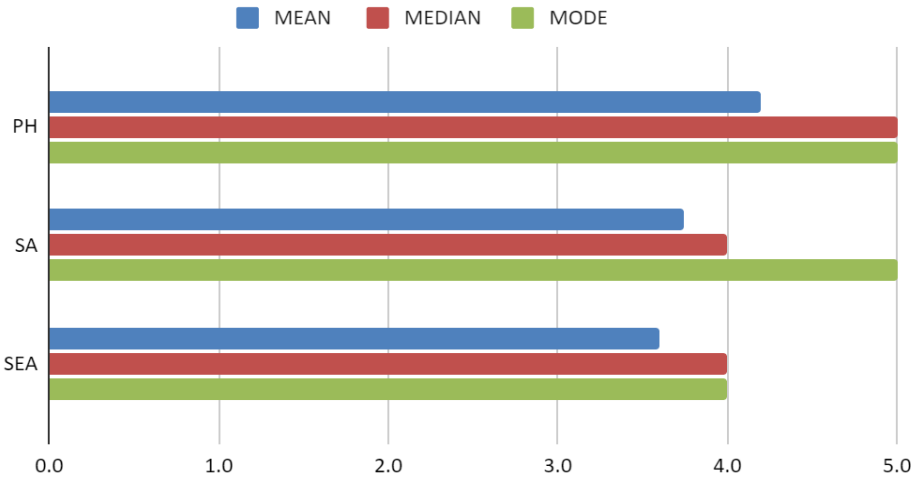
Among the program content offered by RVA, the most preferred by the audience are reflections and news about the church, while the least preferred is dialogues with other religions. Since RVA is a Catholic-based media organization, many of its visitors are Catholic. The data suggests that the primary use of the website is for accessing the gospel and reading news about the Catholic Church. Unlike the literature, which emphasizes the role of the internet in facilitating community-building and social relationships, RVA's audience seems to focus primarily on cognitive needs. It is also worth noting that 6-7% of respondents from each regional category expressed a preference for dialogues with other religions.



5.1.3. Satisfaction with RVA content

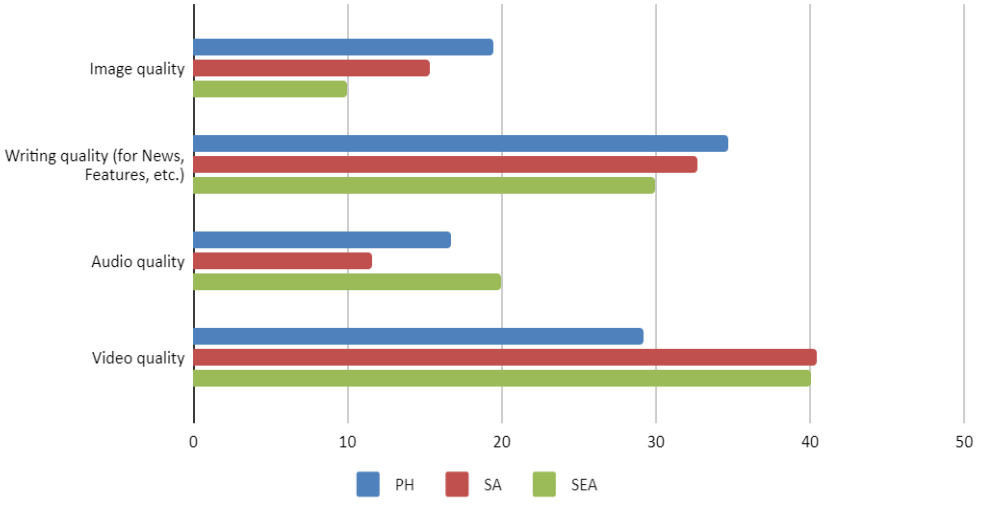
A Likert scale of 1 to 5 was used, with 1 representing the lowest level of satisfaction and 5 representing the highest level of satisfaction regarding reliability. Among the three groups, the Philippines showed the highest satisfaction with reliability, with a mean score of 4.2, followed by South Asia with 3.7 and Southeast Asia with 3.6. These scores indicate that the audience is generally satisfied with the content of RVA. Additionally, the Philippines had the highest percentage of respondents who found the content relatable, which may explain their higher level of satisfaction with

RVA. Moreover, all three regions expressed positive feelings about the website.



What do you think we can improve on?

In the Philippines, respondents believe that RVA should improve its writing quality (34.7%) as well as its video quality (29.2%). This sentiment is also shared by respondents in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Most of the content on RVA is in written form and is kept concise to help the audience easily grasp the information.



5.2. Uses of and Gratification from RVA Website

Based on the quantitative data, satisfaction and positive feelings toward the RVA website are high among respondents from the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The qualitative data further explains what contributes to this satisfaction. In analyzing the open-ended responses from the second survey, codes were categorized into two main themes: satisfaction with the platform and satisfaction with the content. Online religious audiences' satisfaction with the RVA website is based on its characteristics and their construction of the platform's use. For content, codes were categorized as cognitive, affective, and social, following the UGT framework.

Themes	Categories
Platform	
Characteristics of the Platform	Plurality Accessibility Multimodality Quality
Construction of the Platform's Use	Connecting Sharing Engaging
Content	
Cognitive	Knowledge Enrichment Spiritual Enrichment
Affective	Personal Relevance Cultural Relevance Spiritual Relevance
Social	Moral and Social Guidance Community Engagement and Dialogues

5.2.1. Platform

Characteristics of the platform

Categories that emerged under characteristics of the platform include plurality, accessibility, multimodality, and quality. These categories determine the satisfaction of the audience with the online religious website.

Plurality refers to the platform's ability to cater to a diverse audience. Since anyone with internet access can visit the RVA website, one contributing factor to audience satisfaction is its ability to serve various countries and regions. The website offers content in 22 different languages across Asia. One respondent noted that the website is "tailored to different cultural and linguistic communities" and that it is "accessible to a diverse audience." Further, cognitive understanding, which affects overall satisfaction, is facilitated through the language variety and cultural tailoring of the content.

Accessibility, on the other hand, pertains to the ease of use and learnability of the platform. Since the majority of RVA's audience is aged 40 and above, who are not digital natives, the website must be user-friendly for the audience to access the content and learn from the content provided. If the platform is accessible, then it contributes to the overall audience's satisfaction by allowing them easy access and to learn how to navigate the platform.

Multimodality is a key feature of the internet, allowing content creators to post text, visuals, audio, and video on a single page. On the RVA website, for example, daily reflections are presented in written form and accompanied by audio recordings. This allows the audience to choose between reading and listening, or to engage with both formats. This multimodality enhances the platform's accessibility for different types of media consumers (e.g., some users may prefer listening to rather than reading the content) and contributes to its plurality by offering content in various formats. One respondent shared that the "multimedia offerings, like videos and podcasts, provide meaningful insights."

Quality refers to the standards of materials on the platform, which enhances audience satisfaction. One respondent mentioned that they prefer the digital platform because it provides "clear and noise-free reception" for audio and video content, in contrast to radio platforms. The respondent explained that he listened to RVA on shortwave before, but he appreciates the digital format now, as the quality is better. Additionally, respondents

appreciated the high quality of visuals and sound, which made it easier for them to understand and appreciate the content.

Construction of the platform's use

In addition to the platform's characteristics, satisfaction also arises from the respondent's construction of its use. The audience defined the use of the platform in terms of connecting, sharing, and engaging.

Connecting refers to the platform's ability to link people, faiths, and cultures. Respondents highlighted that the platform "bridges different communities through shared spiritual practice." Another commented that it helps them connect with others regarding their faith and culture. Through its multilingual content, RVA transcends cultural and national boundaries, fostering connections. The internet, by nature, removes the constraints of time and space, allowing people from different parts of the world to interact easily. Respondents also mentioned that RVA helps them learn about developments in other Asian regions and the global Catholic community.

Sharing relates to how the platform can be used to share their experiences, culture, and faith. One respondent noted that RVA "helps [them] connect with others by providing a platform to share and explore [their] faith and culture."

Engaging refers to how the platform can be used to facilitate interaction and participation in interfaith dialogues. RVA's platform makes it easier for users to engage with diverse Catholic communities across Asia. One respondent mentioned that "live-streamed Masses and shared prayer initiatives invite participation and dialogue with people who may not be physically close but share a similar spiritual journey."

5.2.2. Content

Beyond the characteristics and construction of the platform, the content itself also plays a role in audience satisfaction. The content was categorized into cognitive, affective, and social dimensions.

Cognitive

These needs are satisfied through the information provided by the RVA platform, particularly religious content that deepens the audience's under-

standing of faith. Two categories emerged under cognitive needs: knowledge enrichment and spiritual enrichment.

Knowledge enrichment pertains to the informational and educational content that satisfies the audience's desire for understanding. Respondents indicated that they visit the website to gain information about their faith or learn about the gospel and the teachings of the Church.

Spiritual enrichment refers to the personal spiritual growth that respondents experience when engaging with the website's content. One respondent wrote, "When visiting Radio Veritas Asia, I seek spiritually enriching content such as daily gospel reflections, Catholic news updates, and live-streamed Masses." Another mentioned that "these programs provide spiritual guidance, deepen my understanding of Scripture, and offer practical insights on how to live out my faith in everyday life."

Affective

Affective needs are satisfied when the content resonates with the audience personally, culturally, and spiritually. The categories under affective needs are personal relevance, cultural relevance, and spiritual relevance.

Personal Relevance refers to content that resonates with the audience's personal experiences. One respondent wrote, "The stories of missionary work and community outreach strike a deep chord, as they remind me of the importance of service and compassion in my own life." Another mentioned that "programs focused on local issues, such as interfaith harmony and the challenges faced by religious minorities, resonate deeply with my experience."

Cultural Relevance refers to how well the content reflects the audience's cultural context. One respondent shared, "The platform's focus on culturally relevant content and stories of local missionaries fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse ways of practicing faith." Others noted that features of traditional celebrations like Mary's Festival in Indonesia deeply resonate with them.

Spiritual relevance, as explained by the respondents, is content that "resonates with [their] spiritual journey and cultural heritage; brings about a sense of community; and encourages meaningful discussions that deepen [their] understanding and connection with both [their] faith and culture. Spiritually relevant content "… [evokes] emotions of hope, reflection, and spiritual connection."

Social

Two categories emerged in social needs: moral and social guidance, and community engagement and dialogues.

Moral and Social Guidance. RVA helps the audience navigate societal issues by providing moral guidance. One respondent said that the programs on family and youth "discuss methods that keep our families united and guide the youth along the right path." Another added that "RVA's diverse content, especially in times of global or personal difficulty, reinforces a sense of unity."

Community Engagement and Dialogues. RVA promotes community engagement and dialogue, fostering a sense of belonging. One respondent shared, "These programs foster a sense of belonging and connect me to other Catholics in Pakistan who share similar cultural and faith-based challenges." Another stated, "RVA encourages me to connect with others by offering content that inspires dialogue and reflection on faith and cultural values."

6. Conclusion

The internet, unlike other media platforms, has transcended the constraints of time and space. It allows for multimodality, enabling the integration of text, visuals, audio, and audiovisual content in a single virtual space. Additionally, it is hypertextual, transforming how audiences consume and process information.

Religious organizations have long used the internet to share information about faith and teach values. When creating these online spaces, it is essential to consider regional differences, such as those in Asia. The design and content of religious websites, such as Radio Veritas Asia, must be relevant to the diverse needs of audiences across the continent and effectively respond to them.

The consumption patterns of religious websites in South and Southeast Asia vary moderately, particularly in terms of content and format preferences. Despite the multimodal nature of these platforms, many users still prefer traditional formats such as reflections, news, and written articles. However, ensuring the relevance of content remains crucial.

Audience satisfaction with religious websites is anchored on two key aspects: (a) the platform's usability and (b) the quality of its content. The platform should be accessible, user-friendly, multimodal, and of high quality. Additionally, it must function as a medium for connection, sharing, and engagement. In terms of content, the stories and information presented should cater to various user needs: cognitive (knowledge and spiritual enrichment), affective (personal, cultural, and social relevance), and social (moral guidance, community engagement, and dialogue).

While the results of the study contribute to understanding varying consumption patterns, preferences, and satisfaction of religious digital media consumers, it was limited to the South and Southeast Asian regions, as it only used existing data available in RVA. For future research, it is recommended that all regions where RVA services are provided be represented in the study to further validate the trends and themes that emerged in the study.

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From Living in the Shadows to Facebook Livestreams: The Impact of Social Media on Current Mediumship Practice of Mother Goddesses Worship (*Đạo Mẫu*) in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformative impact of social media on mediumship practice within the context of Mother Goddesses worship (Đạo Mẫu) in contemporary Vietnam. By examining the ways in which spirit mediums and practitioners utilise social media platforms, the study reveals that these digital spaces facilitate the open expression of belief, foster connections among practitioners, and enable the sharing and promotion of spiritual services as well as the online trade in ritual costumes and objects. Furthermore, social media has become a catalyst for emerging trends directly influencing the ritual practices and increasing the visibility of spirit mediums in today's society, creating generational shifts between younger spirit mediums and their predecessors, who practiced their belief in pre-renovation Vietnam under precarious circumstances. As rituals become more visible and accessible through social media, the interplay between digital and spiritual realms becomes increasingly significant. The findings suggest that social

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media not only enhances a sense of community among practitioners that transcends geographical boundaries, but also shapes the continuing developments of this traditional practices, contributing to a dynamic landscape of Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam today. This research underscores the agency and significance of digital platforms, in particular social media, in transforming spiritual expressions and adapting cultural traditions in the modern era.

