



# Priests as Social Media Influencers? A Study on the Lived Experiences of Select Bulacan Clergy's Engagement in Social Media

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## Abstract

A good number of priests from the Diocese of Malolos have joined the fray of so-called “Catholic influencers” who utilize social media to preach and evangelize. This study explores the lived experiences of select priests with significant social media followings. Utilizing the indigenous Filipino method of pagtatanong-tanong, the priests’ motivations, strategies, and challenges they face as digital content creators were probed. Findings show priests on social media craft their authenticity through a blend of personal identity and religious authority, positioning them as hybrid social media personalities. This allows them to conduct a mediated ministry and reach a larger audience. The content they produce contributes positively to the mediatization of religion, enabling Church teachings to be more accessible to a younger, more tech-savvy audience. The priests’ social media presence expands their spiritual outreach and reshapes how religion is perceived in the digital space.

Keywords: Social media engagement, social media influencers, digital content creators, Catholic Church, priests, SDG 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions

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Bartolome, R. E. (2026). Priests as social media influencers? A study on the lived experiences of select Bulacan clergy's engagement in social media. *Plaridel*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2026-13brtolm>

## Introduction

In 2021, a member of the clergy from the Diocese of Malolos was named among the “top social media influencers” at the 2020 Catholic Social Media Awards (CBCP News, n.d.). Fr. Fidel Joseph Roura, whose Facebook page at the time of the awarding had 2.1 million followers (which has now grown to 7.2 million followers) (Roura, n.d.), also maintains a YouTube channel, “Three Nails and a Crown,” where he posts vlogs, reflections, and archives of his homilies. He is the parish priest of the Quasi-Parish of Our Lady of La Salle in Muzon, San Jose del Monte City in Bulacan.

Fr. Roura is among the increasing number of priests from Bulacan who maintain an active presence on social media. Fr. Franz Joseph Dizon, the current chairman of the Commission on Social Communications of the same diocese, has pages on various social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok titled “Sa Madaling Sabi,” where he posts his collection of homilies and reflections. Renowned professor in liturgy and former rector of the Immaculate Conception Major Seminary Msgr. Andres Valera, HP, answers questions about faith and liturgy through vlogs on his Facebook page “Itanong Mo Kung Bakit.”

They and other priests have joined the fray of numerous religious organizations and individuals who are called “Catholic influencers”—those who utilize various social media platforms to reach especially young people who are gaining interest in the faith for the first time or are in the process of re-embracing it.

The late Supreme Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the 44th World Communications Day in 2010 titled “The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word,” encouraged priests and other members of the Church to be more active online and engage more with the people wherever they may be conversing (Benedict XVI, 2010). The Pope explained:

Yet priests can rightly be expected to be present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different “voices” provided by the digital marketplace. Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs,

websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization, and catechesis (para 4).

The Catholic Church remains a strong influence in the lives of Filipinos, with the Philippine Statistics Authority stating that 85 million out of the 108 million people counted in the 2020 census described themselves as Catholic, with many stating that they practice their faith fervently (Gregorio, 2023).

COVID-19 upended the ways most Filipinos practice their faith as many were restricted from attending religious gatherings for almost two years. It then became the norm for Churches and priests to live-stream Masses on Facebook or YouTube, and post religious messages on social media. The number of priests with social media pages increased while follower counts continued to grow, thus leading to the current phenomenon of having members of the clergy being regarded as social media influencers.

### **Social media influencers**

The website Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) defines social media influencers as individuals who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They post regularly on their chosen social media pages and have a significant number of enthusiastic and engaged followers. Because of this, social media influencers can create trends and encourage their followers to buy a product or support a social cause.

The same website states that social media influencers may be classified based on their follower count, the types of content that they post, or their level of influence (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). In terms of follower count, mega-influencers are those who have more than one million followers on at least one social media platform. Movie stars, sports celebrities, musicians, television reality stars, and other celebrities who have gained fame outside of social media are also considered mega-influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Meanwhile, macro-influencers are those with a follower count ranging from 40,000 to under a million; these include successful online experts who have built a considerable number of followers. Next are micro-influencers, who are ordinary people known in a particular niche. They may have between 1,000 to 40,000 followers on one social media platform. Lastly, nano-influencers may only have a small number of

followers but are considered experts in an obscure or highly specialized field. They have a small number of followers willing to engage with their content or at least listen to their opinions (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

In terms of types of posts, social media influencers may be bloggers, YouTubers, podcasters, or social media content creators only. Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) notes that much of contemporary influencer marketing is dominated by micro-influencers who either post as bloggers or YouTubers.

