

Contested social representations of a religious ritual in the Philippines: Text mining online discourses on the *Traslación*

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Abstract

The article examines the production of contested social representations of a Philippine religious ritual in online spaces using a mixed methods approach to semantic network analysis. Comments from the online media coverage of the 2019 *Traslación* were mined from the Facebook pages of the eight most popular Philippine media outlets. A semantic network consisting of collocation of frequently used words was generated using R and Gephi. Network analysis produced three word clusters highlighting bifurcations linguistically, in the use of Filipino or English, and substantively, in contested representations. Analysis of these themes reveals the centrality of discourses reifying the ritual as authentic expressions of faith. A minority of discourses reflect criticisms of the *Traslación* as idolatry. This reflects the dichotomy of discourses in the *Traslación* literature. The research demonstrates the relevance of social computing in the analysis of meanings of cultural phenomena across large populations.

Keywords: *Traslación*, Black Nazarene, Philippine ritual, social representations, semantic network analysis

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Religious icons and images abound in Philippine culture. Arguably the most prominent and popular object of devotion among these is the *Poong Itim na Nazareno* or the Black Nazarene.¹ The annual *Traslación*, the ritual procession of the Black Nazarene held every January in Manila, sees hundreds of thousands of devotees in the procession proper and millions more taking part in related events. The prominent place in Philippine society's cultural consciousness of both the image and the ritual surrounding it subjects them to broad and varied meanings. These socially constructed representations are differentiated, and intersect, contradict, and contest with one another.

For decades, varying discursive representations of the ritual have been proposed by academics in scholarly literature. Now, the ubiquity of social media has expanded the space for engaging with the ritual, and with it the engagement between these representations. Aided by quantitative text mining and qualitative content analysis, we present a novel approach to the study of these representations. Analyzing the discourses through which these representations are expressed online, the research illustrates the intersections and cleavages of the *Traslación* ritual's social construction among the online public. This study attempts to use novel methodologies to answer the question: What social representations about the *Traslación* are produced in discursive practices online?

Our argumentative storyline unfolds thus. First, we introduce the Black Nazarene and the *Traslación* ritual in their historical and cultural contexts. Then, the concept of social representations is explored, emphasizing its relation with discourse and demonstrating its appropriateness as a framework for exploring the *Traslación*. We then trace the discursive representations constructed around the *Traslación* ritual, arguing that discourses that have long been confined to religious and academic spaces have been expanded through social media. We introduce new methods to explore the social representations constructed in this new space. Finally, we apply the methods to instances on Facebook of the online discourse produced around the 2019 *Traslación* ritual.

The Black Nazarene and the *Traslación*

The Black Nazarene is a life-size statue of Jesus Christ whose distinguishing feature is its dark-skinned appearance. Brought to the Philippines by Augustinian Recollects via the galleon trade from Mexico (Chupungco, 2006, p. 674), the image, fondly called *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno* (Our Father Jesus of Nazareth) by devotees, is regarded as one of the most significant religious artifacts in the Philippines. The wooden icon depicts a dark-skinned Christ, crowned in thorns, and garbed in a maroon robe embossed with gold threads, carrying a cross on the way to Calvary. It was

presented to the Quiapo Church in Manila in 1787 and has remained there since. Annually, its immense popularity draws hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of devotees who participate in the image's associated rituals. It has also turned Quiapo into a major site of pilgrimage for the country (Zialcita, 2013, p. 67).

Devotion to the icon cuts across social, economic, gender, age, and personal dimensions, highlighting its prevalence in Philippine society (Zialcita, 2013; Bonilla, 2006, p. 111). It involves various practices of veneration, including treading on one's knees on the nave and the aisles of the church, kissing and wiping the sacred image, walking barefoot during festivities, and vigorously waving handkerchiefs in the air to herald icon's coming (Bonilla, 2006, p. 111). But foremost among these devotions is participation in the annual *Traslación*, a procession commemorating the transfer of the image from the walled city of Intramuros to its current location in Quiapo. Every 9th of January, hundreds of thousands of devotees flock to the streets of Manila to participate in the ritual. Clothed in maroon and often barefoot, these devotees throng around the Black Nazarene and densely pack the streets. They follow the *andas*, the carriage upon which the image rides, as it is pulled along the designated route with ropes by some devotees. Adherents of the Nazarene throw towels to the guardians of the image, the *Hijos del Nazareno* (Sons of the Nazarene), riding on the *andas* who then wipe the cloth on the statue before handing them back to the crowd. Some devotees even attempt to climb the float to kiss the statue's feet or wipe their handkerchief on the image. They all fervently believe that these pieces of cloth are imbued with powers that cure afflictions and malignancies. While millions attend masses and ceremonies in the days leading up to the *Traslación*, this "torrent of human bodies" (Zialcita, 2013, p. 67) is the scene most associated with the Nazareno ritual.

The image of the maroon-clad masses around the Nazareno encapsulates the historical and cultural cachet that the *Traslación* holds. The ritual's place in the collective Philippine imaginary invites the analysis of its multitude of representations across Philippine society. In this paper, we use the lens of social representations theory to study the varied representations of the *Traslación* and its manifestations in discourse.

Social representations and discursive constructions

The foundational idea of the theory of social representations is that people understand social phenomena through representations. These representations are fostered through interactions with other individuals and groups, and are tested and changed through interactions with those who express different representations. The French social psychologist

Serge Moscovici (1988) developed the concept of social representation and defined it as “the contents of everyday thinking and the stock of ideas that gives coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create as spontaneously as we breathe” (p. 214). Defined more briefly, these are “shared knowledge about a social object” (Montiel et al., 2012, p. 38).