Keywords: *religion in Vietnam, Mother Goddess worship, mediumship, social media, cultural heritage, digital ethnography*

1. Introduction

The Vietnamese folk belief of worshipping Mother Goddesses (*Đạo Mẫu* or *tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu*, also *Tứ Phủ*, Four Palaces) is a syncretic spiritual system centered around the veneration of four cosmological 'palaces', realms, or spheres. Those realms correspond to Heaven, Forest & Mountains, Water, and Earth, each governed by a Mother Goddess and a pantheon of lower deities serving her. The belief is strongly connected to Buddhist practice and Taoist influences while being heavily shaped by local cults and traditions. Despite regional differences, the diverse belief system is often looked at as one and referred to by the unifying term *Đạo Mẫu*, Mother Goddess(es) belief.[2] The ritual practice of *Đạo Mẫu* in Vietnam is primarily characterized by elaborate spirit possession ceremonies (*hầu đồng*) held in temples. During these ceremonies, spirit mediums become vessels for the deities, enacting highly aestheticized performances involving dance, music, costume changes, and the distribution of blessed gifts (*lộc*). Each of the 36 deities that are usually incarnating in *hầu đồng* ceremonies has their own story of contributing to the building up of the Vietnamese nation and helping people, inspiring those coming after them. The ceremonies are not only highly spiritual encounters for individuals and

[2] The use of this term has been introduced and coined by Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996) and his early works analysing and categorising Mother Goddesses traditions and cults all over Vietnam, see reference list.

the community alike, but are also significant expressions of Vietnamese tradition and culture.

Once marginalised as superstition and suffering political persecution, Mother Goddesses worship experienced a dramatic resurgence after Vietnam's *Đổi mới* economic and cultural reforms in 1986, as extensively discussed by various Vietnamese and foreign scholars alike. Notably the works of Philip Taylor (2004), specifically examine this time period where the belief evolved from a marginal tradition to a popular religious practice, illustrating its adaptability and emotional resonance in the wake of a new market economy and spiritual revival. In 2016, practices related to Mother Goddesses worship gained recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.[3] This international acknowledgment marked a big milestone in destigmatising the practice, creating a safer environment for followers to openly practice their belief offline and online, inspiring young Vietnamese artists to merge aspects of the belief with popular culture and contemporary art, thus introducing it to even broader audiences. The UNESCO recognition also marks a turning point in the belief's relationship with the Vietnamese state and local authorities, who are now actively promoting it as an expression of Vietnamese culture for preservation and tourism purposes, e.g., through a 'certification program' awarding certain master spirit mediums with the titles of *Nghệ nhân nhân dân* (folk artisan) or *Nghệ nhân ưu tú* (artisan of merit), emphasising their role as cultural facilitators while providing practitioners with new-found pride, validation, and legitimisation.

The growing popularity of *Đạo Mẫu* in contemporary Vietnam reflects its adaptability and openness to external influences. Extensive merging with local cults, legends, and the absence of a centralised doctrine have preserved its diverse, fluid nature. This flexibility allows spirit mediums to develop their own practices—*mỗi thầy mỗi phép*, 'each teacher has their own teachings'—while broadly adhering to shared ritual rules. Emphasising 'this-worldly' concerns like wealth, prosperity, and family over abstract spiritual goals, *Đạo Mẫu* remains highly responsive to evolving social media and consumer trends, ensuring its relevance both within and beyond sacred contexts as spirit mediums and even the deities themselves cater to the ever-changing spiritual needs of their followers. This digital expansion has significantly reshaped *Đạo Mẫu*, influencing offerings, aesthetics,

[3] For a fascinating personal account on the heritage recognition process of the practice see Oscar Salemink (2020) in reference list.

enabling new forms of visibility, and community building. While older mediums practiced under political constraints, younger generations use social media to express their belief freely, build networks, and assert spiritual legitimacy. Today's Mother Goddesses worship reflects a dynamic negotiation between tradition and innovation, adapting rituals and agency to changing socio-economic and technological landscapes, with social media being central to shaping trends in content and practice.

This paper explores the use and multifaceted impact of social media on the community of Mother Goddesses worship practitioners, as well as on its ritual practice in contemporary Vietnam. It argues that the use of social media is continuously transforming current mediumship practices by amplifying visibility, reshaping ritual economies, and fostering new forms of community, identity, and generational dynamics, highlighting the adaptability of this living spiritual and cultural tradition in response to a digital modernity. Drawing on long-term digital ethnography and participatory research, it examines how spirit mediums and other practitioners engage with online platforms to express belief, perform rituals, and shape spiritual authority. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the research methodology, particularly the use of social media as both a research tool and a field site. The third section introduces an analytical framework that links spirit mediums and digital media as 'tools of transmission' from a material religion approach. The then following section explores the concrete uses of Facebook, and TikTok by practitioners, with a focus on ritual livestreaming, influencer culture, and online community formation. The fifth section reflects on generational shifts in the community of practitioners and how digital engagement redefines ritual forms and spiritual narratives. The sixth section examines how social media affects ritual economy and aesthetics, focusing on emerging trends, increasing competition, and new standards regarding aesthetics and monetary value of ceremonies. The paper concludes by summarising the key findings and reflecting on the implications of these developments for the future of Mother Goddesses worship as both a living spiritual tradition and a recognised cultural heritage.

2. Research Approach

This paper is based on ongoing empirical and participatory research about and with practitioners of the Mother Goddesses belief in Vietnam, conducted both in person and through digital platforms over a period of six years. The research is grounded in long-term, hybrid ethnography, combining offline fieldwork in Central and Northern Vietnam, primarily Huế, Đà Nẵng, and Hà Nội, with active engagement in the respective online "communities," following practitioners across both their offline and online lives. Data collection included participant observation at ceremonies and festivals, as well as digital ethnography focusing on shared content, public interactions, and practitioner networks on Facebook and TikTok. Access to these online spaces was made possible by long-term in-person research and trust-based relationships.

With this in mind, the paper adopts a digital ethnography approach, grounded in the assumption that "digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit" (Pink et al. 2015, 7). This perspective allows us to explore the relationship between the digital, sensory, atmospheric, and material elements of the world that surrounds us, indicating that digital space is not regarded as a self-contained entity, but rather dynamically linking larger social discourses which are taking place offline in our everyday lives. Examining the use of social media among practitioners of *Đạo Mẫu* offers valuable insights into contemporary mediumship practices in Vietnam, because it serves as a tool for immediate self-expression of believers as well as a way for researchers to connect deeply and on a personal level with the community through direct participation (e.g. interactions such as Likes and Comments). Liana Chua (2021) notes about field research in times of increasing digital interactions that social media blurs temporal boundaries in ethnographic research, enabling ongoing "co-presence," whereby this "connectedness" is two-wayed (Chua 2021, 154) even after fieldwork concludes. When aware of the ethical implications, social media-based research shouldn't be underestimated as a tool to gain valuable insights, as demonstrated in this paper. Building on this methodological approach, the next section explores concepts from a Material Religion perspective that underline the analysis, focusing on how both spirit mediums and digital media function as "tools of transmission."

3. Thoughts on (Spirit) Mediums & Media

There are two categories of "media" that are particularly relevant to this paper; on one hand, spirit mediums—human bodies that act as "tools of transmission" (Meyer 2011) for the encounter and communication of spiritual powers with believers in the earthly realm—and, on the other hand, social (digital) media and their role in shaping contemporary religious practices.

In 2015, Heike Behrend et al. published an edited volume titled *Trance Mediums & New Media: Spirit Possession in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (2015), arguing that trance mediumship and technical media are inseparable with the sensory experience being central for ritual embodiment. This means, to achieve a "trance state" and to perform ritual mediation, (trance) mediums generally require tools or equipment, namely technical media. These can include, as we recall Meyer's definition of media as "tools of transmission," a variety of objects, physical spaces, or even specific mass media. Therefore, (trance) mediums are closely related and somewhat reciprocally dependent on technical media (Behrend and Zillinger 2015, 4).

This can be clearly seen in the ritual practice of spirit mediums in Vietnam, where an array of objects is needed for a successful *hầu đồng* ceremony. Those physical objects are e.g. a red veil to cover the face at the ascension and descension of deities within the body of the spirit medium, appropriate costumes for each deity, specific offerings, incense sticks, but also the temple space as a physical location, as well as the sensory sacred atmosphere, which is primarily produced audiovisually by professional musicians (*chầu văn*) and, for instance, olfactorily through the spraying of perfume and the smoke of agarwood and incense. All these elements serve as "technical media" and "tools of transmission," enabling the trance of the spirit medium (which is a "tool of transmission" in itself). Building on this, another "tool of transmission" extending this ritual mediation is mass media (such as coverage of aspects of the belief by news outlets, TV or film in a broader sense), but in particular and way more significantly nowadays social media. By livestreaming or capturing moments of the ceremony and sharing it virtually to a larger audience, across time and space, the time span of the presence of the deities, or what I like to call *temporary auspiciousness*, is indefinitely extended as the posted content can be reposted and kept online (theoretically) forever.

A concrete example of this idea in action is the *Tứ Phủ* (四府, Four Palaces) NFT project created by internationally renowned visual artist and creative director Lê Thanh Tùng, also known as Crazy Monkey.[4] Inspired by the aesthetics of *hầu đồng* ceremonies, his *Four Palaces* project from 2018 features limited short animations of a woman dressed as a spirit medium who appears to be in trance, marketed as NFTs (non-fungible tokens), meaning unique digital assets (in this case artworks) stored on a blockchain that allows people to verify ownership and authenticity while offering a new way of circulating and archiving cultural expressions digitally. He describes his project as "[…] a new way of storing content—culture—beliefs, while bearing the nature of decentralization. These pieces of knowledge and information will be preserved—forever stored with time."[5]

Unlike more traditional preservation strategies, such as the UNESCO inscription or the folk artisan certification program, Tùng's NFT project decentralizes the heritage by enabling its circulation and ownership in the hands of individuals globally. This aligns with the previously mentioned non-centralized, fluid character of Mother Goddesses worship and introduces a new form of digital sacred materiality that is worth further explorations. The *Four Palaces* NFTs have recently been exhibited at a gallery in Sydney, Australia (2024) and they continue to be displayed in a virtual metaverse exhibition, securing its public accessibility indefinitely. In this way, his work bridges the digital, intangible realm and our physical, tangible reality, mirroring mediumship practice on a very elementary level. Having established this conceptual framework of medium and media, we now turn to the practical ways social media is integrated into everyday ritual and spiritual life among *Đạo Mẫu* practitioners.

[4] He is also the visual art director for the music video of the song *Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces) by pop singer Hoàng Thùy Linh (2019), introducing the belief's aesthetics to a broad audience.

[5] https://www.crazymonkey.vn/four-palaces-nft; The discourse surrounding NFTs from a cultural studies perspective regarding art and heritage preservation as well as ownership is still underexplored, but warrants more extensive research and reflections.

4. Deities Dancing on Screens: The Use of Social Media

Social networks, especially Facebook and TikTok, have become essential tools for followers of the Mother Goddesses, in particular master mediums (*đồng thầy*) and initiated spirit mediums (*thanh đồng*), to share about their ritual activities and their personal life. Practitioners frequently post pictures, clips, and livestreams of their spirit possession (*hầu đồng)* ceremonies, temple visits, pilgrimage trips, or other spiritual activities. These digital spaces allow them to express personal interpretations of the belief, honour deities on their anniversaries by posting their stories, teach their followers, exchange knowledge, and, in many cases, even advertise their spiritual services to potential clients. This content is posted across private profiles, public fan pages, business accounts, and large community groups with thousands of members who are connected with Mother Goddesses worship in a variety of ways. Beyond spirit mediums, musicians (*chầu văn*) accompanying the ceremonies and ritual assistants (*hầu dâng*) [6] who are responsible for helping the medium dress, pouring tea and wine, and attending to ritual tasks, are also expanding their presence on social media by promoting their services through posts, videos, and livestreams. Once they have established a good reputation, they often attract bookings across Vietnam. In this way, social media not only supports the professionalisation of ritual roles but also enhances interpersonal and business connections across regions, fostering a strong sense of community despite the diversity of the practice.

Building on this expanding digital ecosystem, livestreams and video calls have further redefined ritual experiences by transcending the physical boundaries of the temple, allowing audiences from around the world to virtually attend ceremonies and experience the presence of the deities through their smartphone screens. What is particularly interesting here is how technicalities, such as camera angles, digital framing, and editing, shape the experience of 'digital participants,' compared to the audience physically present. Here we can relate Alvin Eng Hui Lim's works on live streaming *getai* performances and spirit possessions in Singapore (2018, 2020) where he mentions that the camera not merely documents and reproduces the ceremony, but its perspective and framing also enable viewers

[6] In recent years, training academies for ritual assistants emerged in the North, advertising their courses online. Their sole existence furthering the professionalisation of the ritual role, while also creating new standards and competition.