Lastly, in terms of influence, social media influencers are either celebrities or key opinion leaders. Influencer marketing grew out of celebrity endorsements. However, thought leaders such as industry experts, journalists, and academics are also considered influencers because of their qualifications, position, or experience about their topic of expertise (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

Regardless of type, social media influencers are considered to have the best communication skills and engagement with their audiences. They have a significant number of engaged followers and have become recognized as experts in their field (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

### **Priests as social media influencers**

The Catholic Church does not exist devoid of societal influences, and it cannot ignore the presence and impact of social media among its members. As mentioned above, the members of the clergy are encouraged to engage in social media by sharing information and opinions that are relevant and uphold the teachings of the Church.

In recent years, many priests, particularly in the Diocese of Malolos, have embraced social media as a tool for ministry, reflecting a broader trend within the Church to engage with the digital age. With Pope Benedict XVI's (2010) encouragement for priests to utilize digital platforms for evangelization, social media has become an essential means for clergy to reach wider, often younger, audiences. The Church's recognition of digital tools as extensions of pastoral care underscores the potential for social media to serve as a tool for communication and a powerful medium for spiritual guidance and connection. Priests have used social media not only for live-streaming Masses and sharing homilies but also for engaging in online spiritual guidance, reflections, and personal stories, thus adapting their pastoral roles to meet the demands of the digital world.

Despite this opportunity, the use of social media by clergy also presents unique challenges, particularly as it pertains to maintaining the authenticity of their pastoral roles while navigating the demands of influencer culture. Many priests face the dilemma of presenting themselves as both spiritual leaders and social media personalities. The expectations of social media platforms—including consistent content creation, engagement with followers, and self-promotion—often conflict with the traditional humility and modesty emphasized in clerical life (Altenhofen, 2016). This tension has sparked debates within the Church on how best to balance the use of social media for ministry with adherence to the values of priesthood, such as humility and discretion (Benedict XVI, 2010).

The trend of social media engagement also opens opportunities for priests to reach younger, more tech-savvy generations, who may not be as active in traditional religious settings. By incorporating digital communication strategies, priests can adapt to changing societal trends and extend their pastoral influence well beyond the confines of their parish communities. However, this also necessitates an understanding of the nuances of digital content creation, engagement strategies, and the ethical implications of being a priest in the online space (Hjarvard, 2008).

This study probes the lived experiences of members of the clergy in the Diocese of Malolos who have opted to maintain an active social media presence and have a significant following. Their reasons and motivations for engaging Catholics in social media, the strategies and tactics they employ to obtain and maintain their audience, the challenges they face both in real and virtual life due to their social media presence, and the advantages and benefits they get in their social media ministry were scrutinized and examined.

In the end, the study aims to evaluate if their presence and engagement in social media are in sync with their priestly ministries, and if members of the clergy can be considered as social media influencers.

## **Related Literature**

A good number of scholarly literature revolves around the effectiveness of social media influencers in endorsing different products or issues to various types of audiences on different platforms (Arugay, 2022; Cho et al., 2022; Erdoğan & Arslan, 2022; Karamustafic et al., 2020; Qin, 2020; Raita & Gavrielatou, 2021; Singh et al., 2020). These studies offer

insights into the different strategies and tactics employed by social media influencers in engaging with their audiences. However, none of the studies focused on priests as social media influencers.

A 2016 study by Altenhofen found that priests utilized Facebook in ways that mirrored three parts of their priestly identity, namely, as representatives of the institutional Catholic Church, members of the profession of priests, and as individuals. These three parts of priests' identities led to differing strategies. Being a representative of the institutional Catholic Church included disseminating important Church information and defending the doctrinal teachings of the Church. As a member of the profession of priests, they used Facebook to disseminate information about their local Church and build relationships in a professional capacity. As individuals, priests used Facebook to stay in contact with friends and family, share life events, stay up to date with the news, and find comedic content.

While conducting in-depth interviews with public relations professionals at megachurches throughout the United States, Golan et al. (2021) found that the traditional reliance on one-way communication strategies had shifted, giving way to more two-way communication as congregations prioritized digital connections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They also found that Church communicators understand the concept of social media influencers differently than their corporate communicator peers to also include influence on another's spiritual beliefs and well-being.

The two studies explored how individual members of the Church and even as an organization engage with their audiences. However, they did not explore the influence of priests on their social media audiences.

## **Method**

The study is phenomenological in nature. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to get at the essence of an experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Its goal is to come up with a comprehensive and humanistic understanding of a phenomenon by analyzing the lived experiences of the individuals who have gone through the phenomenon. In this case, it is the study's goal to understand the essence of priests' experiences when they create content and engage with their followers on social media.

As phenomenology is interested more in the depth of descriptions rather than in the breadth of observations, the researcher would have

to have to rely on a wealth of data from each informant. As such, this study utilized the Indigenous research method of *pagtatanong-tanong*. *Pagtatanong-tanong* (Pe-Pua, 1989) has the following characteristics: (a) it is participatory in nature, which means the informant has an input in the structure of the interaction in terms of defining its direction and in time management; (b) the researcher and the informant are equal in status, and so both parties may ask each other questions for about the same length of time; and finally, (c) it is appropriate and adaptive to the conditions of the group of informants in that it conforms to existing group norms.