The “social” aspect of the theory of social representations emphasizes the shared nature of representations across individuals. People operate within social groups that are founded on a shared and mutually constructed knowledge. This social grouping instills feelings of shared connection and security, leading to cohesion based on shared beliefs. Norms and actions are fostered within groups based on these social representations. Social representations become psychological realities and inform the behaviors of the group (Montiel et al., 2012), and their dissemination through group actions becomes especially clear when interacting with other groups whose behaviors are informed by different shared beliefs. When social groups engage one another, they are involved in dynamic processes of contentions and reformulations.

Because social representations are expressed through group-specific forms of communication, we can say that these dynamic processes are mediated through contestations of discourse. Discourse, understood as the use of language to articulate reality, constitutes the process that constructs social representations. Language mediates how individuals and groups make sense of reality; an act of discourse is therefore an act of representing an object. Discursive processes are also the means to express, transfer, and contest different social representations among different groups (Zbróg, 2019). In a context involving multiple groups contesting and conflicting, discourse serves as the arena in which inter-group conflicts play out and are resolved. Social representations are therefore “a product of discourse: it is through communication that representations emerge in the collective consciousness and are reproduced” (Moscovici, qtd. in Zbróg, 2019, p. 203).

Social representations in religious phenomena

The social representations framework is apt for the study of religion as well because like with every other social object, people socially construct their knowledge of religious phenomena. Sartawi (2015, p. 349) even suggests that religious knowledge are not only themselves social representations, but also “a molder, producer and collection of social representations.”

Groups with shared religious representations are often identified as part of a certain religious group, sect, or collective, and are labelled appropriately. These groups are often highly stable because of the nature

of the reinforcement of shared knowledge, which is deeply ingrained, affixed with moral value, and visibly enacted. Religious objects are also highly contentious and invite competing meanings. Again, because of the nature of religious action, contestations and engagements between different groups and their representations are common and often explicit. Religious knowledge often encounters challenges and new perspectives, lending more importance to social representations and their function for adaptation and group identity. The object of this study is rife with contested knowledge and elaborations of group positions, and thus lends itself very well for analysis using social representations.

Discourse has a doubly important role in the context of religious phenomena and their meanings. The nature of religious language involves “the relations among experience, concrete practices, and what is culturally construed to lie beyond ordinary experience” (Keane, 1997, p. 48). Religious discourse not only reflects the social representation itself but is also “deeply implicated with underlying assumptions about the human subject, divine beings, and the ways their capacities and agencies differ” (Keane, 1997, p. 49). In other words, religious discourse involves not only the shared knowledge of a particular religious object but also the speaker’s (and by extension their group’s) most fundamental assumptions and core beliefs. This is especially true in the context of religious debate because the need to differentiate is greater, as is the need to reflexively adapt to new knowledge.

Idolatry and authenticity as representations of the Traslación

How, then, can the framework of social representations read the specific religious object of the Traslación? We already established the constitutive interplay between social representations and discourse. We now need to examine how the Traslación has been written about. Identifying the discourses made around the Traslación is key to understanding its social representations. In the following discussion, we trace the discourses surrounding the ritual and the contestations between these discourses. In doing so, we emphasize that these discourses were made from positions and within spaces of authority, particularly religious and academic.

A phenomenon as notable as the Traslación naturally invites discourse at various levels. Mainstream media outlets present a facet of this discourse. Aside from reports on security measures, attendees’ head count, and tragedies in its aftermath, media coverage of the Traslación also includes the popular debate between those who see the Traslación as a genuine expression of faith and devotion and those who criticize it as inauthentic, fanatical, or idolatrous². The authors of these articles and features are often religious authorities or academics involved in studies of religion.

The debates on idolatry and authenticity have long been played out in both religious and academic discourses, as well as in the intersection of the two. Early works on the *Traslación* ritual were assessments made with pastoral considerations (Cornelio, 2014, p. 475-476), and in the context of the faith-versus-fanaticism debate, they sided with the latter. The work of Jesuit priests Jaime Bulatao (1965) and Vitaliano Gorospe (1966) viewed rituals like the *Traslación* as reflections of a moral paucity that ought to be addressed evangelically. The latter described the procession as a sign of religious immaturity because of the focus on “merely external rituals which often verge on the fanatical” (p. 201).

Following an “analytical break” in the 1970s (Cornelio, 2014, p. 478), more systematic sociological and anthropological lenses were used in secular studies of popular religion. These studies focused on understanding Catholicism in the Philippines as a social phenomenon. The scholarship acknowledged the nature of the religious worldview in Philippine Catholicism as one that transcends formal orthodoxy. Theoretical debates revolved around the specific character of the worldview, as well as the degree of influence between the indigenous traditions in pre-Hispanic Philippines and the urban tradition brought by colonizers. This led to differences in the labeling of this phenomenon, varying from folk religion to popular religiosity to religious syncretism.