"to encounter their deity in proximity, as if they were next to him" (Lim 2020, 9), demonstrating how digital techniques itself may construct ritual and enhance the emotional resonance of the viewer with the sacred. In this way, both the spirit medium and the digital format work together to create a sense of divine proximity.

In *hầu đồng* ceremonies, the smartphone used for livestreaming is often placed on the small table (*bàn loan*) in front of the altar, directly facing the spirit medium. This position—aligned with the altar's statues of the deities—grants viewers of the livestream a perspective typically reserved for divine beings, contrasting with the physical attendees seated behind or beside the medium. The medium's gestures of prayer and offering are thus simultaneously directed at both the altar and the unseen online audience. Moreover, the deities (or their statues) act as silent spectators, much like the digital viewers participating in the livestreams, except when the latter send comments or reactions. This contrasts sharply with the physical presence of those in the temple space, who joyfully clap, shout, and interact directly with the incarnating deities throughout the ceremony. In some cases, mediums vary the camera angle by positioning it diagonally in front of the altar, allowing the online audience to see both the spirit medium and the participants in the background or by placing the smartphone in the hands of someone in the audience, allowing for a more immersive or communal visual experience as digital participants experience the same perspective as if they were actually present in the temple with everyone else. As Heidi Campbell argues in her various works about digital religion, online platforms can serve as legitimate extensions of religious space, because digital spaces are able to facilitate meaningful ritual participation and spiritual engagement, among others through direct online interactions (liking or commenting) and real time co-presence enabling shared spiritual experience (e.g. livestreams), serving as networked spaces of sacred interaction (see Campbell 2012, Campbell and Bellar 2022). These evolving practices of digital mediation and virtual presence invite further inquiry into how sacred space is produced, perceived and extended across screens.

Another striking point in Campbell's works are her observations regarding shifting (religious) authority or leadership in the digital age. She argues that religious authority is increasingly "networked" and decentralised, meaning it is shaped not only by institutional legitimacy but also by a practitioner's ability to connect with audiences and build trust online, e.g., through personal narratives and interactions (2012, 11 ff.; Campbell and

Bellar 2022, 75 ff.). This mirrors a recent development in Vietnamese Mother Goddesses worship, namely the emergence of what I term "influencer mediums," drawing from the concept of social media influencers. This term describes spirit mediums, mostly master mediums, who create a carefully curated image or public persona of themselves, their ritual practice, and sometimes their economic means through their digital presence. These individuals often act as trendsetters, shaping how the belief is practiced and perceived through inspiring other believers in their own practice. Their curated content ranges from livestreamed ceremonies and edited images and videos of themselves serving the deities in extravagant costumes with pop music playing in the background, proudly presenting certificates and awards they received by cultural heritage organisations, to lecture videos for their followers, and even 'Get Ready With Me'-style segments popularised by influencer culture, in which they interact with viewers while applying their make-up for the temple or social outings. Their social media pages usually show a colourful mix of their daily spiritual activities while also providing insights into their personal lives and relationships, presenting themselves as religious authorities and charismatic figures.[7] Like their worldly counterparts, these influencer mediums often possess significant reach and their influence on their followers is tangible. Their aesthetic, spiritual, and material choices—shared with thousands of followers—extend their influence across temple communities and social networks alike, exemplifying how social media visibility, material wealth, and ritual authority have become increasingly intertwined.

Drawing the connection to previous studies, Taylor's early work explores how mediums construct charisma and spiritual authority through performance and aesthetic choices in their ceremonies. He writes, "The medium's charisma is not simply a matter of personal magnetism but is cultivated through performance, ritual knowledge, and the ability to mediate between the spiritual and social worlds" (Taylor 2004, 83). Adding to this, Endres later emphasises the performative character of the ritual practice in her work, highlighting how mediums seemingly effortlessly blend spirituality, efficacy, with entertainment through elaborate ceremonies (Endres 2011, 66). Today, the same forms of spiritual persona-building

[7] See Isabel Weitschies, *Zwischen rotem Schleier und Gucci Tasche. Geistermedien des Muttergottheitenglaubens und Transformationen ihrer sozialen Rolle im gegenwärtigen Vietnam* [*Between Red Veil and Gucci Bag. Spirit Mediums of the Mother Goddess Belief and Transformations of their Social Role in Contemporary Vietnam*] (Master's thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 2024).

described here are simply continued and extended into the digital realm, where influencer mediums perform not only for deities and temple audiences but also curate their online presence to captivate larger online followings. Naturally, there are very mixed opinions among practitioners and the general public in regards to this new development, debating about what constitutes appropriate expression, yet they also reflect the participatory and contested nature of living heritage. However, those discussions seem perpetual as the use and impact of social media cannot be reversed or ignored, especially when it is directly initiated by many practitioners of this belief (or heritage) themselves in the most immediate, 'authentic', and unfiltered way possible (albeit with the help of a beauty filter or two).

Along these grassroots developments, tourism agencies and cultural institutions have also begun utilising social media to promote activities related to Mother Goddesses worship as a cultural heritage. This includes posts promoting festivals (*lễ hội*) at major religious sites, serving the spiritual needs of local communities but also increasingly position them as spiritual/heritage tourism destinations.[8] While digital tools have clearly opened new pathways for engagement within the community of spirit mediums and beyond, it is necessary to consider how these contemporary expressions differ from previous forms of practice and how generational memory may or may not continue to shape community and notions of solidarity.

5. Then and Now: Community Engagement and Social Media

The social landscape in which master mediums and practitioners express their faith today could hardly be more different from just a few decades ago. Rituals were held in secrecy, often under the cover of night, without music or elaborate offerings, as mediums and believers navigated the risks of stigma, political suspicion, and quiet resistance. Yet even in those precarious times, spirit mediums remained trusted figures within their

[8] See Isabel Weitschies, "Deities on Screens and Boats: *Lễ Hội Điện Hòn Chén* and the Impact of Social Media on Spiritual Heritage Tourism in Worshipping the Mother Goddesses in Huế, Central Vietnam" (forthcoming) on the promotion of the biannual festival worshipping Mother Goddess Thiên Y A Na for spiritual heritage tourism purposes on social media.

neighbourhoods, quietly tending to the spiritual needs of their communities. Following the recognition of Mother Goddesses worship as national and UNESCO cultural heritage, the practice rapidly gained public acceptance, boosting the visibility and confidence of practitioners. Spirit mediums and private temples have multiplied noticeably today, even without official records to show. As Tiên, the administrator of a major Facebook page on *Đạo Mẫu*[9] emphasises, the initiation to be a spirit medium was once rare and usually seen as the last resort due to social stigma, particularly for unmarried female spirit mediums, who often concealed their spiritual activities even from immediate family members as they were concerned about judgement and not finding a husband. Now, the spirit medium community is more visible than ever, though traces of the old caution still linger among some practitioners.

Today, initiation ceremonies are almost a regular part of the everyday work in the temple, although this, of course, heavily depends on the respective master medium and his or her following. With an increasing number of initiations, the demographic makeup of the whole community of practitioners is changing, as most practitioners are called into the service of the Mother Goddesses in young adulthood. Vietnam is generally a young country, with an average age of 32.9 years (2024)[10] so the demographics of contemporary Vietnamese society as such already provide a fertile ground for fast-moving trends, economic growth, and social development. This generational transformation illustrates what Endres observed as a redefinition of Vietnamese mediumship in response to changing social and political environments (2011, 154). While some older practitioners critique this shift as a loss of authenticity, others see it as a living testament to the belief's enduring adaptability, an argument that extends today into the digital realm.

As younger spirit mediums take on a more prominent role in the "scene," there is a growing receptivity to and willingness to integrate current (consumer) trends[11] into the practice, as well as an increased affinity for and engagement with social media, a space for younger generations to

[9] All references to Tiên (pseudonym) in this paper are based on continuing personal communication between 2020-2024 online and in person in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

[10] See World Population Prospects 2024 - Population Dynamics -Department of Economic and Social Affairs – United Nations: https://population.un.org/wpp/ (last accessed 25.02.2025).

[11] Not only directly related to Mother Goddesses worship, but sometimes also trends in broader society, e.g. the use of popular international name-brand plush animals as offerings for deities believed to be the age of children, such as *Cậu Bé*.

mediate, learn, display, and construct spiritual legitimacy online while navigate the belief's form and content. One example of this development is the portrayal of certain popular deities who are regularly incarnated in ceremonies, nowadays often embodying characteristics that do not necessarily stem from traditional narratives. Those new characteristics have rather become normalized through the repetitive interpretations of them shared by various practitioners online. A notable case is that of *Cô Bơ*, the Fourth Lady, who is frequently portrayed as a beautiful woman in tears, signifying her deep suffering. It is believed that in her lifetime she regularly rowed her boat across a river to help people cross. One day she met a renowned general who was on his way into battle against Chinese invaders. They fell in love and he promised to marry her upon his return. However, while she waited for him, enemy forces arrived at the riverbank seeking passage. In a selfless act, she offered to help them but drowned the boat with the enemy soldiers and herself, sacrificing her life to protect the Vietnamese nation. While her story is undeniably tragic, the emphasis today has increasingly shifted toward framing it as a romantic tragedy, which appeals more to contemporary audiences. As a result, many younger spirit mediums cry when they incarnate her in ceremonies, expressing her strong emotions on not having been able to reunite with her lover, whereas many older and more experienced spirit mediums tend to highlight her courage and noble sacrifice for the greater good instead, portraying her as a role model for her followers.[12]

These emerging trends, combined with the fluid nature of Mother Goddesses belief, are increasingly excluding older generations of spirit mediums from spaces and processes that are nowadays essential in shaping and negotiating the contemporary practice. As the number of practitioners grows, particular of a younger generation, altering the community's demographics, feelings of solidarity are strained, potentially leading to generational conflicts. As early as 2006, Viveca Larsson and Kirsten W. Endres wrote about the rapid increase in initiation ceremonies in Hanoi—a development that is even more favoured today by current social processes, the promotion of the belief by the Vietnamese government, and the active use of social media than it was nearly 20 years ago. In this context, Larsson and Endres speak to an older master medium about the practice during the times of the ban on the belief, writing "[...] during those difficult

[12] Personal conversation with Master Tâm (pseudonym) (23.06.2024, Hanoi) who is the 121st medium in his family lineage.

years, there used to be a really nice and cheerful community of mediums. [...] These were hard times, he adds, but he remembers them as 'happy days' because there was a strong feeling of solidarity. In contrast, he feels that nowadays many people just come and go and do not seem to have time to reflect and pray; they just come to the temple for blessed gifts from the spirits" (Larsson and Endres 2006, 154). They also write, "[...] elderly mediums criticise the new generation of mediums for not properly observing the spirits' rules and for entering into mediumship in order to tap the spirits' assumed efficacy for the sole purpose of improving their material well-being and economic success" (Larsson and Endres 2006, 156).

While not all practitioners share this perspective, it helps explain why many, especially older master mediums, spirit mediums, and believers, choose to keep their practice private and distance themselves from the highly visible and digitally active members of the community. Those who do engage publicly are often charismatic and skilled at presenting themselves as well as their ritual practice both online and offline. By contrast, many regular practitioners prefer to maintain a low profile, acting casual about their beliefs in daily life. Alongside this public expression, a "practice in the shadows" persists, reminiscent of the past when *Đạo Mẫu* was prohibited. Practitioners following this approach often avoid discussing their belief even with family, striving to preserve what they view as a "pure" and "truthful" practice. Less visible than their flamboyant counterparts, these private, usually more traditional practitioners are often overlooked, though they represent another face of Mother Goddesses worship. This lack of visibility can lead to emerging unwanted prejudices and judgement from broad society if they lack basic understanding of the belief's diverse expressions.

As spirit mediums become more visible both offline and online, new practitioners increasingly struggle to find a suitable master medium (*thầy*) to follow, even as the role of spiritual teachers becomes more significant. The search for a genuine teacher is complex, heavily rooted in fate and personal affinity, but also in the compatibility between an individual and the personal style of a master medium. Although digital platforms seemingly make it easier to connect and many master mediums appear just a message away, the abundance of teachers and temples today creates new uncertainties, making it difficult for new believers to navigate whom to trust and follow. As with any popular phenomenon, greater exposure leads to greater risks of commercialisation, appropriation, and fraud. As Tiên reflects,

"Back in the old days, there were very few mediums. Now you see them everywhere." She observes that many pursue mediumship for notoriety rather than spiritual calling (*căn*), some master mediums exploiting their followers financially through costly initiation ceremonies, imposing both economic and spiritual burdens. Despite their potential to serve as a space for support and knowledge exchange, Facebook groups have increasingly become breeding ground for predatory teachers as desperate posts for guidance appear almost daily, illustrating how vulnerable many new believers feel. New practitioners must therefore critically assess whom to trust, without being misled and blinded by curated online personas and public displays of material wealth. Complicating this further, the styles of master mediums are increasingly diversifying due to greater freedom and external influences, such as increased contact with practitioners of other regions and digital consumer trends, encouraging both innovation and competition. For new believers, navigating this vast and often conflicting landscape can be overwhelming and reinforces the need for a genuine teacher to show them the right path and provide guidance, not only in spiritual matters, but also how to live a good life.