The researcher interviewed five (5) priests from the Diocese of Malolos, two of whom can be considered macro-influencers, while three can be classified as micro-influencers. In terms of content formats used, two priests were vloggers, one priest was a blogger, and two priests had social media posts only. The five priests were selected based on their significant social media followings, representing a mix of macro- and micro-influencers. Data saturation was reached after the fourth interview, as no new themes emerged. This sample size is consistent with phenomenological research standards for in-depth qualitative analysis.

**Table 1.**

*Profile of Participants*

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in the ministry</b>	<b>Social media platforms</b>	<b>Number of followers</b>
Participant A	70	44	Facebook	20k
Participant B	64	39	Facebook	1.5k
Participant C	34	7	Facebook YouTube TikTok	330K 23.5K 55.6K
Participant D	35	8	Facebook	159k
Participant E	32	4	Facebook	8.3k

To ensure compliance with the ethical requirements of social research, the participants were sent letters detailing the objectives of the study and requests for interviews (*pagtatanong-tanong*). This

provided clarity on the study's purpose and gave the participants sufficient information to make an informed decision about their involvement. Moreover, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before participating in the study. The forms ensured the participants' awareness of their rights, the nature of their participation, and their ability to withdraw anytime in the research. Lastly, to protect the participants' privacy, all data collected was treated with utmost confidentiality and anonymity. No personal identifiers were used in the reporting of the findings to ensure the participants' identities remained protected throughout the study.

For data analysis, the researcher followed the steps that Moustakas (1994) outlined in his transcendental approach to phenomenology. First, the researcher began with the process of bracketing, which involved a process of rigorous self-reflection. Second, the transcripts were prepared and were read multiple times. For each research participant, the process of horizontalization was followed by highlighting important statements and quotes from the transcripts. Then, only the statements and quotes that contained a relevant description of the experience, or those that Moustakas (1994) referred to as "horizons" were retained. Then, the statements were clustered into themes. Third, based on these themes, a textual description of what the participant experienced, and a structural description or a description of how the experience happened, were written.

The process was done for all the five participants. In doing so, the researcher was able to create a composite description of the phenomenon by integrating the textual and structural descriptions across the five participants. This is the essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016 ; Moustakas, 1994).

As the researcher has a working knowledge of the subject of this study, he recognizes that his positionality provides advantages and potential challenges. His prior experiences allowed him to engage deeply with the material and understand the nuances that may arise during data gathering and analysis. However, this working knowledge may also introduce assumptions about the participants' experiences, which to the best of the researcher's ability, should not affect the interpretation of the data.

Moreover, the researcher knew the participants in a personal and professional capacity, and maintains a working relationship with some of them. While his existing relationships helped in establishing rapport

and trust, thus leading to richer and more open conversations, the researcher is also aware that this might influence how the participants present their experiences.

To mitigate these challenges, the researcher practiced reflexivity throughout the research process, noting his thoughts, reactions, and assumptions while having the *pagtatanong-tanong* (interviews) and data analysis. This enabled the researcher to be constantly aware of how prior knowledge and personal relationships may affect the research. This approach ensured that the study remained credible, balanced, and true to the participants' lived experiences.

## Results

### Reasons and motivations for creating content on social media

The participants said that apart from sharing to a wider audience their homilies and reflections that their parishioners would typically hear from them, their motivation for putting up a social media page is to share what they are passionate about.

*Kasi my first reason is, everyday I pray, and then I have to write my prayers. So, why not share my prayers? I started with my family, family and friends and then eventually dumami na 'yung aking mga audience. And then may nagsabi sa 'kin, 'Father bakit hindi kayo mag blog? Hindi kayo maglagay sa ano?'. So, I went into blogging. But 'yun pa rin lagi, because I have to pray, I have to write, so I share it. (Participant B, personal communication, August 28, 2023)*

[My first reason is that I pray every day, and then I write my prayers. So, why not share my prayers? I started with my family, family, and friends, and then eventually my audience increased. Then someone told me, 'Father, why don't you go into blogging? Why don't you put it in a blog?'. So, I went into blogging. But it is the same reason—because I have to pray, I have to write, so I share it.]

What prompted me to agree was basically two: since most of the subject that will be asked is liturgy, and I am

in love with liturgy, then perhaps I can impart what I know to other people. Secondly, I said in imparting, they will profit from it. That is the main thing. (Participant A, personal communication, July 23, 2023)

When asked about their target audiences, the priests gave varied answers. Participant A said those who are involved in the liturgy in the parishes are who they had in mind. Participant B, for his part, said it is for people who are his age (mid-50s).