Among the developments that came with this analytical turn is the recognition of the Philippine Catholic worldview’s historical provenance in the process of indigenization. Anthropologist Niels Mulder (1992) described this process as localization, in which foreign concepts “find a local root, a native stem onto which they can be grafted. It is because of this native life-blood that they can blossom and bloom” (p. 240). As the anthropologist Felipe Landa Jocano (1967) explains, foreign introductions such as religious beliefs are not accepted at face value but are “modified to suit one’s cultural ways of believing and doing things before acceptance is made,” (p. 43), and that central to Philippine religious life is the pervasive “belief that any man (a farmer or employee) to be successful ... must square accounts with the spirits or saints by performing the necessary rites and ceremonies” (p. 43). This reflects an underlying worldview which sees that “the individual being is but a small part of a wider natural-social universe inhabited largely by spirits and saints, and [that] the social prescription for individual human action is felt to come from metaphysical demands” (p. 43). Subsequent studies of religious rituals have used this framework to investigate the social reasoning behind these spiritual acts.³ Works on the devotion to the Black Nazarene in this mold include Mercado’s (1976), which explained devotion as Oriental rationality and Matienzo’s (1988) functionalist study.

Contemporary scholarship on the *Traslación* generally has a shared assumption that religious rituals have a social ‘rationality,’ even as they proceed with different approaches. Some have used philosophical lenses to understand the rite.⁴ Others are anthropological and sociological works focusing on actors and their meaning-making. These studies used ethnographic methods to explore how devotees understand the ritual and locate themselves. These works have explored themes such as space (Aguinaldo, 2002), gender and masculinity (Tremlett, 2006; Austria, 2011), identity (Zialcita, 2016), politics (Calano, 2015), and aesthetics (Bonilla, 2006). Teresita Obusan (2008) surveyed 110 participants of the *Traslación* for similar purposes. These studies found that the Black Nazarene and the *Traslación* ritual embody several representations such as total hope, faith, savior, and gratitude, thanksgiving, and sacrifice.

The two main social representations that emerge from discourses on the *Traslación*, the ritual as idolatry and the ritual as authentic expression of faith, are well-established. Similarly, the groups that articulate these discourses are long-established institutions that come from a position of discursive authority: mass media, religious figures, and academics. As such, the conflicts between representations are played out in their respective authoritative spaces, as we see, for example, in the debates in the academe.

Less attention has been given to the discourses and representations made outside of these spaces. But with the ubiquity of social media use in the country, the online space is likely to house most of the discourses on the *Traslación*. This paper is an initial contribution to the study of religion in the online public sphere by looking at the *Traslación* through articulations and contestations made through social media, and the social representations that these constitute.

Facebook and mediatization in religious discourse

Studying online spaces works to move away from the prevalent focus on academic discourses and representations. Recognizing that social media is the stage for religious expressions at a massive scale (Pihlaja, 2018), the study also serves to expand the common scope of inquiry. The nature of prevalent ethnographic approaches limits studies to small populations. However, millions more participate not physically but discursively online. Social media, particularly the comment sections, are the site of debates and contestations that produce different representations of the *Traslación*. This discursive space of social media was mined and analyzed to unravel these contested representations.

How did we go about choosing which data to mine and analyze and which ones to filter out? Here the consideration was to find arenas or spaces

in social media that are more or less reflective of the public sphere and where discourses among different segments of the population may emerge. This was done because it is in social mediation, the communicative and social practices of the public sphere, where social representations emerge. Spaces such as these constitute “the terrain in which they are generated, crystallised and eventually transformed” (Jovchelovitch, 1995, p. 98). Moreover, such arenas must be able to engender and spark discourses on the subject to draw out these representations.

McLuhan’s (1964) famous aphorism tells us that the medium is the message. Therefore, just as important as the discourse itself is the space in which the discourse occurs. Social media has become a potent discursive space where social representations of phenomena in the public sphere can be inductively studied. The concept of mediatization can be usefully deployed in relation to the local *Traslación* phenomenon. This concept involves the relatively intuitive idea that media in various forms affect religious practice through “[changing] the very ideas and authority of religious institutions and alter the ways in which people interact with each other when dealing with religious issues” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 11) but nonetheless provides a clear frame for looking into the changes in religious practices that arise from the new space of social media. The effect of mediatization is seen in religion specifically in changes “in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 12). Another layer of complexity is the decentralized nature of the internet as a medium, as it “offers more direct user involvement and interaction and engages lots of other voices than those of the traditional mass media” (Fischer-Nielsen, 2012, p. 46).

Hjarvard (2008) posits that the process of mediatization is facilitated through “banal” religious representations, “a series of experiences and representations that may have no, or only a limited, relationship with the institutionalized religions” (p. 16). In relation to this, studies that use the mediatization framework often attribute to the mediatization process a weakening of religious authority. Fakhuroji (2015) describes mediatization as “causing a shift in the role of religious leaders as the religious authorities” (p. 2013). Faimau and Behrens (2016) describe exactly this effect on religious Facebook groups. These conclusions seem to suggest that mediatization in religion has an effect of distancing or disembedding religious practice from traditional theological aspects. There is a substantial and expanding body of work that looks into such phenomena. The foundational works in this field include Hjarvard (2008) and Fischer-Nielsen (2012) and focus on the experiences of Nordic countries. Such works often view new mediatized spaces as sites of tension between the old religious institutions and the

growing social force of secularization. In a way, digital spaces serve as a microcosmic arena of broader societal contestations.