Beyond these generational shifts and potential tensions, a major aspect shaped by social media is ritual economy. The next section therefore explores how a continuously increasing digital visibility intersects with monetary means, ritual aesthetics, and expends on notions of sincerity and competition in contemporary *Đạo Mẫu* practice.

6. Digital Consumption: Ritual Economics and Social Media

A Vietnamese proverb states: "Wealth gives birth to ritual forms" (*phú quí sinh lễ nghĩa*), meaning that material wealth determines the scale of one's ritual obligations. Those with greater means are morally expected to organise more elaborate ceremonies, reflecting a Confucian ideal of filial piety and the moral debt owed to ancestors and deities (Jellema cited in Endres 2014, 28). As Larsson and Endres (2006, 157) quote a spirit medium, "[...] who would buy ugly clothes for their parents? [...] would you present your parents with rotten meat or a burnt chicken? [...] I respect the spirits like my parents and it is the heart of a person that counts, not the money." A widespread view is that beyond a true heart and pure intentions, only five basic elements are needed for a successful ceremony: incense, candles,

something to drink (water, tea, or rice wine), flowers, and simple food like fruits that can be offered to the deities. Tiên shared that, in her experience, the deities value sincere attention above lavish offerings as long as they have a pure heart (*tâm*). She elaborates:

> […] spirit mediums do not necessarily need lots of expensive costumes for each deity. If you can afford it, you should do it, but if not, it is enough to have one costume for all the spirits. Again, it is all about your heart and intentions […] not one way is better than the other. It only becomes an issue if the very present, big, expensive ceremonies are being looked at as the norm and new mediums think they have to do the same. Both ways of conducting a ceremony are valid on their own and depend on the person, their situation and intentions. We shouldn't make a judgement. The same goes for different approaches of master mediums to teach their devotees. Each person has a different path to the belief and to serve the Mother Goddesses.

To summarise, the deities know our hearts and understand our (financial) situation. Elaborate ceremonies are appropriate if affordable, but they are by no means necessary. This is especially evident during the times of the ban on the belief when spirit mediums held their ceremonies hidden in secret, without expensive offerings, temple decorations or music, only using a single robe and veil to avoid drawing the attention of local authorities to their ritual activities. As Endres writes: "Whereas in times of war, food shortages and state persecution of *Tứ Phủ* [Four Palaces] mediums, a single robe and a few modest offerings sufficed, material prosperity and modern consumer habits have set new standards of ritual aesthetics, the agency of which is instrumentalised in different ways and at the same time critically negotiated" (emphasis in original, Endres 2008, 162, transl. by author). However, the aesthetics or "beauty" of a ceremony has always played a central role in ritual practice, primarily to pay the greatest possible honour and respect to the deities, but also because aesthetics are linked to the entertainment value for the participants and ultimately the efficacy of the ceremony. Accordingly, ritual aesthetics have agency (Kapferer cited in Endres 2008, 161). A *hầu đồng* ceremony must always be beautiful (*đẹp*), joyful (*vui*), and be done with a true heart (*thật tâm*), directly influencing the tangible presence of the deities. Nevertheless (or perhaps precisely because of this), there is a growing trend today for ceremonies to be increasingly expensive, elaborate, and engaging.

In today's *hầu đồng* ceremonies, the more impressive the costumes, flowers arrangements, professional make-up, musicians, and blessed gifts

(*lộc*), the better it seems. Many ceremonies now cost several hundred, and sometimes even thousands of USD, covering not just offerings, decorations, and gifts for the participants, but also transportation to special temples, and compensation for ritual assistants and musicians. Sharing wealth with the temple community fulfils a master medium's moral responsibility and publicly affirms their prestige and spiritual legitimacy, often interpreted as a sign of sincere devotion and divine favour (Endres 2008, 166). With economic growth, i.e. the constantly growing market and financial resources as well as the increasingly free availability of a wider range of goods in physical shops and online retail, the monetary value of ritual practices also continues to rise. Today's (digital) economy stands in stark contrast to the situation in pre-renovation Vietnam when, on the one hand, there was state repression of all ritual activities and, on the other hand, a tense economic situation affecting the entire country, in which neither offerings nor ritual clothing were affordable or available in sufficient quantities, regardless of a person's social class or finances (Larsson and Endres 2006, 158-159). Again, I want to connect my work to Taylor (2004), as his research highlights how economic prosperity has historically influenced ritual scale and aesthetic expression in *Đạo Mẫu* as well as its commercialisation directly after 1986, e.g., regarding pilgrimages to sites worshipping Goddesses. His study illustrates that the intertwining of commerce and spirituality in Mother Goddesses worship organically followed the previous limitations of the ritual practice, among others described by Larsson and Endres (2006), predating social media and now being amplified by it. Today's large and ever-growing selection of ritual and ceremonial objects and their increasing affordability and accessibility to believers of varying income levels, especially through Facebook groups or online shops such as shopee.vn drastically shapes ritual economies. The colourful embroidered ritual clothing with matching accessories, beautifully decorated fans with feathers, ritual weapons, golden jewellery, handcrafted paper offerings, and much more are increasingly becoming goods of digital consumption that can be purchased in seconds with just a few clicks on the smartphone. This has also led to mass-produced, lower-quality ritual goods now being widely available at low cost, either sold directly in online shops or through private resellers on Facebook. Consequently, many wealthy master mediums have already moved on from these mass-produced items and focus on uniqueness and high quality to set themselves apart.

In this sense, the spirit mediums I labelled as influencer mediums truly resemble social media personalities in their ability to shape their online

followings. Although, to my knowledge, they do not (yet) work with advertising deals and discount codes, many finance their lifestyles through their following, spiritual services, and often side businesses related to the belief, such as selling ritual goods like paper offerings or ritual accessories on Facebook. Financial wealth is widely seen as a tangible, material indicator of the benevolence and support of the deities, reinforcing a medium's spiritual credibility. The pursuit of elaborate ceremonies, luxury goods, and designer clothing[13] increasingly intertwines personal prestige with religious devotion, spiritual authority, and self-expression in and outside of the temple. Social media amplifies this dynamic as some spirit mediums showcase their spiritual and material success through displays of lavish status objects, creating trends and competition while potentially inviting gossip. It is a fine line between admiration and envy. For the majority of master mediums, whether or not they engage on social media and follow consumer trends, their spiritual work is not isolated but closely linked to broader aspects of their identity, including self-expression, gender and sexual identity, social status, and consumer behaviour. Their private lifestyle goes hand in hand with their spiritual calling and practice.

Nearly 20 years ago, Endres (2008) observed similar dynamics, noting how economic changes at that time were increasing the monetary value of offerings presented to the deities. She described the phenomenon of "show-off-mediums" (*đồng đua*), practitioners driven by competition to display wealth and beauty, often above their financial means, leading them into heavy debt (Endres 2008, 166). She mentions in a footnote that literary sources describe this competitive character among spirit mediums as far back as the 1940s in late colonial Hanoi. Although not new, this development is being driven further and faster by current economic growth and Western consumer influences in Vietnamese society. Today, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok reinforce new "standards," influencing young practitioners, who may delay their initiation ceremony a long time to earn and save money or have to rely on wealthy relatives living abroad for their spiritual practice. Despite the wide availability of ritual goods seemingly having a unifying and egalitarian effect, new aesthetic trends may set standards so high that practitioners from lower social classes

[13] Here it is not relevant if the designer products are genuine or not as the market for counterfeit products in Southeast Asia is enormous. What counts is the idea or 'fantasy' that those products convey.

struggle to keep up and risk exclusion. However, this ultimately depends on the teachings and views of the teacher they follow.

While *Đạo Mẫu* traditionally prioritises sincerity of heart over material expression, Vietnam's economic growth and the rise of social media have shifted ritual practices. Ceremonies are increasingly commodified and digitally mediated, becoming displays of both spiritual devotion and personal prestige. This shift encourages consumerism, redefines spiritual authority, and intensifies competition among mediums, motivated both by serving the deities beautifully and the desire to distinguish themselves from other mediums. Feelings of envy, jealousy, and conflict often arise, revolving around the perceived sincerity of a mediums' practice, the relationship towards their followers, their wealth, and their personal lives. While these tensions have long circulated at ceremonies and festivals, today they are increasingly negotiated in online spaces too. These developments in the ritual economy—where aesthetics, wealth, and online influence converge—highlight how Mother Goddess worship is increasingly being shaped by digital negotiations and consumerist values. Ceremonies worshipping Mother Goddesses have been both public spectacle and personal expression for a long time, but the latter is seemingly growing in significance, continuing to blur the boundaries between spiritual sincerity and performative display while potentially even aiming to strengthen its own capability to compete with others. This shift demonstrates one of the main arguments of this paper, namely regarding social media not merely as a tool for communication, but as a powerful agent actively (re)shaping spiritual authority, ritual aesthetics, and community building all while providing the space for a diversifying individual practice. In the following conclusion, I summarise the findings of this paper and reflect on the broader implications of these shifts, particularly in terms of heritage, authenticity, and adaptability in a digital world.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores how spirit mediums and practitioners of Mother Goddesses worship in contemporary Vietnam use social media to express belief, connect across regions and abroad, and shape ritual practice. Platforms like Facebook and TikTok strengthen interpersonal and professional ties, facilitate the online trade of ritual goods, and continuously generate

new trends and standards—directly influenced by the rise of influencer mediums. These developments directly impact both the lived reality of the belief and its economic framework, reflecting generational shifts from pre-renovation Vietnam to today. Social media allows practitioners to utilise their newfound visibility in Vietnamese mainstream society and online, transcending static heritage politics by using their own voices to negotiate and adapt their spiritual practice to changing social, spiritual, and economic contexts. This adaptability is especially visible in the ritual performance, portrayal of the belief, and self-expressions of followers of the Mother Goddesses.

At the same time, a growing digital presence expands the accessibility of the belief and its ritual activities to outsiders, introducing potentially harmful external, consumeristic influences as well as risks of fraud. This tension highlights the ongoing debate between preserving a "frozen-in-time" version of a cultural heritage versus recognising the fluid realities of a living tradition, that is closely connected to the everyday lives of thousands of people on a very intimate level. Spirit mediums in contemporary Vietnam constantly navigate the interplay between tradition and fate, digital media and modernity, secular and sacred. Both human mediums and digital media act as "tools of transmission" (Meyer 2011), bridging the seen and unseen, the physical and intangible through reshaping what it means to mediate the divine in the 21st century. Facebook Stories featuring colourfully adorned altars or links to livestreams of *hầu đồng* ceremonies are seamlessly followed by videos of club visits with friends from the night before, blurring boundaries or even rendering them invisible. This study thus sheds light not only on the lived dynamics of *Đạo Mẫu* but also on how digital technologies reshape spiritual authority, ritual aesthetics, and the negotiation of spirituality and heritage today. The deities of the pantheon of the Mother Goddesses have found their unique ways to stay relevant and to bridge the past, present, and future, reaching across spiritual, human, and digital worlds to guide their followers through our fast-paced, ever-changing world.

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Ethics Statement

The research was conducted with a strong commitment to ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent and pseudonyms are used in publication to ensure privacy and confidentiality, unless explicit permission was granted. Data collection and analysis were carried out transparently both digitally and in person to avoid bias and ensure a balanced perspective. This study aims to contribute positively to societal knowledge while upholding all ethical considerations.

AI Declaration

The author used AI tools for partial translations, language editing, and grammar correction. Translations were done with DeepL Translator while the author used the Grammarly AI Writing Assistant throughout the writing process to check English spelling and grammar. Before submission the author edited selected passages again for language clarity, grammar, and overall feedback on structure using ChatGPT.

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Charitable Instruction: Towards a Catholic-Thomistic Response to Misinformation

Wesley Kim D. Soguilon[1]

ABSTRACT

One of the problems the Philippines faces is the plague of misinformation, and this paper provides the groundwork for a possible Catholic-Thomistic response. In this work, the researcher attempts to answer the question of why Catholics need to solve this problem and what they can do to solve it. The paper resolves this question by arguing that it is the obligation of Catholics to share the truth through charitable instruction. The work then suggests that training programs dealing with misinformation and appropriate social media usage should be given at the parochial and grassroots levels. It also advocates for the utilization of Catholic schools by teaching students how to use social media properly and how to charitably instruct others to be wise on online platforms. Furthermore, the work reminds Catholics that they urge the state to uphold the common good by enacting programs that support charitable instruction in the context of social media usage in the country, whether by revamping the educational system or by boosting the country's fact-checking capabilities. To arrive at this, the work discusses the following: the Catholic social teachings on the Christian call to instruct the ignorant vis-à-vis St. Thomas Aquinas' views on

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it and the societal common good in Catholic doctrine. From there, the researcher extrapolates a possible response to misinformation that Catholics may adopt. Practical recommendations are then given toward the end of the paper.