Participant D, meanwhile, gave an interesting and very specific answer as to his page's target audience: "*Lahat ng broken, and at the same time, lahat ng may pinagdaraan.*" (personal communication August 30, 2023) [All those who are broken, and at the same time those who are going through something]. He explained that the reason for this was his page also started when he was going through a personal crisis.

*Alam ko namumurublemang ako nito. Tapos, sabi ko sa sarili ko, 'Hindi pupuwedeng pag may problema ako ay apektado yung ministry ko. Hindi pupuwedeng pag ako'y down, hindi ako makakapag-preach ng Mabuting Balita, o ng mga balitang nakakapagpagaan ng loob ng tao.' So, I decided to create my first Facebook page.* (personal communication August 30, 2023)

[I was having problems. Then I told myself, 'I should not allow my problems to affect my ministry. It cannot happen that while I am down, I am unable to preach the Good News and news that can help people feel good. So, I decided to create my first Facebook page.]

As for the selection of the social media platform, all the participants said they chose to share their content on Facebook since, as Participant A would put it, "it is where the people are." Moreover, some participants said that since they are not tech-savvy, they find Facebook easy to use and accessible.

Participant C, however, posts on other social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) to reach audiences who are not on Facebook.

*Sayang 'yung content kung mayroon kang audience. Tapos may nababasa rin akong article na iba ang audience profile ng mga nasa TikTok. Maraming hindi nag-Fa-Facebook ang nasa TikTok. So ibig sabihin mayroon akong audience na nare-reach sa TikTok.* (personal communication, September 30, 2023)

[The content will be wasted if you have an audience. I read some articles that TikTok has a different audience profile. Many users on TikTok don't have Facebook. So, it means I am reaching an audience in TikTok.]

### **Process of content creation**

In creating their content, Participants A and C said they have a team assisting them. Participants B, D, and E said they produce their content on their own.

In terms of the key message of their pages, each participant gave varied answers that are tied to the target audiences they mentioned earlier. For instance, Participant A said that his vlog aims to answer many questions about the liturgy. Participant D, for his part, said his content aims to console the hearts of his followers.

On the frequency of posting their content, Participant A said his team posts vlogs once a week, every Saturday evening. Participant B said he would schedule the posting of his blogs every 3 o'clock in the morning since it would be afternoon in the United States, where some of his readers are based, and would also allow early risers here in the Philippines to read his content first thing in the morning. Participants C and D said they both post their content every morning. Participant E said he doesn't post regularly, only when he feels inspired to do so.

The participants were then asked how they attempted to grow their followers or subscribers. Participant B and D both said they used to boost their posts on Facebook. Participant C said that regular posting helps in obtaining new followers. Participant E said he does not employ any strategies and tactics to gain new audiences, "just the plain truth of the Gospel" (personal communication, March 3, 2024).

Participant A said they used different tactics to gain viewers of his vlog:

We have some strategies like we give gifts, but of course, you have to redeem it in our parish. Like when we discuss

about Mary, we have a statue of Mary for those who would ask questions. We started to ask the audience if they had any questions. And we would mention their names. First is shout-outs, second, seasonally, we give memento for those who have asked questions (personal communication, July 23, 2023)

When asked if their personalities are reflected in the content they produce and post on social media, Participants A and C replied in the affirmative.

Yes, most of the time. Although there are some personal things like you see me drinking coffee. I am really a coffee drinker. So, you see that once in a while. (Participant C, personal communication, September 30, 2023)

*Oo, kasi I'm also personal in my homilies. Ito'y isang prinsipyo ko sa buhay as a communicator, what is most personal is most universal... kung ano 'yung nasa kalooban mo, in your deepest of hearts, magugulat ka ang daming nagre-resonate sa iba kahit sobrang personal... I'm not into details but generally, 'yung situation ko, nai-sha-share ko rin paminsan-minsan. So, I think nakakasilip rin sila. Minsan inaamin ko, ito ang kahinaan ko, heto ang strength ko. I'm comfortable with that.* (Participant C, personal communication, September 30, 2023)

[Yes, because I am very personal in my homilies. This is one of my principles in life as a communicator—what is most personal is most universal... how you feel in your deepest of hearts, you will be surprised that it resonates with others even though it is very personal for you. I'm not much into details generally, when I share my situation sometimes, people would have a peek into who I am. Sometimes, I admit my weaknesses and my strengths. I'm comfortable with that.]

However, when asked if they would produce content that other social media influencers create, such as product reviews, tutorials and how-to's, contests, and topics other than those related to the Church,

such as food, health, and wellness, fashion, lifestyle, among others, the priests said they are not inclined to do them as it is not aligned to their identity as priests.

*Hindi ko gagawin sa page ko 'yung mga bagay na ito, kasi unbecoming siya, hindi lang pari, kundi ng page. Meron kasing mini-maintain na image 'yung page, eh. (Participant D, personal communication, August 30, 2023)*

[I will not do those things in my page because they are unbecoming, not just for the priest but for the page. We have to maintain a certain image for the page.]