More relevant to the subject of our study are the works that look at religion and media in global south contexts. In such cases, the phenomenon of secularization is less pertinent. Instead, digital media is seen with an “evangelical” role, a way to disseminate and maintain religious ties to a population that is increasingly more reachable digitally. This extends literally in some cases, as in the mediatization of practices to accommodate diasporic populations (Setianto, 2015). Cases in Africa, where widespread adoption of social media is more recent, are interesting. Studies of Facebook as sites of religious interaction in Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2013) and Botswana (Faimau and Behrens, 2016) have found not only the intended effects such as fostering a broader religious community and forging of a new digital religious identity but also consequences such as a reconfiguration of religious authority owing to the multiplicity of discursive interpretations allowed by the medium.

This multiplicity is indeed the hallmark of digital space, particularly of Facebook. This study is interested in determining if the effects of mediatization discussed above can also be observed in the discourses surrounding the local *Traslación* ritual. As such, and in line with modern developments in studies of religious discourse (Wuthnow, 2011, p. 14), the study used quantitative and computational methods to complement qualitative analysis.

Methods: Analyzing social representations from big data

We employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how the *Traslación* ritual is socially represented in online discourse. Utilizing semantic network analysis, we quantitatively derived the relationships between salient words from our data corpus. Subsequently, we implemented qualitative content analysis to give contextual meaning to our computationally-derived findings. In this section, we explicate our data collection, cleaning, and analysis procedures.

Data collection

To build our data corpus, we collected all posts related to the *Traslación* from 8 to 10 January 2019 from the pages of the eight most popular Philippine media outlets on Facebook (ABS-CBN News, GMA News, Inquirer.net, Rappler, News5, Manila Bulletin, CNN Philippines, and Philippine Star). The collection period spanned the eve of the 2019 *Traslación* until its culmination. Using keywords such as *Nazarene*, *Nazareno*, *Traslación*, and *Quiapo*, we generated a collection of 744 posts. Afterward, we used the data

collection software Facepager to extract all comments from the posts in our database. This generated a corpus of 156,997 comments.

Data cleaning

There are two main limitations in cleaning text data in Filipino and other Philippine languages. First, the absence of comprehensive linguistic stemmers that can break down the inflected forms of words into their base form impedes the analysis of salient themes. An example of a stemming problem is finding a way to transform the variant forms (e.g. past tense *nagbigay* [gave], present tense *nagbibigay* [giving], future tense *magbibigay* [will give]) of the Tagalog word for 'to give' into its singular base form *bigay*. Without a way to stem the words, we cannot fully quantify their importance in the corpus. Second, the unavailability of comprehensive lists of unmeaningful Filipino stopwords such as prepositions, conjunctions, and markers tend to muddle the analysis because of their sheer abundance across the corpus.

To mitigate these constraints, we manually created a thesaurus to facilitate data cleaning. We used the tidytext package in the data analysis software R to tokenize or break down the comments into words. Afterwards, we generated a table consisting of words and their respective frequency counts to create a thesaurus or a collection of all words used in the comments. We manually stemmed and tagged the most frequent words ($n > 30$) in the thesaurus. We subsequently mutated our original database of comments to reflect the stemmed forms and removed the tagged stopwords. Because we wanted to look at salient utterances that constitute social representations, we filtered the cleaned dataset and retained the salient words ($n > 400$). Doing these preprocessing steps enabled us to minimize noise and properly quantify meaningful words for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis

Semantic network generation. The first step in our analysis procedure involved generating the semantic network. Semantic networks are networks composed of saliently used words in a textual corpus and the connections between them. This method is used to explore and visualize hidden semantic structures in text data. It has been thoroughly researched in scholarly literature, referred to as maps (Carley, 1997) or network text analysis (Carley, 1997; Diesner & Carley, 2005), but generally referred to as semantic networks (Krippendorff, 2004; Drieger, 2013; Yoo, et al., 2019) by scholars.

A semantic network is constructed by creating a co-occurrence matrix that indicates the number of times a pair of words appear in the same sentence, line, paragraph, or document. This is then transformed

into a visual network where nodes constitute unique words in the text and edges compose the weighted co-occurrence between words in the corpus. Processing textual data into a network enables us to assess and discover the relational properties of words by looking at various features such as clustering behavior and the discursive centrality of words (Yoo et al., 2019). This method is useful for the analysis of social representations in text because it allows us to examine the linguistic productions that constitute and disseminate social representations in the public sphere. Moreover, it permits us to capture these linguistic markers while preserving the naturalness of local talk.

To generate the semantic network, we used the *widyr* package in R to calculate word collocation values. Collocation refers to the number of times each pair of words appear together within a comment. Salient pairs with a collocation value of more than 400 constituted the edges or links of our network. We determined this value through an iterative approach of generating networks using variations of minimum collocation values. Through this iterative process, we observed that setting the minimum collocation value to greater than 400 enabled us to unravel salient utterances while maintaining the interpretability of the network.

After calculating the collocation values, we exported the data from R and imported it to Gephi, a network analysis and visualization software. We sized the nodes based on their frequency of use in the data corpus. We weighted the width of the edges based on the collocation value between the two words that they connect. A thicker edge corresponds to a larger collocation value.

Mixed methods analysis. After generating the network, we quantitatively identified word clusters and visualized the network using Gephi. To further give nuance to the network, we undertook linguistic and qualitative content analysis. This involved tagging words based on their language and theme to identify subclusters of words that constitute social representations. To guide the process of tagging, we iteratively consulted and referred to our original database of comments. This was done in order to properly contextualize how these words are discursively connected in natural utterances to represent the ritual. Subsequently, we referred back to our semantic network to analyze network characteristics based on our linguistic and content analysis. We found that this approach enabled us to explain the structure of the discourse better rather than solely relying on the quantitative findings of our research.