Keywords: *misinformation, common good, instruction of the ignorant, work of mercy, charity*

1. Introduction

One of the most troublesome burdens present in Philippine society is misinformation.[2] Most Filipinos have been, or are being, deceived by inaccurate information that they found on social media platforms. For example, a study by Filipino students at the University of Indonesia found out that during the pandemic, misinformation was shared mostly by people who, while being more uncritical of social media posts, belong to the older generations on internet platforms, since no information literacy courses or programs were offered to them before.[3] This shows that there may be a correlation between the age of the social media user and their level of critical thinking when dealing with posts on those platforms. Another study shows that the social media platforms themselves peddle misinformation due to their incorrectly suggestive search engine that would promote videos that contain misinformation. For instance, regarding TikTok, a study found that about 20 percent of the search results that it provides contain

[2] Since the very concept and scope of misinformation is extensive and complex, I would like to focus my discussion on misinformation on social media and how this may form a bias on the citizen. The basis that I have for this contention is that Filipinos are the foremost users of social media and that platforms that they use contain widespread misinformation. This is pertinent since, in the latter part of the paper, I shall reflect on the thoughts of Aquinas and the call for Christians to teach and instruct the ignorant out of, and with, charity for the common good.

[3] Joseph Rem Dela Cruz et al., "Surfing the Waves of Infodemics: Building a Cohesive Philippine Framework Against Misinformation," *Journal of Asian Medical Students' Association* 9, no. 1 (2020): 26–38, https://doi.org/10.52629/jamsa.v9i1.251, 30.

misinformation.[4] This leads to a high probability of misinformation being shared with the user. Another report found that the 2022 Philippine national and local elections were highly influenced by misinformation.[5] This is brought about by the trust of the Filipino people in social media platforms rather than mainstream media, troll farms that operate in the country's cyberspace, and the politicians themselves utilizing social media to spread misinformation against their rivals. Another reason why such is the case is because of bad actors that deliberately share misinformation. There are advertisement and public relations strategists who calculatingly build misinformation campaigns for political clients.[6] Furthermore, some key opinion leaders often express views on a range of subjects that fall outside their academic expertise.[7]

The tendency to use social media platforms to gain information on complex, important, and sensitive topics rather than reliable websites on the internet leads to the formation of incorrect beliefs and biases and the inappropriate sharing of information with others. A case in point would be its threat to health research and scientific developments since people would not believe the factual outcomes of these due to misinformation.[8] The formation of biases and beliefs based on misinformation is not limited to what the person sees on social media; it also includes misinformation that is shared by the person to others by means of those platforms or through personal communication such as, but not limited to, casual conversations or teaching it in a classroom. The widespread use of social media among Filipinos, due to its accessibility, has made it easier for misinformation to

[4] Jack Brewster et al., "Beware the 'New Google:' TikTok's Search Engine Pumps Toxic Misinformation to Its Young Users," NewsGuard, September 14, 2022, https://www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/september-2022/.

[5] Japhet Quitzon, "Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 22, 2021, https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/social-media-misinformation-and-2022-philippine-elections.

[6] Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines," *University of Massachusetts Amherst*, 2018, 1–74, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7275/2cq4-5396, 31.

[7] Ong and Cabañes, 34.

[8] Jayson Aucensillo, "Misinformation Threatens Health Researches, Developments," Philippine Information Agency, December 13, 2022, https://pia.gov.ph/news/2022/12/13/misinformation-threatens-health-researches-developments.

spread—such as fake news related to COVID-19 in the Philippines, as well as religious and political misinformation in Indonesia, which has significantly polarized public opinion on these issues.[9] As one can see, misinformation proliferation is influenced by a number of factors such as, but not limited to, one's bias, perceived authority of the sharer or source (by the social media user), and the visual aesthetics of the misinformation that would make it seemingly factual.[10]

The Philippines has a huge problem of misinformation that destroys the common good by sowing division and error. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Philippines is the topmost social media user in the world. According to Kemp, the country "was home to 90.8 million social media user identities in January 2025, equating to 78.0 percent of the total population."[11]

The Church teaches that all Catholics are called to contribute to the building of the common good. As a predominantly Catholic country[12] faced with this problem, why do Filipino Catholics need to solve it, and what can they do to solve it? I will attempt to answer this question in this paper by providing a Catholic-Thomistic response or framework that addresses this problem. I shall first discuss the meaning of misinformation as defined in this paper. After that, I shall discuss the Catholic social teachings on the Christian call to instruct the ignorant vis-à-vis St. Thomas Aquinas' views on it. Following that, I shall examine the notion of societal common good in Catholic doctrine. Building on this, I shall extrapolate a response to misinformation that Catholics may adopt, which I call "charitable instruction." Finally, I will offer practical recommendations grounded in this principle.

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[9] Sheila V Siar, "Fake News, Its Dangers, and How We Can Fight It," *Philippine Institute for Development Studies*, 2021, no. 6 (August 2021): 1–10, 3.

[10] Andy Nestor Ryan Pazon, "Socioscientific Perspectives on 'Fake News' in the Era of Social Media among Generation Z Filipinos," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 1–14, 8.

[11] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2025: The Philippines," DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 25, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-philippines.

[12] Nearly four fifths of the Philippine population are Catholics. Of the 108,667,043 household population in 2020, 85,645,362 persons reported that they are Roman Catholic. See Dennis Mapa, "Religious Affiliation in the Philippines (2020 Census of Population and Housing)," Philippine Statistics Authority, February 22, 2023, accessed March 8, 2025, https://psa.gov.ph/content/religious-affiliation-philippines-2020-census-population-and-housing.

In this work, misinformation refers to wrong information that intends to deceive people.[13] This means that the term "misinformation" refers to incorrect information aimed at misleading people so they would form incorrect biases that may be shared. The people who share misinformation, however, do not intend to do it and deceive others.[14] Misinformed people, note, are victims: they do not know that they were misinformed, nor do they know that what they were sharing was wrong. This is in contrast with "disinformation", wherein false, or even manipulated, information is intently shared to deceive people or get them to follow a particular agenda.[15] Because of their predicament, they must be taught and instructed on what is right. That is where the call of the Christian "to instruct the ignorant" finds relevance. The American Psychological Association characterizes the term "misinformation" as: how people get the facts wrong and how this may be shared unintentionally with others.[16]

2. Catholic Social Teachings on Instructing the Ignorant

I will discuss Catholic social teachings regarding the instruction of the ignorant as a spiritual work of mercy focusing on St. Thomas Aquinas' views. The Catholic Church teaches that instructing the ignorant is a charitable work of mercy that addresses the spiritual needs of others.[17] It is the social doctrine of the Church, emphasizing the important role of Christians

[13] Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, "Misinformation," in *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2020, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/misinformation.

[14] College of Staten Island Library, "Misinformation and Disinformation: Thinking Critically about Information Sources," College of Staten Island, January 23, 2023, https://library.csi.cuny.edu/misinformation.

[15] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], "Types of Misinformation and Disinformation" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Factsheet-4.pdf.

[16] American Psychological Association, "Misinformation and Disinformation," American Psychological Association, January 2023, https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation#.

[17] John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), sec. 2447, accessed May 12, 2023, https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/.

in caring for the whole human person. The call to instruct the ignorant stems from the Catholic social doctrine that begins with the person and teachings of Jesus in the Bible.[18] Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom and the salvation of people from sin.[19] This means that the suffering that people are experiencing due to sin is temporary, and that the role of Jesus, handed down to the Church and her faithful, is to alleviate this suffering through working for their relief. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) calls this the "preferential love" of the Church to the oppressed, a love that aims to liberate people from their misery through works of charity and develop them to their fullest potential.[20] The liberation and development of the person do not concern a single aspect of him or her. True development requires the whole person to heed God's call.[21] The Christian is called to contribute to the true development of the person by doing corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and instructing the ignorant is a part of the latter.

Aside from contextualizing her social teachings to what Christ had preached and done in the Gospels, the Church also situates them within the framework of the Ten Commandments. This is evident in the CCC, where many of her social teachings are presented in the section that expounds on the Ten Commandments of God. For instance, the definition and characteristics of the social doctrines of the Church are greatly illustrated in the segment that deals with the seventh commandment.[22] Since the social teachings of the Church are situated in the discussion of the Ten Commandments, it would necessarily follow that the discussion on the spiritual works of mercy would also be contextualized in the same manner. The Church's discussion of ignorance relates to her explication of the duty of each person to seek the truth, adhere to it, and inculcate it in one's conscience so that one's life, actions, speech, and thoughts may be aligned to it.[23] This is the case since Christians are mandated to live in the truth by acting and speaking truthfully after the pattern of Christ, the Truth. An individual is called

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[18] David J O'Brien and Thomas A Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 1.

[19] O'Brien and Shannon.

[20] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2448.

[21] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2461.

[22] Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Makati: St Pauls, 2005), 509.

[23] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 521.

to bear witness to the truth at all costs in any activity in their life. He is required to respect the truth and impart it to others through means of successful communication in the spirit of charity.[24] Included in that mission is to impart the truth through teaching and instruction that would contribute to the common good, a point which will be explicated in the later part of this paper.

3. St. Thomas Aquinas on Charity and the Instruction of the Ignorant

St. Thomas Aquinas would have a different orientation with regard to the call of instructing the ignorant. If the social teachings of the Catholic Church were to instruct the Christian faithful to actively witness to the truth and share it with others as a spiritual work of mercy (i.e., the instruction of the ignorant), Aquinas would situate this in the context of sin and culpability. Thus, for Aquinas, ignorance is a privation of knowledge (i.e., a lack of knowledge) that is supposed to be possessed by a subject who has the ability and obligation to know and comprehend such.[25] There are two elements here that must be explored: the ability and obligation of the subject to know. Aquinas recognizes that not all human beings can know everything that there is. One would say that those who fail to know that which they cannot know by reason of a defect in their ability, or that the subject matter is not in their purview, do not commit a sin, precisely because the knowledge that they cannot know is not obligated for them to know.[26] Again, stress is emphasized here in Aquinas' contextualization of the discussion of instructing the ignorant with sin. One must remember that for a sin to happen, insofar as Catholic teaching is concerned, it must be a grave matter done with full consent and knowledge. Since the knowledge needed for the act to be qualified as a sin is not present and cannot be such, it would follow that the act would not be a sin. However, if a person could know and is obliged to do so, but does not exert an effort to know, it would result in a sin since the person did not fulfill their obligation and became negligent

[24] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 524.

[25] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Is a Sin?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae: The causes of sin, in particular (Prima Secundae Partis, Q. 76), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2076.htm.

[26] Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Is a Sin?"

about it.[27] Here, Aquinas heavily emphasizes that not doing one's responsibility results in negligence, which is a sin.

Furthermore, he would qualify this initial discussion by stating that, while ignorance may excuse a person from sin, it may also not excuse the person from it altogether. The reason for this is that there are people who deliberately choose to be ignorant so that they would be able to sin more (since they do not know, as if, that what they are doing is sin) and that there are those who, because of other preoccupations, neglect to know that which they should know.[28] For Aquinas, evading one's responsibilities is considered a sin, as it amounts to a failure in duty and moral irresponsibility. Now, what does this have to do with the issue of misinformation? Online users have the responsibility to share accurate information. In other words online users have the responsibility to verify in advance whether the information they intend to share is correct and useful. It is assumed that since the user has the capacity to know more about that which he or she will share because of the information that can be found on the internet, those who share a particular item on their social media platform know best about that which he or she shared. Ignorance, here, does not become an excuse for a person to share misinformation on social media. It does not remove culpability from the person who shared that misinformation; rather, it imputes it since the person became negligent of their responsibility. That is why those accounts that constantly share physically and mentally harmful misinformation are removed from the platform since it was made clear to the user that one must think first before sharing anything. But what about those who unintentionally shared misinformation? Here fact-checkers have the role of ensuring that the information being shared is accurate as well as informing the person who shared proven misinformation to remove it from their account.[29] The issue arises when the person deliberately ignores fact-checkers and keeps on sharing misinformation due to ingrained mental bias.

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[27] Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Is a Sin?"

[28] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Ignorance Excuses from Sin Altogether?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae: The causes of sin, in particular (Prima Secundae Partis, Q. 76), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2076.htm.

[29] See Wright State University, "Use Fact-Checking Sites," Research Guides: Media Literacy and Fact-Checking, January 29, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, https://guides.libraries.wright.edu/c.php?g=1019856&p=7399944.

Based on the discussion regarding Aquinas and ignorance, I argue that the person who became negligent of their responsibility on social media platforms by virtue of their sharing of misinformation committed a sin because of their thoughtlessness and negligence. Specifically, Aquinas would state that a human would commit a mortal sin of negligence if that which his will remised (because of the lack of solicitude of his reason) is necessary for his salvation, while a venial sin if that which was remised is not necessary for salvation.[30] Since matters that are usually neglected on social media by sharing misinformation are typically not relevant to one's salvation, I posit that the negligence committed by a person in this particular setting is a venial sin. However, if that which was shared is misleading enough so that others would stray from the path of salvation (i.e., that which was shared is heretical), the person may have committed a mortal sin. This is connected to thoughtlessness, which Aquinas would classify as sin under imprudence. For the purposes of this discussion, we do not need to include imprudence but only thoughtlessness. Aquinas would state that thoughtlessness is a sin because a person fails to rightly judge and consider a truth about something because of their negligence of those things wherein this right judgment rests.[31] The root of this argumentation is that thought, as an act of the intellect wherein it would consider the truth about something that was presented, concerns judgment inasmuch as right thought is needed to form a right judgment.[32] Thoughtlessness becomes a sin because of the lack of right judgment of the person, which may lead to other ill consequences. Here, Aquinas is emphasizing that, for one to be prudent and to avoid sin, one must have the right judgment about something, backed up by the right thought about it. Going back, the sharing of misinformation becomes a sin because of the person's failure to rightly judge whether it is true or otherwise and if it is worth sharing or not, brought by their negligence of those things that are needed for a right judgment (namely, proper research and knowledge of the subject matter). This would lead to a

[30] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Negligence Can Be a Mortal Sin?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae: Negligence (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 54), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3054.htm#article2.