*I tried that once. I think five contents on my YouTube account. Kasi ang gusto ng staff ko mag explore nga kami ng iba, 'yung medyo contemporary, medyo mag jive. Alam mo surprisingly, makikita mo sa analytics eh, pagka homily ang taas ng views, nung nagpost kami ng ganun, nagdaan ang mga araw, mga linggo, nilangaw. (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)*

[I tried that once. I think there were five pieces of content on my YouTube account. It was because my staff wanted to explore something different, somewhat contemporary, and would jive [with the younger audience]. Surprisingly, based on the analytics, the homilies have a large number of views, but when we posted other types of content, days and weeks passed, not a lot of views.]

For Participant B, he said he tries to be relevant by linking his reflections and prayers to current trends, especially in social media.

*Like, 'yung 'Its raining in Manila,' eh 'yun ang pinag-uusapan eh. Kamukha nung 'Jopay.' Yun 'yung hit na hit so I write something. It so happened that these things, when they become viral and trending, somehow they inspire me to write something. O kaya minsan naalaala*

*ko may kinalaman ito sa, for example sa Gospel, o kaya sa mga santo. (Participant B, interview, August 28, 2023)*

[Like the song ‘It’s raining in Manila,’ that is what people are talking about. Like the song ‘Jopay.’ Those were the hits, so I wrote something. It so happens that these things, when they become viral and trending, somehow inspire me to write something. Or sometimes I would recall that these are related, for example, to the Gospel or one of the saints.]

### **Engagement with their followers**

According to the participants, they would rarely engage with their followers on their social media pages; one priest even stated that he doesn’t engage with the audience at all. For those who have limited engagements, they said they mostly reply to prayer requests and requests for counseling.

*‘Yung mga hindi naming ma-air may mga personal kasi. Sometimes, it went to the point people would ask for prayer. So, you have to tell them that we pray for you. But since the program is not about prayer, we answer privately. (Participant A, personal communication, July 23, 2023)*

[There are things we cannot air, especially those that are a bit personal. Sometimes, it went to the point people would ask for prayer. So, you have to tell them that we pray for you. However, since the program is not about prayer, we answer privately.]

*‘Yung mga nagco-comment, sinasagot ko rin. Usually, thank you for visiting. Minsan kasi ang comment sa ‘kin, they ask for prayer, for special blessings.... (Participant B, personal communication, August 28, 2023)*

[Those who would comment, I would reply as well. Usually, thank you for visiting. Sometimes those who comment would ask for prayer, for special blessings.]

Despite having limited engagement with their audiences, the priests said that the feedback from their followers, whether through their online pages or in-person encounters, allows them to gauge the success of their pages. For the participants, when people would say they were touched, inspired, or that they learned something from their pages, that is how they would assess whether their contents and pages have succeeded or not.

One, a lot of people said that they would give a comment that they have learned from it. (Participant A, personal communication, July 23, 2023)

*Kapag maraming shares. Kasi 'yung mga comment, amen amen lang 'yun eh. Pero kapag makikita mo 'yung mga shares tapos how they caption it, they share it to other people, do'n mo makikita kung paano sila nakarelate, kung paano nagkaroon ng sense sa kanila 'yung post na 'yun.* (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)

[If there are many shares. Because for the comments, mostly they are just 'Amen.' But when you see how people would share your content, especially how they would caption it, that is how you will see that they were able to relate to the post, how the post made sense to them.]

*Ako, mas natutuwa ako kapag ka may nagme-message na, 'Father, salamat po sa post po ninyo.' Pagka hindi ako nag-post, maghahanap—'Father, ba't po walang post ngayon?' Sa akin, 'yun ang success. Kasi nga ang goal ko, makapagpagaan ng loob.* (Participant D, personal communication, August 30, 2023)

[I feel happy when people would message me, 'Father, thank you for your post.' If I am unable to post, they would like for it and would message me, 'Father, why is it that you do not have a post today? For me, that is success when you can make people feel good.]

## **Identity of a priest who is also a digital content creator**

When asked what they gain from creating content that they share on social media, the priests said that they learned a lot. They had to research more and prepare well for their homilies, which they think also made them better priests.

And suddenly you learn also by researching. That is one. What else? Well, I did learn how to face the camera without being camera conscious. Besides that... suddenly people are inviting me all over the place to talk. (Participant A, personal communication, July 23, 2023)

*Na-cha-challenge ako na maging bago, maging fresh sa aking mga sinasabi at mag-research, magbasa. Pag Sunday ang sources na binabasa ko mga commentaries, at least three. Hanggang lima 'yun. Kapag wala akong nakikitang angle na pwede kong i-explore, hindi ako tumitigil.* (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)

[I feel challenged to have to say something new and fresh; thus, I must research and read a lot. For Sunday homilies, I read at least three commentaries. Sometimes up to five. Until I find a new angle that I can explore, I do not stop.]