Results

Figure 1 shows the relationships among words used in online discussions about the Traslación. The semantic network consists of 136 nodes and 1,304 edges with the size of the nodes corresponding to their salience in the corpus and the thickness of the edges reflecting collocation values. To preserve the naturalness of domestic talk in our analysis, we opted to retain words in the original language used. Understandably, the figures contain words that are only understandable to Filipinos. To aid readers, we explain the meaning of these words in prose. Moreover, we include translations for the non-english words in the Appendix section of this paper.

Using Gephi, we identified three quantitatively-defined clusters segmented by color and separating lines. Cluster 1 is colored red and contains 26.47% of the nodes in the network. The first cluster consists of words related to religious belief such as catholic (*katoliko*), religion (*relihiyon*), belief (*paniniwala*), and bible (*bibliya*). Cluster 2 is colored blue and contains 57.35% of the nodes. Evidently, the cluster encompasses the majority of the nodes across the network. It includes words related to healing (*galing*), guidance (*gabay*), and gratitude or show of thanks (*salamat*). We can also see the salience of words such as *nazareno*, *amen*, and *poon* (lord) in the second cluster of words. Lastly, cluster 3 is colored green and contains 16.18% or the least amount of nodes. The third cluster comprises words related to *family*, gratitude (*thank*), and blessing (*bles*).

Through this superficial analysis, we can already derive some of the themes talked about in discussions on the Traslación. However, our semantic network still remained incoherent at a deeper level. Even though we were able to extract some meaning from the words contained in each cluster, we still lacked information about their contextual use in utterances. Moreover, we also did not know why the words in the network were clustered that way. Hence, we subsequently undertook linguistic and content analyses to further understand the structure of discussions online.

Linguistic analysis: Linguistic bifurcation in discursive structure

To further our understanding of the discourse's structure, we undertook a linguistic analysis of the semantic network. This involved tagging the words based on their language and referring back to our network. Our results showed that the semantic network is linguistically bifurcated with words computationally clustered based on the language used. Figure 2 visualizes the linguistic bifurcation of the semantic network. The majority (80.88%) of the nodes in the network are in Filipino as indicated by the blue colored words. On the other hand, only 19.12% of the nodes are in English, highlighted in green in the graph.

Table 1. Share of Nodes and Centrality Rank of the Social Representations

Social Representation/Node Type	Share of Nodes (%)	Centrality Ranking by Mean Weighted Degree (1 highest - 10 lowest)
Pronoun	20.59%	3
Idolatry and False Belief	15.44%	9
Petition and Blessing	14.71%	5
Health and Protection	12.50%	7
Help and Guidance	8.82%	6
Gratitude and Praise	8.09%	2
Family	7.35%	4
Deity	7.35%	1
Undisciplined Devotees	3.68%	10
Forgiveness	1.47%	8

Our results show that the meaning of the ritual is discursively contested, reflected in the substantive bifurcation of the network. Representations are fractured into two main categories: (i) clusters 2 and 3 contain representations that recognize the authenticity of the ritual as an act of faith and (ii) cluster 1 consists of representations that contest the ritual's legitimacy by portraying it as a practice of idolatry. Here, we explain these representations and contextualize their use in the comments.

Representations reifying authenticity. Among the representations that reify the authenticity of the ritual, *petition and blessing* (colored green in Figure 3) contains the most number of nodes, constituting 14.71%. Comments that portray this representation are often uttered in the form of petitions asking for the fulfillment of prayers (*dinggin ang dalangin*), realization of wishes (*tuparin ang hiling*), bestowal of blessings (*ipagkaloob/ibigay ang biyaya/blessing*), and even the provision of employment (*ipagkaloob ang trabaho*). In this vein, the ritual is represented as an avenue for supplication to the divine for the realization of requests.

This is followed by utterances involving *health and protection* (colored blue in Figure 3), accounting for 12.50% of the nodes. Comments revolve around narratives imploring God for healing (*pagalingin ang sakit/karamdaman*) and protection from illnesses (*ilayo sa sakit/karamdaman; good health*), strengthening of the body (*palakasin ang katawan*), and safeguarding from harm (*ingatan; iligtas at ilayo sa kapahamakan/masama*).

Compared to the first two representations reifying the ritual, the last four representations constitute a lesser number of nodes. Comments

involving *help and guidance* (colored orange in Figure 3, 8.82% of nodes) ask for God's help in confronting tribulations (*tulongan sa pagsubok/problema*) and continued guidance in everyday life (*lagi/patuloy na gabayan at patnubayan sa araw-araw; please guide*). Expressions of *gratitude and praise* (colored red in Figure 3, 8.09% of nodes) are uttered as declarations of thanks (*tanggapin ang pasasalamat; maraming salamat sa lahat*) and exaltation (*happy fiesta; viva mahal na nazareno; tanggapin mo ang pagpapala*) to the divine. The *familial* (colored purple in Figure 3, 7.35% of nodes) representation highlights the locus of these utterances. Comments are often dedicated to family members (*mahal sa buhay; buong pamilya; family*) such as children (*anak*), spouses (*asawa*), siblings (*kapatid*), and grandchildren (*apo*). God is also often referred to using the familial title of a father (*ama; padre*). Lastly, utterances pleading for *forgiveness* (colored light yellow in Figure 3, 1.47% of nodes) from sins (*patawarin ang kasalanan*) constitute the least amount of nodes.