[31] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Thoughtlessness Is a Special Sin Included in Prudence?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae: Imprudence (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 53), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3053.htm.

[32] Aquinas, "Whether Thoughtlessness Is a Special Sin Included in Prudence?"

thoughtless, careless, and imprudent sharing of those things, which may confuse and mislead other people. However, since this is not in my purview, I could not classify if this were a mortal or venial sin.

It is in this context that Aquinas would situate his discussion on the instruction of the ignorant. To better understand the thoughts of Aquinas, we must first explore his view on charity (since mercy and almsdeeds are specific acts of charity), followed by a survey of his thoughts on mercy and then almsdeeds. Aquinas would situate his discussion on charity, or *Caritas*, in the broader context of the virtues. Primarily, he would understand charity as an infused virtue in the soul, since it makes the person possessing it, and their works, good.[33] It is a virtue precisely because it makes the person love and act for the good since the person loves the good for which they aspire. They long to possess that highest good, pursued for its own sake, and then share it with others: beatific vision. Since it makes the person aspire for the highest good (i.e., beatific vision), charity is a virtue and the highest among them. St. Thomas Aquinas says that charity makes humans love [sic] "God for His own sake, and loves fellow-men who are capable of attaining beatitude as it loves itself; charity resists every hindrance both in itself and in others."[34] One can see here that *Caritas* makes humans also overcome obstacles to loving; the individual becomes courageous enough to love others and share their goodness despite the challenges that they might face.

Since love involves some sort of communication or outpouring of one's goodness, it is intimately linked to friendship. Caritas is the friendship between humans and God since there is mutual love (which is a requirement for friendship) between them. Humans love God and God's creation and do everything they can to have a good relationship with God, in the same way as God loves humans and provides for their good.[35] Notice here how one can love God by loving God's creation. This means that everyone is mandated to love their neighbor since they are bearers of God's image

[33] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Charity Is a Virtue?," trans. Lottie H. Kendzierski, Quaestiones Disputatae: De Virtutibus, accessed April 29, 2023, https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/QDdeVirtutibus2.htm#2.

[34] Aquinas, "Whether Charity Is a Virtue?"

[35] Thomas Aquinas, "Is Charity Friendship?," ed. Kevin Knight, Summa Theologiae: Charity, Considered in Itself (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 23), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3023.htm#article1.

and dignity.[36] Loving God and others, St. Thomas Aquinas stipulates, has effects on the soul; one of those effects is mercy. Mercy is "sorrow [that] arises from love, either through the absence of the thing loved, or because the loved object to which we wish well, is deprived of its good or afflicted with some evil."[37] Here is an idea that we must focus on: we also suffer because of our neighbor's suffering. This is because of our love for them, which makes us suffer their sufferings as if they were our own.[38] Going back to mercy and *Caritas*, one has to love one's neighbor by practicing charity, that is, by caring for them as how their situation demands. St. Thomas Aquinas is not convinced that wishing and praying for the well-being of one's neighbor is already love.[39] It must go beyond that. For him, real charity is manifested through actions, and "Aquinas divides these acts into three categories: (1) acts of beneficence, (2) almsgiving, and (3) fraternal correction."[40] Particularly, mercy belongs to the second category. Thus, we can say that mercy compels the person to have compassion for those who are suffering and be compassionate to them by alleviating their sorrow.[41]

Aquinas moves from these discussions on charity and mercy to almsdeeds, stating that these are acts motivated by mercy since these very acts are done out of compassion and the sake of God to address the needs of another.[42] For almsgiving to happen, there has to be a merciful

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[36] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether There Should Have Been Given Two Precepts of Charity?," ed. Kevin Knight, Summa Theologiae: The Precepts of Charity (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 44), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3044.htm#article2.

[37] Thomas Aquinas, "Is Joy an Effect of Charity?," ed. Kevin Knight, Summa Theologiae: Joy (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 28), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3028.htm.

[38] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Evil Is Properly the Motive of Mercy?," ed. Kevin Knight, Summa Theologiae: Mercy (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 30), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3030.htm.

[39] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?," ed. Kevin Knight, Summa Theologiae: Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm#article5.

[40] Shawn Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 3 (2009): pp. 449-471, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2009.00394.x, 458.

[41] Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," 469.

[42] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Almsgiving Is an Act of Charity?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae:

disposition on the part of the person. This is important since mercy gives way for almsdeeds to happen, the former becoming the latter's motivation.[43] Aquinas classifies almsdeeds into two classifications based on the needs of the human person: one addressing their bodily needs (i.e., the corporal works of mercy), while the other addressing their non-bodily needs (i.e., the spiritual works of mercy).[44] One of the spiritual works of mercy is the instruction of the ignorant, wherein a deficiency in the speculative intellect of the person is supplied through instruction.[45] Now, what is that deficiency that has to be supplied through instruction? Aquinas would answer that it is the lack of knowledge about those things which one ought to know.[46] Here, we can see that Aquinas would still situate his discussion on the knowledge of truth since it is needed for one's salvation: we must remember that the spiritual works of mercy are aimed toward the non-bodily needs of the person. Spiritual acts of mercy are aimed at supporting and instructing the human person in their emotional and religious aspects.[47] In other words, the instruction of the ignorant concerns the non-bodily need of the person with regards to salvific truth, knowledge, and wisdom. The lack of things (i.e., privation) pertinent (and supposedly there) to the individual's salvation, journey to truth, knowledge, and wisdom, is ought to be supplied by that who will do the work of mercy out of compassion and love.

These acts of mercy are, furthermore, compulsory to the individual in Aquinas's account. The basis for this is that almsgiving is a matter of precept; Sacred Scriptures clearly commands love of neighbor, and this love must be expressed through action. For Aquinas, it is better to be a doer of good than merely a well-wisher—love must respond to the actual needs

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Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm.

[43] Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," 458.

[44] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether the Different Kinds of Almsdeeds Are Suitably Enumerated?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae: Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm.

[45] Aquinas, "Whether the Different Kinds of Almsdeeds Are Suitably Enumerated?"

[46] Aquinas, "Whether the Different Kinds of Almsdeeds Are Suitably Enumerated?"

[47] Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," 458.

of others through deeds, as action holds greater value than words.[48] This means that, as a precept, there is an obligation for the individual to respond to the valid needs of their neighbor by practicing charity (in the ways outlined in the different kinds of almsdeeds).[49] Two important elements must be highlighted here: first, there has to be a valid need on the part of the one who is in need.[50] Aquinas recognizes the reality that one cannot help everyone who is in need since humans are limited and that he is not a superhero who can do every possible thing that may allay the suffering of all people.[51] As a result, Aquinas qualifies this precept of helping others by specifying that it applies to those who are truly in need—individuals who, if not assisted, are at risk of not receiving help. These are people in urgent need, whom an individual encountering them, with the ability to help, must assist at that moment.[52] The second important element is the obligation of the individual to respond by practicing charity. While there is an obligation to the individual, Aquinas recognizes the need for the individual to first possess that which he or she can share with others in the spirit of charity. For him, the individual must fulfill this obligation by sharing their surplus—what is unnecessary to them and their dependents—with those in need.[53] In other words, one must sustain oneself and their constituents first before going out to help others. Here, one can see that the axiom "one cannot give what one does not have" holds true. One must first possess those things that would enable them to help others.

It is clear now that Aquinas would see the instruction of the ignorant, both as a work of mercy and practice of charity, as obligatory for the individual. Here, I would like to call this spiritual work of mercy a "charitable instruction" to the individual. When one is to instruct the ignorant or those who lack the necessary knowledge on things, one must do it charitably since the instruction of the ignorant is primarily an expression of charity.

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[48] Thomas Aquinas, "Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?," ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Summa Theologiae: Almsdeeds (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 32), 2017, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3032.htm#article5.

[49] Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," 458.

[50] Since what he was talking of is a precept about the virtues, Aquinas would argue that almsdeeds should be governed by right reason, insofar as it is demanded by it. This is the case since the practice of almsdeeds is a necessary condition for the attainment and development of virtue.

[51] Aquinas, "Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?"

[52] Aquinas, "Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?"

[53] Aquinas, "Whether Almsgiving Is a Matter of Precept?"

While this spiritual work of mercy is closely intertwined with the need for salvation, it may also refer to the instruction given to individuals who lack the necessary knowledge in some areas, most especially in their attainment of the truth.

Here, the Catholic Church expanded the spiritual work of mercy from the usual salvific context, where it is situated, to the concrete needs of society in promoting the truth to the people. The Catholic Church would instruct her faithful to promote the truth as a part of their obligation to live in the truth as part of their witnessing to God, who is the Truth.[54] The obligation to live in the truth stems from the anthropological understanding of the Church. The Catholic Church teaches that humans tend toward the truth as a part of their nature and that they are obliged to honor and bear witness to it after their attainment of it.[55] Humans are called to be witnesses of the truth by being observers of the Gospel and transmitting the teachings of the faith through words and actions.[56] Now, what does truth mean insofar as the Catholic teachings are concerned? It is one's uprightness and sincerity in their actions and speeches, coupled with showing oneself as truthful in terms of their acts and words and in avoiding duplicity and hypocrisy.[57] Now, every Catholic is expected to have an attitude of respect for the truth. One's respect for the truth, as an expression of charity, should influence the Catholic's response to the communication of the truth to others.[58] This includes the modern means of communication, especially social media. When communicating the truth or information on these means, it must be directed toward serving the common good. This means that the information communicated should be both true and just, contributing positively to the well-being of society.[59] Notice that the Catholic Church teaches that respect for the truth, coupled with charity and consideration of the common good, should be present in the field of imparting information through whatever means.[60] To better understand this, we must briefly tackle how the common good is understood in the context of Catholic social teachings.

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[54] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2464.
[55] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2467.
[56] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 522.
[57] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2468.
[58] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2489.
[59] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2494.
[60] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 524.

4. The Common Good in Catholic Social Teaching

In prima facie, the Church would base her idea of the common good on natural law.[61] This means that her understanding and application of the concept of the common good would be contextualized on her comprehension of the nature of reality and humans. For the Church, humans beings are inherently social, which is why the common good concerns all people. It is defined as a "sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily."[62] The common good, then, should be a true good for all, a good that harbors the whole development of society and humans. Now, the reason why reality and humans are the centers of the Church's discussion on the common good is that they are the loci in which this principle would be applied. The common good is especially concerned with social structures, challenges, and human life, which hopes to urge and guide a collective action that addresses social concerns.[63] It is founded on a good anthropological grasp of humans as a social being, a commendable sociological understanding of the messiness of human reality, and a sound ethical theory based on teleology.[64]

According to the Church, the common good must possess the following characteristics: it should respect the rights of individuals, promote the spiritual and temporal well-being of society, and sustain peace and security among citizens.[65] For the common good to be actualized, there has to be social participation from the individual and the sponsorship of the state for its development. Here, the common good becomes a political and social enterprise precisely because it deals with the good of all in a societal context. The fundamental reason for this is that people who possess dignity live in a community with others. As a result, individual good, which stems

[61] William A Barbieri, "Beyond the Nations: The Expansion of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought," *The Review of Politics* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 723–54, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034670500032149, 747.

[62] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 1906.

[63] Barbieri, "The Expansion of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought," 749.

[64] Barbieri, "The Expansion of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought," 748.

[65] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 1925.

from human dignity, must be squared with the collective good.[66] It is important to note that the common good, while it does value the individual good, is not merely a conglomerate of individual goods that are molded together.[67] It is a good that recognizes some goods in society as common to all, and that the care for these goods would eventually develop the good of individuals.[68]

Since the common good is a social matter, there must be social participation from individuals. Their generous outpouring in the social sphere and their voluntarism are needed.[69] To be socially participative for the common good at the individual level, humans must take charge in the domains that they have control over: they must assume personal responsibility and do their part.[70] How can humans do their personal responsibility? By making sure that, for example, their children are educated properly, there is food on the table because of their work, and that their family has a secure source of income.

5. Towards a Catholic-Thomistic Response

Now, we must go back to misinformation and the common good. We said that the information provided in the media (including social media) should serve the common good. The CCC clearly states that proper information, in the spirit of justice and charity, should be able to form sound public opinions on matters that concern the common good.[71] Misinformation runs contrary to the purpose of proper information, as it leads to the formation of unsound public opinions on important issues affecting both individual and societal well-being. These unsound opinions would, then, form incorrect biases that would motivate people to do that which is contrary to the

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[66] Rochus-Antonin Gruijters, "Solidarity, the Common Good and Social Justice in the Catholic Social Teaching within the Framework of Globalization," *Philosophia Reformata* 81, no. 1 (May 2016): 14–31, https://doi.org/10.1163/23528230-08101002, 17.