For Participant E, there is a higher purpose as to why he posts content on social media, saying “doing this continuously will merit the grace of the Kingdom of heaven.”

When asked if they monetize their pages, only Participant C replied in the affirmative. The other priest said they do not monetize their pages as it is not part of their “bread and butter,” and they are content with knowing they are reaching a larger audience with what they post on social media.

*Kasi binasa ko na kung hindi ko i-monetize, si Facebook lang ang makikinabang. Siya lang ang yayaman. So ang ginawa ko, nagbukas lang ako ng gripo para makakuha ako ng parte sa kinikita niya, which hindi naman sa akin napupunta kundi do'n nga sa mga estudyante na*

*tumutulong sa 'kin sa page ko, mga kabataan. So, para sa 'kin, it is not for me, kinuha ko lang 'yung karapatan ko mula do'n sa paggawa ng contents, inano ko lang 'yun, in-able ko 'yung para makatulong rin ako sa iba sa ministry. (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)*

[Because I've read that if I do not monetize the page, only Facebook will gain from it. They will just become richer. So, what I did, I opened a faucet, so to speak, to get a part of that earnings, which doesn't go to me personally but to the students who are helping me on my page, to the youth. It is not for me. I just get what is rightfully mine from creating those contents, which in turn I use to help others in the ministry.]

Regarding the challenges they face from being social media influencers, some said they have difficulty finding the time to create content, while others said they have limited knowledge on the technical aspect of content creation. Another participant said being known on social media resulted in a lack of privacy as he is recognized everywhere he goes.

Participant B, for his part, said the creation of the content is in itself the challenge.

*The pressure to come up with content consistently. Sometimes alam mo, I just felt it this recently, meron na akong responsibility sa audience ko, even if I do not know who they are. Meron na akong ganun na para bang, 'Father may sakit ba kayo, bakit wala kayong blog?' (Participant B, personal communication, August 28, 2023)*

[The pressure to come up with content consistently. Sometimes, you know, I just felt this recently that I have a responsibility to my audience, even if I do not know who they are. I receive queries like, 'Father, are you unwell? How come you do not have a blog for today?']

The most challenging, especially for the younger priests, are the criticisms they receive from their fellow priests.

*Eh 'di syempre madami tumaas ang kilay—ako'y nagpapasikat, gustong kumita. Anong tawag dito, pabibo, pabida, pasikat, gustong magpa-celebrity. Lahat ng negative narinig ko na.* (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)

[A lot raised their eyebrows. They said I was doing this just to become famous and earn money. What do you call this—I am a show-off, and I just want to be a celebrity. I heard all types of negative criticisms.]

For Participant A, a good way to handle and avoid criticisms is to lay down the ground rules of the page from the very beginning. This will ensure that negative comments and feedback, especially those that are not directly related to the thrust of the social media page, are handled properly.

We did not answer it. Because the page is not for debate, and that is one thing that I have from the beginning. The content is not for debate. This is not a platform for complaints. But we do receive it sometimes. And we refer to the whole policy. I think before anybody should engage in social media, the first thing is the parameters. (Participant A, personal communication, July 23, 2023)

According to Participant C, one also needs to handle critics and bashers properly. One must have the proper mindset and fortitude to withstand negative feedback.

*Ang importante lang sa sarili ko grounded ako na alam ko na pari pa rin ako, number one. Number two focus lang ako sa ginagawa ko. Hindi naman ako, kung paano ako magdeliver ng homily kapag may camera o wala pareho lang. kung paano ako magprepare ng reflections may camera o wala pareho lang. Kahit sa house blessing nagho-homily ako, sa car blessing kung minsan pag hindi ako nagmamadali nagho-homily ako.* (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)

[What is important is that I stay grounded, that I am a priest first, that is one. Second, I just focus on what I

am doing. I do not deliver homilies differently whether there is a camera or not, I deliver it the same way. Even during house blessings, or I am just blessing a car, if I am not in a hurry, I would still deliver homilies.]

When they were asked if being a digital content creator was aligned with their ministry as a priest, all participants replied in the affirmative. Following the mandates of the previous and current Pope for new evangelization, they said social media is an effective and popular means to connect with and communicate with a larger audience, especially young people.