Representations contesting legitimacy. Although representations challenging the ritual's legitimacy are marginal relative to representations reifying the ritual, these antagonistic representations still occupy a significant space in the semantic network. As seen in Figure 3, cluster 1 consists exclusively of words related to representations that contest the ritual's meaning. Utterances framing the ritual as a form of *idolatry and false belief* (colored grey in Figure 3) contains 15.44% of the nodes in the network. It is the representation that encompasses the most number of nodes in the semantic network. Comments invoking this representation assert that Catholics (*katoliko*) are practicing a false and idolatrous religion (*hindi tunay na relihiyon/pananampalataya/paniniwala*) because they are worshipping a man-made, wooden statue (*sumasamba sa gawa ng tao/rebulto/kahoy*) through the ritual. Instead, devotees are implored to read the truth in the Bible (*basahin ang salita ng katotohanan sa bibliya*). The last representation criticizes *devotees as undisciplined* (colored cyan in Figure 3, 3.68% of nodes). Particularly, comments admonish devotees (*deboto*) for lacking respect (*walang respeto*) and discipline (*walang disiplina*) due to the large volume of garbage (*basura*) left on the streets after the procession.

Discursive centrality of representations. As elucidated in the previous subsections, representations contesting the legitimacy of the ritual constitute a significant proportion of the nodes in the network. In particular, we found that the representation of *idolatry and false belief* comprise the most nodes. While proportion values enable us to assess which representations constitute the most nodes in the semantic network, it does not necessarily mean that they are the most influential. To identify which among the representations are prominent in discussions, we calculated the

centrality values of the representations in our semantic network.

To do so, we first calculated the weighted degree centrality of all nodes in the network, which corresponds to the total number of edges that a node has weighted based on the strength of each edge. As indicated in the methods section, we used word collocation values to indicate edge weights in the semantic network. This means that as the number and strength of connections to a node increases, the higher its centrality value is. After getting the weighted degree centrality of all nodes, we calculated the mean centrality of nodes in each social representation or category. We then ranked them from highest to lowest in Table 1.

We found that the top six representations all reify the authenticity of the ritual. The most central representation is *gratitude and praise*, followed by *family, petition and blessing, help and guidance, health and protection, and forgiveness*. Interestingly, even though the representation of *idolatry and false belief* constituted the most number of nodes, it was the second to the last in terms of centrality. This is followed by the representation framing *devotees as undisciplined*. The results indicate that antagonistic representations that contest the ritual still remain marginal in online discussions on the Traslación despite the number of nodes that they constitute.

Discussion

Our results show that the semantic network is linguistically and substantively bifurcated in structure. Linguistic bifurcation indicates the division of the network into clusters of Filipino (clusters 1 and 2) and English (cluster 3) words. Substantive bifurcation points to the division of words into clusters of representations that reify the ritual (clusters 2 and 3) and clusters that contest its legitimacy (cluster 1). We also found that there are eight main social representations in online discussions about the Traslación. Representations reifying the ritual are *petition and blessing; health and protection; help and guidance; gratitude and praise; family; and forgiveness*. Conversely, representations that contest the ritual's legitimacy are *idolatry and false belief; and undisciplined devotees*. Moreover, our results indicate that even though representations that contest the ritual contain a significant amount of the nodes in the semantic network, they remain marginally influential in discussions relative to representations that reify the ritual.

Methodological contributions

In terms of methodological contributions, the study illustrates how methods from allied fields such as linguistics, computer science, and communication can inform approaches towards research on cultural

practices. Our research utilized a discursive approach to the study of religious rituals, examining online talk as constitutive in shaping a ritual's meaning in society. Past studies on Philippine rituals and practices have depended primarily on interviews and surveys (Obusan, 2008), qualitative readings (Aguinaldo, 2002), and historical analysis (Zialcita, 2013) in their methodological approach. By leveraging computational approaches and big data, we unraveled novel insights on how the significance and meaning of centuries-old rituals, practices, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage are shaped, reified, and contested in the societies where these are embedded.

Appropriating methods from natural language processing, we utilized semantic network analysis to answer the social science question we posed. Semantic network analysis provides a novel and precise way to extract themes and representations from text data by enabling us to quantify and visualize the discursive structure of online discussions. Moreover, it enables us to retain natural talk by ensuring that analysis reflects and preserves the words invoked in actual utterances. The method also enables us to identify discursively central words or clusters. The utility of the method is that it produces a quantification and visualization of the discourses of online comments. This result can be contextualized through qualitative means. By complementing the use of semantic networks with content analysis, we are able to provide context and nuance to our computational findings. Lastly, this approach also enabled us to limit bias and subjectivity in analyzing text. By first quantitatively modeling the discursive structure of the text then using it as a basis for qualitative analysis, we gained better control over subjective bias in terms of extracting themes from the data.

Theoretical contributions on the study of folk Catholicism in the Philippines

The findings of the study contribute to the understanding of a religious ritual as a social phenomenon by providing an account of its social aspects: its socially constructed meanings, the discursive medium through which these meanings are expressed, and the socially plural space in which these meanings are made. Although we have previously noted the limited scope of the spaces from which previous discourses about the *Traslación* are found, this corpus still provides a robust account of the ritual and its myriad meanings.

In particular, we found it interesting that contemporary discourses in virtual space follow the contours of the debate in past literature. This partially confirms the persistence of these representations and meanings in society. The data also seem to reflect other findings in literature. Similarly,

we observe in our analysis the prominence of discourses recognizing the legitimacy of the *Traslación*, as nearly three-quarters of the nodes that express social representations relate positively to the ritual. We also found the representations that negatively relate to the ritual to be the least central among the social representations, and this marginality also reflects the marginality of that position in the literature.