[67] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 166.

[68] Charles E Curran, "Catholic Social Teaching," *The Good Society* 10, no. 1 (2001): 1–6, https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/20710992, 4.

[69] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 164.

[70] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1914.

[71] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2495.

truth and justice. Furthermore, social media can reduce vigilance in what people share, potentially shaping flawed minds that fail to resist harmful influences.[72] If misinformation are shared, this danger becomes more apparent. Proper guidance and discipline should, then, be taught to social media users so that this may be avoided.

In the face of all these, what can the Catholic individual do? I propose a response to misinformation that Catholics may adopt, which I call "charitable instruction". The Catholic Church is clear that Catholics should be charitable in the field of communication and in imparting information, and that he or she should impart information honestly and properly with esteem to the human dignity of the person and the moral laws.[73] The information that Catholics should provide must be true, complete, and in the service of the common good.[74] At the outset, it is clear that both the information that Catholics share and the way in which this is shared should be in the spirit of Christian charity. The dignity of the person and the pursuit of the good must remain at the heart of all communication. To communicate information effectively, the Catholic should do it charitably.[75] It is hoped that these would answer the demands of the formation of sound public opinion and the need to guide people toward the truth.

It is the duty of the Catholic individual to propagate and share the truth. We have discussed the instruction of the ignorant as a work of mercy fueled by charity and as an obligation for the faithful. In this context, the Catholic individual is called to instruct those who have been misled by misinformation, as well as those who continue to spread it—whether knowingly or unknowingly—leading others into error. As vanguards of the truth, the Catholic faithful is called to fulfill their obligation to charitably instruct others and avoid the sin of negligence in one's obligation.[76] Thus, charitable instruction would contribute to the common good inasmuch as it both instructs the ignorant and provides the proper avenues for the apt formation of the correct conscience and the discipline of the individual when it comes to social media usage.[77]

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[72] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2496.
[73] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 524.
[74] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 525.
[75] *The Church and Internet, 3.*
[76] *Inter Mirifica*, 17.
[77] *The Church and Internet, 7.*

With the background and foundation given by charitable instruction, proper education is the key that may address the plague of misinformation that we are experiencing, particularly in the Philippines. Since Catholics have the duty to promote truth in the media and to charitably instruct others on sharing that which is true and lead them to the truth, they must be responsible users of social media by ensuring that what they share is truthful. To achieve this, training programs, seminars, and forums that deal with topics on misinformation and appropriate social media use should be given at the parochial and grassroots levels.[78] Simple yet meaningful and enriching programs such as media literacy seminars may be given to our parochial social communications team and to our parish catechetical ministry. These members can then share some practical strategies for countering misinformation on parishes social media accounts and in the schools where the catechists teach.[79] If Catholics themselves are not equipped with the proper skills to discern truth from falsehood, they cannot charitably instruct others and fulfill their obligation. They may even fall into the sin of thoughtlessness. Thus, it is important that parishes offer forums to teach the skills needed to discern the truth from falsehood and to charitably instruct others. Catholic schools must also take part in this sacred mission. If students know how to use social media properly and how to charitably instruct others to be wise on online platforms, we contribute to the common good. This not only enhances the well-being of individuals but also fosters discerning and honest citizens for the benefit of society as a whole. The teaching may happen in two ways: first, in the proper organization, preparation, and execution of the Media Literacy courses of Catholic Schools as mandated by the Department of Education.[80] There are several ways to ensure the effective execution of the curriculum: first, by hiring qualified teachers who are experts in the field and providing them with effective training; second, by conducting authentic assessments to ensure students have mastered the required competencies; and third, by integrating real-life applications and practical scenarios into the curriculum to help students recognize its relevance and proper use.

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[78] *The Church and Internet, 11.*

[79] See *Inter Mirifica*, 18.

[80] Department of Education [DepEd], "Media and Information Literacy," K To 12 Basic Education Curriculum, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SHS-Core_Media-and-Information-Literacy-CG.pdf.

The second way is through media literacy forums by inviting expert speakers to conduct workshops for Catholic school students, thereby enriching their learning experience. Additionally, as Catholics, we have the duty to remind and urge the state to uphold the common good by enacting programs that support charitable instruction, in the context of social media usage and misinformation. This can be achieved by improving our educational system and its delivery, as well as enhancing our fact-checking capabilities and communication competence.

6. Conclusion

In sum, the issue of misinformation in the country remains one of the problems that contemporary Filipinos face. This humble work proposes that Catholics have the duty to instruct those who have been misled by misinformation—whether intentionally or unintentionally shared—and to guide them back to the truth, as part of their contribution to the common good of society. Furthermore, they have a personal Catholic responsibility to address this issue, which they must fulfill, lest they fall into the sin of negligence. To realize this, we have explored the need for a Catholic charitable instruction and some of its practical applications at the parochial and educational levels. We have also briefly explored how charitable instruction may be instrumental in the seminars and fora that can be given in parishes, in the involvement of Catholic schools in this effort, and in the sacred duty of Catholics to remind their governments to uphold the common good in addressing the plague of misinformation.

The challenge now is for Catholics to go forth into the world and do their best to address misinformation, both within their communities and beyond. In a world increasingly shifting toward a post-truth and relativistic era, and where authentic fraternal correction and the search and longing for the truth are becoming rarer, Catholics are called to be beacons of light and vanguards of the truth. The question is: are they up for this sacred mission?

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Yuval Noah Harari. *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI.* New York, Random House, 2024, 492 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0-593-73681-4.

Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* offers a forceful warning against the advent of artificial intelligence dominated networks. He asserts that because computers have developed the ability to pursue goals and make decisions, this introduces a fundamental change in our information networks (p. 204). Such networks not only imitate and surpass human intelligence but rather have the potential for creating a whole new reality: new political structures, economic models, and cultural norms (p. 219). Harari sees this as the end of human-dominated history, and calls the reader to greater awareness and responsibility, as we move into an era were we might become an increasingly powerless minority vis-à-vis artificial intelligence.

In many ways, Harari's work is both eye opening and foreboding. He supplies the reader with compelling historical evidence to demonstrate the way information is created, manipulated, and controlled, and how this bears significant personal, social, and cultural impact. His rhetoric is compelling enough to unsettle and motivate the reader to retain a sense of agency vis-à-vis information networks. The key question is, where can this robust human agency come from in the face of the mounting influence of AI? His examples that raise this question most powerfully are those that demonstrate violence and injustice done against persons with the help of information networks, such as Facebook's role in the genocide against the Rohingya in Myanmar, or the AI surveillance network policing and imprisoning women in Iran who remove their hijabs (p. 195f; p. 245f). Reading these and similar examples in the book, one wonders about the moral compass of human agents involved, while Harari focuses on the agency of computers.

One challenging aspect of *Nexus* is its disposition toward a faith-based audience or readership. Harari's otherwise thoughtful and engaging analysis of information networks carries an especially antagonistic tone when it

comes to religion throughout the book, but most consistently in Part I, in which Harari seeks to make the case that information is not necessarily truth, and information can be shaped and manipulated to impact culture. For Harari, one such information manipulating cultural force is religion. This is regrettable and serves to alienate the faith-based reader, who would otherwise benefit from the eye-opening analysis of computer networks especially in the later chapters of the book, Parts II and III. Without agreeing to or ascribing to religious belief or compromising his world-view, Harari might have shifted his tone in these moments throughout the book to a more neutral one and carried his audience along. As this faith-based reviewer assesses it, the most compelling and valuable parts of *Nexus* are Part II and III, while Part I is mostly off-putting in its hostility toward religion.

Harari's critical reflections on religion and information networks within a religious context serve as cautionary for him, casting these as examples of weakness, error, or naïveté. For the faith-based reader, there is however good opportunity here to both dialogue and self-reflect on the perspectives of the author. For example, Harari's treatment of the Bible, from both the Jewish and Chrisitan perspective is thought provoking insofar as he shows the historical development of the Biblical canon, but he takes a broad leap when it comes to the Church's use of these texts to assert its own power: "That's how the belief in a supposedly infallible superhuman technology like the New Testament led to the rise of an extremely powerful but fallible human institution like the Catholic Church that crushed all opposing views as 'erroneous' while allowing no one to question its own views" (p. 90). As compared to the serious and thoughtful view later in the book, moments like this read antagonistic, hostile, and even out of place.

Harari spends significant focus on the Catholic Church, casting it as a system with a weak self-correcting mechanism, a system that claims infallibility that cannot admit institutional mistakes (p. 106). Harari's use of the term infallibility merits significant nuance; he applies it to the Bible, to the Church as a whole and somewhat more appropriately to the Pope reaching on faith and morals. While he is in the ballpark of the theological understanding of this term, he expands it well beyond normative Catholic use. Harari and the Catholic Church do not mean the same thing when using the term infallible. In this same vein, it would enrich Harari's reflection to consider a broader ecclesiology than his present focus on the Church as the guardian of the deposit of faith. This is his main lens for understanding the

Church as an institution, distilling it to system of power that exerts control with and around information. With this critical and myopic view Harari misses significant context. He misses the context of worship, fellowship, pastoral care, and service that round out the deposit of faith. Significantly, he also misses the morally formative value of religion, Catholic or otherwise, which is a connection that could have offered strong support for his later advocacy of human agency in the book. It is precisely religious systems that can have the positive moral impact on individual human agency that he is seeking to lift up as a response to AI. In the study of systems and networks, Harari could have produced and entirely different and profoundly hopeful picture if he would have for example centered his assessment of religions not as institutions that manipulate information but as living communities that come together with shared values to worship, serve, heal, guide, form, and reconcile.

Taking one example from this broader view, Harari does not take into consideration the liturgy as one profound information system within religious practice. Imagining the way communication unfolds and how information is conveyed in the liturgy would have appropriately re-contextualized the Biblical text in the worshipping community (as opposed to volumes guarded and manipulated by the Church) as well as debunked his assessment of the Church resisting self-correction. The mere history the development and reform of liturgical rites, and how these emerged from, functioned in, and had impact on worshipping communities is a history of self-correction and change. More broadly, any praxis-oriented aspect of the life of the Church, whether religious education and catechesis, pastoral care, commitment to works of justice, and especially, moral formation, could provide a similar lens. There is more than one way to envision the Church as a network and a system, and many of these lenses are deeply contextual and therefore living and evolving. For other authors with greater hospitality to a faith-based approach, this would be a worthwhile direction for further exploration.

Harari offers an important and helpful point: information networks are about both truth and order (p. 68). There is both a factual and relational aspect of information networks; they communicate content and also connect people around this content. Harari emphatically asserts this, warning the reader that if we only focus on the truth, our view remains naïve. We ought not miss the social impact of information networks. For Harari, this twofold distinction of truth and order are important as he heads into his

reflections on AI in later chapters. From the perspective of the Christian reader, this twofold distinction resonates deeply with the basic theological understanding of divine revelation, whereby God's self communication is both content and relationship—it informs and forms at the same time. This could become a rich dialogue point and invites the reader into Harari's concerns about AI from a place of theological depth and familiarity. Along with Harari, faith-based readers wonder about the relational-social impact of AI and computer networks. As Harari advocates for human agency, religion comes in with the conviction that sound moral formation can and should mitigate the impact of viral social media trends that advocate harm or violence. Morality retains commitment to the universality of human dignity, something that Harari explores instead by way of deontology and utilitarianism (p. 278f). Because for Harari religion is inherently problematic, there is a lost opportunity here to explore morality and moral agency as part of his analysis.

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David Thang Moe. *Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023, xix + 227 pp. Paperback. ISBN 9781666764263.

In *Beyond the Academy*, David Thang Moe offers a bold, timely, and deeply contextual vision for thinking and practising public theology in Asia. Moe's most significant contribution arises not from the heights of academic institutions but from living the faith and witnessing grassroots Christian communities in Myanmar. Moe argues for a "lived Asian public theology of religions" that takes seriously the realities of religious pluralism, mass poverty, and ethnic conflict. Moe combines ethnographic research, theological reflection, and contextual analysis to present a synthetic methodology that bridges the gap between academic theology and the daily practices of ordinary grassroots believers.

1. Overview

The central thesis of *Beyond the Academy* is that public theology, particularly in Asia, must shift from being a top-down academic approach to a bottom-up dialogue that engages with the lived experiences of grassroots Christians. Moe critiques the dominant models of Asian public theology, particularly those associated with theologians like Aloysius Pieris and Felix Wilfred, for being insufficient to incorporate grassroots voices and overstating political liberation at the expense of spiritual dimensions of faith. Moe proposes a "new triple dialogue" as the methodological core of his project, which includes:

- An intra-Christian dialogue between the academy and the grassroots;
- An interreligious dialogue between Christians and practitioners of other religions (especially Buddhists); and
- A glocal dialogue between Asian and non-Asian theologians.

Each of the five chapters builds upon this overarching aim. Chapter one outlines "unhappy gaps" between the academy and the church, showing how public theology often bypasses the voices of those on the margins.

Chapter two outlines the motivations and methodologies for engaging grassroots communities. Chapter three engages with an ethnographic account of lived Christian witnesses in Myanmar. Chapter four revisits the contributions of key Asian theologians, critiquing their shortcomings and highlighting the potential of grassroots-centred theology. Finally, chapter five synthesizes academic and grassroots perspectives, offering a model for lived public theology that is both contextual and dialogical.