Yes, it is. It is part of evangelization. Remember the commission of Christ, go and spread the good news. Teach the people what I have taught you. It is part of our job. That is why even in Vatican II, *Inter Mirifica*, and *Communio et Progressio*, the two cornerstone documents on communication in the Church, these modern means of communication are gifts from God. (Participant B, personal communication, August 28, 2023)

*Iyong second letter of Paul to Timothy, 'yung proclaim the Good News in season and out of season. 'Yung in season and out of season, it does not only refer to timing but it also refers to avenues to which we can proclaim the Gospel. So parang bakit ko ili-limit 'yun sa sarili ko na ito lang, dito lang sa simbahan na ito ako magpe-preach, dito lang sa group of people, kung mas marami akong pwedeng ma-reach, why not? And kung kaya ko naman dahil passion ko rin naman 'yung media ministry in college, hindi nga lang ako yung laging nasa harap ng camera, lagi lang ako nasa likod. So for me, it is consistent with the ministry of the Church of evangelization. Kasi evangelization is trying to reach out, kung hanggang saan, until the ends of the world 'di ba? (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)*

[In the second letter of Paul to Timothy, the former said we should proclaim the Good News in season and out

of season. When he said in-season and out-season, he was not just referring to time, but he also refers to the avenues to which we can proclaim the Gospel. So why would I limit myself to the confines of our parish church and only preach to a group of people when I can reach a larger audience? And if I can do it because media ministry has been my passion since I was in college, only during that time I am mostly behind the camera. So, for me, it is consistent with the ministry of the Church to evangelize. Because when we evangelize, we reach out even up to the ends of the world, right?]

As for the label of being social media influencers, the participants provided extremely contrasting opinions. While the younger priests said they were okay with being considered social media influencers, the older priests who participated in this study said they were not comfortable with the label.

*Kaya nga, I'm so passionate in teaching priests about how to utilize their social media in worthwhile things, especially evangelization, because we are priests online and offline. Your identity, your priestly identity, must be reflected wherever you are. You are an influencer whether you are in social media or not. (Participant C, personal communication, September 20, 2023)*

[That is why I am passionate about teaching priests about how to utilize their social media in worthwhile things, especially evangelization because we are priests whether we are online or offline. Your identity, your priestly identity, must be reflected wherever you are. You are an influencer whether you are on social media or not.]

I do not like the term. Why should you be an influencer? I was only the instrument. It is Christ, ultimately, it is Christ. I am not in favor of that term, influence. With all due respect to my brother priests, I find it disturbing. Personally, I find it disturbing. Because it is already being centered on the priest, the center should

be Christ. (Participant B, personal communication, August 28, 2023)

I always say to people, if the people remember you and they do not remember Jesus, you are failing your task. It is Jesus that should be remembered, not you. If they forget your name, well and good, as long as they know the name of Jesus. (Participant A, personal communication, July 23, 2023)

## Discussion

Based on the results presented above, two main themes emerged from the lived experiences of priests with their social media pages. First, all may be considered digital content creators, but not all would want to be labeled as social media influencers. Second, the specific types of content they produce and disseminate on social media are very much tied to their identity as priests.

### Digital content creators or social media influencers?

Based on the *pagtatanong-tanong* with priests maintaining active social media pages, there is no doubt that they ought to be considered digital creators or content creators. As narrated by the participants in this study, they create blogs, photos, and videos and distribute them in various social media channels, primarily Facebook, but others do post on other platforms such as YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and WordPress. They focus on creating content to engage with their target audiences by producing the types of content that their audience wants to consume.

The priests have shown that even on varying levels of competence and expertise, they are doing exactly what social media influencers do: they consider different content ideas, they create posts (e.g., social media cards, videos, blogs), they manage their social media pages either directly or with the assistance of a team, and they interact with their followers, albeit in a limited manner. On the creative side, they do ideation, planning, execution, and analysis of their content to ensure that what they put out on social media resonates with their target audience, and is consistent with their social media pages' brand.

However, as evidenced by the interviews, there is a disagreement among the participants if they ought to be labeled as social media influencers. Those who agreed with the label said that as priests, it is

very much their task to influence and convince their followers not to purchase a specific brand or service but instead lead them to follow God through the teachings of the Bible and the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, those who disagreed with labeling priests as social media influencers said it was not their intent to have their fans among their followers. As priests, they only consider themselves as channels of God's word, and the focus should be Jesus Christ's message of salvation. They cannot be likened to social media influencers who would receive incentives or percentages from the sale of the brands that they endorse. Even though, as content creators, they have a substantial following and a distinctive brand persona that is being projected on their social media pages, they lack a patterned relationship with commercial sponsors.

Nonetheless, the participants agree that as content creators, they intend to create engaging content that inspires and guides their audiences. While they recognize that they can grow a large following on social media, their presence in it is typically less about themselves as content creators but more about the information—the Word of God—that they are sharing.

Regardless of differing opinions, as social media influencers, priests navigate and leverage the different social media platforms of their choice to share their message, build a community, and engage with their followers, no matter how limited it may be. This may be akin to a mediated ministry, where priests use digital media platforms to perform their traditional and pastoral roles, such as teaching, counseling, and spiritual guidance. Through the myriad of content they produce, they offer religious content to a broader, if not international audience, thus extending their reach beyond the traditional congregational settings in their parishes.