Several themes that often emerged in the literature, such as hope, faith, gratitude and thanksgiving, salvation, and sacrifice, were also the most prominent social representations to emerge in our analysis. Our findings seem to support Jocano's (1967) conception of the social nature of belief in the Philippines, which has informed subsequent works on religious rituals. Representations concerning expressions of gratitude were most central among social representations, while those petitioning or asking for blessings and those concerned with health and well-being comprised the biggest shares of nodes.

Our analysis also identified social representations that were not thematically prominent in the literature. Discourses around families proved to be the second-most central among social representations. These discourses either identified family members as subjects of prayer and petition, or invoked the name of the divine in familial terms. Neither of these were well-discussed in the literature, possibly owing to its analytical focus on individual meaning-making.

However, while we observed that our data reflects some of the elements of the ideological dichotomy that exist in literature, we also caution against absolutely thinking of these representations in dichotomous terms. As reflected in our study, meanings and representations surrounding religious rituals are complex and nuanced. Moreover, they are embedded in continuing processes of contestation and reformulation. This gives rise to possibilities for intersection and transformation among representations, highlighting the importance of continued attention in studying religious rituals among scholars.

The analysis of the linguistic composition of discourses also adds to the theoretical understanding of religion. The results presented in this paper closely represent the linguistic composition of popular discourse. Previous works have approached language in religious discourses either through English translations or through exact representations of works in the original Filipino (as in Obusan, 2008). The results show that religious discourses have a more complex linguistic profile showing the predominance of Filipino use and a minority in English. The analysis shows that usage of English was in utterances about family, gratitude, and blessing. Our analysis also indicates little, if any, code-switching. The study of language use and language choice

in religious contexts is a vibrant field of research (Keane, 1997; Spolsky, 2003), but has not been well-explored in Philippine scholarship. We believe that our analysis, though not exhaustive, makes a contribution towards this approach.

Mediatization of religion as a global phenomenon

While the study explored a local cultural practice, it is important to situate it as part of a relatively recent and growing body of scholarship on discourses of religious expression that take place in mediatized environments. The focus on what Pihlaja (2018) calls 'religious talk online' allowed the study to explore a new space beyond the traditional spaces studied in conventional works on religion and its social aspects, as well as sharply expanding the amount of people and discourses studied, from the handful allowed in ethnographic studies to the tens of thousands that this study was able to analyze.

Moreover, we are able to assert that online space is as significant a site of religious experience as any other, and that online interactions constitute a significant part of the lived experience of religion. The significance of social media as a space for religious experience and practice is evident in the multitude of meanings that we discussed in this work. We find that mediatization in this case does not affect the relation between traditional religious principles and religious practices but instead reflects and even amplifies the plurality of expressions of religion that already exist. This resonates with similar studies on the effects of mediatized religion in the global south in comparison to observed secularization in the global north. However, we caution against generalizations because of the culturally and historically contingent nature of religious practices.

In all, this research uses new methods to explore new dimensions and, consequently, new understandings to the study of Philippine religion and religious experiences. The idea of contestations in religious experiences is well-established, especially in the discourses of authenticity and idolatry. We were able to demonstrate that this dynamic can also be observed in the case of online discourses of the *Traslación*. We were also able to demonstrate how this dynamic plays out in a space of public discourse: how religious utterances are presented, how meaning is created from such utterances, through what medium public discourses occur, how contested representations are formed, and how these can possibly intersect, all of which paint a complex portrait of contemporary Philippine religiosity. This research is an initial foray into the study of online interactions and experiences as part of religious life, which we hope to be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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Notes

¹ The other contender for the most recognizable religious image, as well as the one with the most devotees, is the Santo Niño or the Child Jesus (Chupungco, 2006, p. 674).

² A cursory look at the headlines from some major news outlets shows this debate starkly. ABS-CBN News featured both “Black Nazarene devotion: Faith or fanaticism?” and “Black Nazarene devotion: Deep faith or ‘idolatry?’”; CNN Philippines had “Faith or fanaticism? Why the Black Nazarene procession continues to draw millions of devotees”; online news site Rappler published “Devotion or fanaticism? Why devotees sacrifice for Black Nazarene”; Business World had the highly similar “Devotion or fanaticism?: Black Nazarene continues to draw Catholics”; and the Philippine Daily Inquirer quoted from defenders of the ritual with “Quiapo priest: Filipino devotion to Black Nazarene not idolatry” and “Tagle defends Nazarene crowds: Not fanatics but forces of faith”.

³ Works illustrative of this framework include Zialcita’s (1986) study on popular interpretations of the passion of Christ; Tiatco & Bonifacio-Ramolete’s (2008) reading of crucifixions as panata; and MacDonald’s (2004) analysis comparing the veneration of saints to precolonial polytheistic worship.

⁴ The *Traslación* has been read through the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard (Matienzo, 2016), Friedrich Nietzsche (Pasco, 2015, p. 69-72), and Jean-Luc Marion (Kahambing, 2019).