2. Key Themes

2.1. Theology from Below

At the heart of Moe's project is a commitment to "first theology" (*theologia prima*), the idea that theology does not begin with academic discourse but with the worship, prayer, suffering, and lived faith of ordinary Christians. Furthermore, Moe acknowledges the limitations of the grassroots and refuses to romanticise them, but insists they provide valuable insight into the nature of faith and public life. He critiques theologians who merely speak on behalf of the oppressed without incorporating their actual voices, arguing instead that theology must begin "from the ground up."

This theme is especially highlighted in chapter three, where Moe recounts how grassroots Christians in Myanmar engage in practices of preaching, worship, and prayer that embody their theological commitments. Moe observes how their theology of salvation emphasises themes such as Christus Victor and the priestly work of Christ, which are often overlooked in academic theological discourse but deeply meaningful in contexts of spiritual warfare and political oppression.

2.2. Critique of Top-Down Public Theology

Moe offers a penetrating critique of the way public theology in both Western and Asian contexts. Drawing on Miroslav Volf's observation that academic theology has "lost its voice" in public discourse, Moe highlights how many Asian public theologians, such as Pieris and Wilfred, fail to engage with grassroots communities and instead speak within narrow academic circles. Moe argues that such theology often pays scant attention to spiritual realities, by excessively focusing on structural sin, and ignoring the lived faith of those on the margins.

However, Moe's critique is also constructive. He offers a pathway forward through the "new triple dialogue" that opens public theology to a broader array of voices and experiences. By integrating social science methods, particularly ethnography, Moe grounds his theology in real-life contexts, enabling a theology that is both prophetic and participatory.

2.3. The Myanmar Context and Religious Nationalism

While Moe's vision is pan-Asian in scope, it is firmly rooted in the particular context of his home country. The book's fourth chapter provides a sobering account of Buddhist nationalism and the ethnic discrimination faced by minority Christians in Myanmar. Moe draws on political science and sociology to explain the rise of Burman-Buddhist dominance and its impact on Chin, Karen, and Kachin Christian communities. He critiques the ideology of "Burmanization" and the slogan "to be a Burman is to be Buddhist," demonstrating how such narratives marginalize non-Buddhists and fuel ongoing conflict in the region.

In this context, Moe's vision of public theology takes on a deeply urgent and pastoral dimension. It is not a luxury of the academy but a lifeline for communities struggling to make sense of their suffering and to articulate as well as express their faith in an environment that is oppressive and hostile to their growth.

2.4. A Synthetic and Dialogical Methodology

Moe's synthetic methodology, bringing together academic theology, ethnographic research, and grassroots voices, is the book's greatest strength and innovation. He positions himself as a "theologian of the bridge," seeking to reconcile the concerns of scholars with the lived realities of believers. His proposal for a "new triple dialogue" is especially noteworthy for its inclusivity, contextual nuance, without neglecting the church's place in the wider world.

Unlike previous models that centre interreligious dialogue in academia, Moe insists on the inclusion of "little traditions" and ordinary practitioners. He also calls for glocal dialogue that bridges the global body of Christ, engaging both Majority World and Western theologians in mutual learning. This methodological breadth makes the book relevant beyond Myanmar (and as the title suggests, beyond the academy) offering a blueprint for theological engagement in other postcolonial and pluralistic contexts.

3. Evaluation

3.1. Strengths

Beyond the Academy is a groundbreaking and moving work. One of its greatest strengths is its authentic voice. Moe writes not just as an observer but as an insider, a participant from the grassroots who has lived through the traumas of ethnic conflict and spiritual oppression and now brings these experiences into conversation with the academy. His dual identity as a grassroots insider and Yale-trained academic gives the book both credibility and emotional depth. Having grown up in Indonesia during Suharto's regime in the 1980s and 1990s, the writer resonated deeply with many of the struggles Moe outlines. While the context in Indonesia was, in many ways, different from that of Myanmar, the themes of political repression, ethnic tension, and the resilience of grassroots faith communities feel strikingly familiar.

The book is also commendable for its clear structure and logical progression. Each chapter builds on the last, culminating in a synthesis that feels both intellectually rigorous, contextually relevant, and spiritually grounded. Moe's writing is clear and passionate, balancing scholarly critique with deep pastoral concern.

Moreover, the book challenges readers in the West to consider broadening their theological categories. Moe's emphasis on spiritual powers, personal sin, and holistic salvation offers a corrective to the overly political and sometimes secularised versions of liberation theology found in Western academia.

3.2. Criticisms

While the book is rich in insight, there are a few areas where it could be strengthened. First, while Moe mentions the limitations of grassroots theology, it might be worth a more detailed exploration of potential pitfalls, for example the danger of theological syncretism, prosperity gospel distortions, or anti-intellectualism, which are commonly known in these contexts. Engaging these concerns directly would strengthen his argument by anticipating and addressing potential critiques.

Second, the synthetic methodology, while commendable, occasionally feels more aspirational than fully realised. The book gestures toward a mutual enrichment between academic and grassroots theology, but the

integration could be more developed. For example, while Moe reports on grassroots practices and critiques academic theology, a deeper analytical synthesis and a real-life case study where this is demonstrated, albeit in early stages, would further ground his proposal.

Finally, while this may be beyond the scope of Moe's work, it would be valuable to explore how grassroots theology takes shape within Myanmar ethnic churches in the diaspora (particularly in the United States, where Moe now resides). The writer's own experience ministering among Indonesian Christians in Australia shows that past oppression continues to influence their theology and community practices abroad. Tracing how lived public theology is recontextualized in these diaspora communities could offer a rich avenue for further research and reflection.

4. Conclusion

Beyond the Academy is a vital contribution to public theology, contextual theology, and World Christianity. It calls for theologians, pastors, and scholars to reimagine the sources and methods of theological reflection, to listen deeply to the voices of those on the margins, and to engage the real challenges of life in postcolonial, pluralistic societies. David Thang Moe's work is courageous, thoughtful, and prophetic, a clarion call to theologians everywhere to move beyond the academy and into the lives of those they serve.

For readers seeking a theology that is not only relevant but responsive, one that emerges from the struggles, prayers, and hopes of ordinary believers, *Beyond the Academy* is essential reading.

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Kieko Obuse. *Buddhism and Islam Mutual Engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2025, 303 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-90-04-70454-1.

Any religion—traditional, established, or otherwise—has played a vital role in society from time immemorial. Religion can be a source of mutual engagement or protracted conflict. Either way, religion can have deep influence, impact, and far-reaching consequences in people's and communities' daily lives, larger sociopolitical, economic, and cultural institutions and their policies and programs, perceptions, and representations. Moreover, no religion should be held superior or inferior. Every religion is distinct, beneficial, and beautiful. Ideally, no religion should be in conflict with other religions. However, the world has seen religions clash for various reasons. The efforts to reconcile, dialogue, and mutually engage among religions are intrinsically and essentially a herculean task, responsibility, and calling, which must be promoted at all levels for the common good of people, societies, and communities with grit, understanding, and commitment.

The book—*Buddhism and Islam Mutual Engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan*—is a timely intellectual output highlighting how the two religions (Buddhism and Islam) have made concerted efforts toward reciprocal interactions in the region and Japan. Learning and knowing these endeavors of dialogue between two religions helps to understand how religions have been increasingly confrontational and irreconcilable. But what counts are the potential ways to promote mutual engagements, which constitute the core and crux of the book, which makes it essential reading.

Before discussing the highlights of the book, it is better to have a cursory look at the two religions in the region—Buddhism and Islam in Southeast Asia and Japan.

With an estimated 190–205 million Buddhists spread over Southeast Asia, Buddhism is a major religion in the region. This represents about 35–38 percent of the global Buddhist population. With about 63.75 million Buddhists, or 95 percent of Thailand's population, the country boasts the most Buddhists in the region. Other nations with notable Buddhist

populations where Buddhism is the majority religion are Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos.

On the other hand**,** Buddhism in Japan had about 70.76 million followers in 2022, down from 83.24 million the year before. Estimates from other sources, however, point to a different range of the population identifying as Buddhist—from 46 percent to under 20 percent.

Islam in Southeast Asia**:** With an estimated 242 million followers, or roughly 42 percent of Southeast Asia's population, Islam is the most common religion there. This comes to about 25 percent of all Muslims worldwide. With over 237 million Muslims, Indonesia boasts the highest Muslim population among all the countries; Malaysia comes second with over 19 million.

About 0.28 percent of the total population, the estimated 350,000 Muslim population in Japan as of early 2024, is up from almost 110,000 in 2010 to 230,000 in 2019; this statistic has more than doubled during the past ten years. Rising numbers of foreign Muslim residents, Japanese converts to Islam, and births within the Muslim community help explain this expansion.

The book's introduction focuses on diversity and changes in Buddhist-Muslim engagements, challenges it faces in accompanying the study, a comprehensive approach to Buddhist-Muslims, redefining doctrines and theologies, and the production of difference: mutual perceptions as interpretive possibilities.

The first chapter explores Buddhist-Muslim engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan. It applies categories from the theology of religions to these interactions, examining two types of parallelism, key concepts and doctrines in both Buddhism and Islam, and offering comparative analysis and implications for mutual perceptions. It also discusses the role of holy figures in both traditions—prophets, saints, and bodhisattvas.

The second chapter discusses Buddhas and prophets in the shared history from the early period to modern times, along with various encounters and Muslim and Buddhist writings. The third chapter examines the challenges of pluralism and contemporary dialogue efforts in Buddhist-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Thailand and Malaysia. It highlights key initiatives aimed at fostering interreligious understanding and cooperatio. The fourth chapter illustrates how Southeast Asia provides fertile ground for exploring parallelism and contemporary trends in Buddhist-Muslim engagement. It examines relevant Muslim and Buddhist

writings from both Southeast Asia and Japan, highlighting leading voices in the region—including pioneers of Buddhist parallelism and metaphysical parallelism.

The fifth chapter explains the exoticism of the Asian Brotherhood and Japanese engagements with Islam from the early to the modern age (754-1854), the late colonial period (1854-1912), and the imperialist period (1912-1945). The sixth chapter focuses on the repositioning of Islam in contemporary Japan. It addresses the challenge that parallelism poses to the traditional monotheism-polytheism divide, explores Islam-related incidents in Japan, and examines the discourse of 'othering' through the perspectives of both Japanese and non-Japanese Muslims. The chapter also discusses interreligious dialogues and symposiums, as well as contemporary Muslim and Buddhist writings in Japan, highlighting themes such as emerging forms of parallelism, the development of fully fledged parallelism, and structural parallels in mystical experiences. Finally, the conclusion section is on the potential of parallelism as a method for religious studies.

The author did extensive research spanning over 25 years. Fieldwork with practicing Buddhists and Muslims of vital relevance to the research is especially important for the project since it emphasizes modern trends in Buddhist-Muslim interaction. This makes an interesting and scholarly work. The author has done a great job dealing with the subject matter with scholarly and lucid writing and convincing arguments.

The book is highly recommended to academia and anyone who is interested and passionate about the study of religions, particularly in Buddhist and Muslim interreligious dialogue and conversations in Southeast Asia and Japan. For students, teachers, and scholars of the sociology of religion and theology of religion, the book is essential reading.

After having read the book, one would be fully convinced how the study of religion is a must, and as such, efforts of knowing and understanding the dynamics of dialogue that exist between Buddhism and Islam and mutual engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan—not as binary polarities, but as a promotion of dialogue and interreligious conversations that will help build bridges across the region. Consequently, such endeavors potentially contribute to promoting peace, solidarity, and common good that constitute the central tenets of any religion, notably Buddhism and Islam. The book in that same direction is noteworthy.

The second advantage of reading this book is that, although doubts and perceptions about Buddhist-Muslim engagement in Southeast Asia and

Japan may seem irreconcilable, open and thoughtful discussion can create valuable opportunities for learning and cultivating a growth mindset in understanding these interactions.

The academic contribution of the work is commendable, as it significantly enhances awareness of Buddhist-Muslim engagement in the aforementioned regions. Drawing on two decades of rigorous research, careful observation, and meaningful interactions with both scholars and practitioners—including Buddhists, Muslims, non-Buddhists, and non-Muslims—the author presents a well-grounded and insightful study. This sustained scholarly effort offers a valuable foundation for future research, both by the author and by others working in the field.

That said, the book could benefit from certain improvements. Specifically, it would be enriched by an examination of how other religious traditions present in Southeast Asia and Japan may either support or impede Buddhist-Muslim engagement. Furthermore, the inclusion of non-religious factors—such as political, economic, or sociocultural influences—that either facilitate or hinder such interactions would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Additionally, the book would be strengthened by a clearer articulation of the specific insights, positive developments, and challenges emerging from Buddhist-Muslim interactions in individual countries within Southeast Asia and Japan. It should also address how these country-specific experiences might inform or be adapted to other contexts—whether in regions where Buddhism and Islam are dominant or where they exist as minority traditions. Such an approach would significantly enhance the scholarly discourse on Buddhist-Muslim engagement and promote broader conversations aimed at fostering mutual understanding and the common good among researchers and practitioners alike.

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