Appendix

Node Table of the Semantic Network

Word	Translation	Language	Theme
diyos	god	filipino	deity
hesus	jesus	filipino	deity
itim	black	filipino	deity
nazareno	nazarene	filipino	deity
panginoon	lord	filipino	deity
poon	lord	filipino	deity
senyor	lord	filipino	deity
god	god	english	deity
jesus	jesus	english	deity
lord	lord	english	deity
basura	garbage	filipino	devotees as undisciplined
deboto	devotee	filipino	devotees as undisciplined
disiplina	discipline	filipino	devotees as undisciplined
respeto	respect	filipino	devotees as undisciplined
wala	none	filipino	devotees as undisciplined
ama	father	filipino	family
anak	child	filipino	family
apo	grandchild	filipino	family
asawa	spouse	filipino	family
buhay	life	filipino	family
buo	whole	filipino	family
kapatid	sibling	filipino	family
padre	father	filipino	family
pamilya	family	filipino	family
family	family	english	family
kasalanan	sin	filipino	forgiveness
patawad	forgive	filipino	forgiveness
fiesta	feast	filipino	gratitude and praise
lahat	all	filipino	gratitude and praise
mahal	beloved	filipino	gratitude and praise
marami	many	filipino	gratitude and praise
pagpala	blessing	filipino	gratitude and praise
salamat	thank you	filipino	gratitude and praise

tanggap	accept	filipino	gratitude and praise
viva	long live	filipino	gratitude and praise
happy	happy	english	gratitude and praise
love	love	english	gratitude and praise
thank	thank	english	gratitude and praise
galing	heal	filipino	health and protection
ingat	take care	filipino	health and protection
kalusugan	health	filipino	health and protection
kapahamakan	danger	filipino	health and protection
karamdaman	illness	filipino	health and protection
katawan	body	filipino	health and protection
lakas	strength	filipino	health and protection
layo	distance	filipino	health and protection
ligtas	safe	filipino	health and protection
malusog	healthy	filipino	health and protection
masama	baad	filipino	health and protection
pabayaang	leave be/forsake	filipino	health and protection
sakit	sickness	filipino	health and protection
good	good	english	health and protection
heal	heal	english	health and protection
health	health	english	health and protection
not	not	english	health and protection
araw	day	filipino	help and guidance
bahala	leave to	filipino	help and guidance
gabay	guide	filipino	help and guidance
lagi	always	filipino	help and guidance
ngayon	now	filipino	help and guidance
pagsubok	challenge	filipino	help and guidance
patnubay	guidance	filipino	help and guidance
patuloy	continue	filipino	help and guidance
problema	problem	filipino	help and guidance
tulong	help	filipino	help and guidance
guide	guide	english	help and guidance
please	please	english	help and guidance
alam	know	filipino	idolatry and false belief
basa	read	filipino	idolatry and false belief
bibliya	bible	filipino	idolatry and false belief

gawa	made	filipino	idolatry and false belief
hindi	no	filipino	idolatry and false belief
huwag	do not	filipino	idolatry and false belief
iba	different	filipino	idolatry and false belief
isa	one	filipino	idolatry and false belief
kahoy	wood	filipino	idolatry and false belief
katoliko	catholic	filipino	idolatry and false belief
katotohanan	truth	filipino	idolatry and false belief
pananampalataya	faith	filipino	idolatry and false belief
paniniwala	belief	filipino	idolatry and false belief
rebulto	idol	filipino	idolatry and false belief
relihiyon	religion	filipino	idolatry and false belief
sabi	say	filipino	idolatry and false belief
salita	word	filipino	idolatry and false belief
samba	worship	filipino	idolatry and false belief
sarili	self	filipino	idolatry and false belief
tao	person	filipino	idolatry and false belief
tunay	true	filipino	idolatry and false belief
amen	amen	filipino	petition and blessing
bigay	give	filipino	petition and blessing
biyaya	gift/blessing	filipino	petition and blessing
dalangin	prayer	filipino	petition and blessing
dinggin	hear	filipino	petition and blessing
hiling	wish	filipino	petition and blessing
ipagkaloob	provide	filipino	petition and blessing
maayos	orderly	filipino	petition and blessing
maganda	good/beautiful	filipino	petition and blessing
nawa	hopefully	filipino	petition and blessing
sana	hopefully	filipino	petition and blessing
trabaho	work	filipino	petition and blessing
tupad	grant	filipino	petition and blessing
all	all	english	petition and blessing
always	always	english	petition and blessing
bless	bless	english	petition and blessing
blessing	blessing	english	petition and blessing
more	more	english	petition and blessing
name	name	english	petition and blessing

pray	pray	english	petition and blessing
akin	mine/me	filipino	pronoun
ako	I/me	filipino	pronoun
amin	our/us	filipino	pronoun
ikaw	you	filipino	pronoun
inyo	your (plural)	filipino	pronoun
iyong	you/your	filipino	pronoun
ka	you	filipino	pronoun
kami	we	filipino	pronoun
kanila	theirs	filipino	pronoun
kaniya	his/hers	filipino	pronoun
kayo	you (plural)	filipino	pronoun
kita	us (inclusive)	filipino	pronoun
ko	my	filipino	pronoun
mo	your	filipino	pronoun
namin	our	filipino	pronoun
natin	our	filipino	pronoun
nila	their	filipino	pronoun
niya	their	filipino	pronoun
nuestro	our	filipino	pronoun
nila	they	filipino	pronoun
siya	he/she	filipino	pronoun
tayo	we/us	filipino	pronoun
i	i	english	pronoun
me	me	english	pronoun
my	my	english	pronoun
our	our	english	pronoun
us	us	english	pronoun
your	your	english	pronoun

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