### **Authenticity of priests in the digital space**

In large part, the reason why some participants reject the label “social media influencer” is because of their intent to remain authentic to their identity as priests. This is quite paradoxical, as those who are regarded as effective social media influencers are those who are perceived to be authentic.

In the digital realm, one's authenticity is his or her performance of a persona. This authenticity is then mediated through digital platforms and social media to produce an “edited persona.” For social media influencers, this authenticity is shown as a public “face” or personality

that is socially constructed and presented to their audiences (Ebben & Bull, 2023).

However, for the priests who took part in this study, there is no delineation between their offline and online persona. What is being shared with their audiences through blogs, social media cards, and videos is their public “face” as priests, the same that their parishioners get to see during masses, reception of sacraments, and other church activities, and is only being projected to a wider, online audience.

Moreover, the differences in the key messages of their pages are rooted in and reflect their distinct talents and interests as priests. Just like everyone else, priests also have their expertise and hobbies. That is why one of the participants said he only creates vlogs about the liturgy as it is his expertise and he has studied it extensively, while another only writes blogs as it is closer to his former profession as a media practitioner.

Moreover, when asked about the types of content they create, all said they would only create content that is in line with their priestly identity, and are only focused on preaching and spreading the word of God. They will not be producing content that may be perceived as “unbecoming” of priests. One participant even said he would always wear clerical garments when appearing on camera to reinforce his identity as a priest who is using social media to preach.

In line with Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), which emphasizes humility and service in evangelization, the priests who participated in this study said they must navigate the digital space in a manner that prioritizes their pastoral mission over self-promotion. *Evangelii Gaudium* encourages the faithful, particularly the clergy, to engage with others authentically, adopting a humble approach that reflects the Gospel rather than seeking personal glory. For priests engaging in digital spaces, this requires them to remain focused on spreading the message of the Gospel rather than on cultivating a digital persona that might detract from their primary spiritual purpose. Moreover, Canon 285 of the Code of Canon Law reinforces the need for appropriate conduct for priests, particularly when they engage with secular matters. This canon stresses that priests are to avoid activities that could lead to vanity or personal glorification. Specifically, it states that priests should refrain from engaging in behaviors that are incompatible with the clerical state or that could detract from their sacred duties. This guidance is especially pertinent in the context of

digital engagement, where the line between spiritual outreach and self-presentation as an influencer can blur. Priests are called to navigate their public presence—whether in person or online—with integrity, ensuring that their actions align with the Church’s mission of humility, service, and authenticity.

These are in contrast to the findings of Altenhofen (2016) where the author identifies three key identities that Catholic priests navigate on Facebook, namely: the religious expert, where priests maintain their authority by sharing theological knowledge and religious teachings; the digital influencer, where they adapt to the norms of social media and attempt to balance their traditional role vis-à-vis the demands of digital communication to remain relatable and influential; and their authentic self, where priests share aspects of their personal lives and foster a genuine connection with their social media contacts or friends.

While Baudrillard (1994) argues that authenticity is a simulation or hyperreal construction, where authenticity in the digital platform is about representing a version of reality that may feel real but is actually constructed, for the priests in this study, their authenticity is tied to their identity performance (Goffman, 1959). Their authenticity is tied to their identity, where the priests build their content around the aspects of their personhood and use it to connect with their audiences. Priests, as digital content creators, leverage their expertise, skills, and experiences to cultivate trust and connection with their online followers.

### **The Lived Experiences of Priests with Social Media Pages as a Communicative Process**

Lou, in a 2022 study, proposed a theory of trans-parasocial relations to describe the relationship between social media influencers and their followers. It describes the relations that are collectively reciprocal, in that the interaction between the social media influencer and their follower is one of give-and-take. Trans-parasocial relations are either synchronously or asynchronously interactive, meaning that influencers can interact with followers through real-time live-streaming and offline meetups, or they can frequently interact with followers asynchronously after some time delay. The trans-parasocial relations between influencers and followers are co-created in that followers play an active role in the co-creation and development of influencers’ offerings, values, aims, agenda setting, and motives along the progression of their relationship.

Trans-parasocial relations are appropriate in situations where there are two-way interactions between influencers and followers that

frequently happen on social media, and their relationship is no longer one-sided.

However, as described by the priests, the relationship is still best described as parasocial, which is evident among celebrities and media figures. There is not much interaction between the priests and their followers on the social media pages, and the relationships are mostly one-way or unilateral. Priests share homilies, inspirational messages, or personal reflections on social media, and their followers begin to feel as though they “know” the priest, even if they have never met in person.

This dynamic allows for wide-reaching spiritual influence on the part of the priests but would also require careful management to maintain authenticity and connection while acknowledging the limitations of these one-sided interactions.

The cooperative principle espoused by Grice in 1975, meanwhile, may explain aspects of how priests try to convey their messages to their followers on social media. Simply put, content creators have a cooperative principle when they post content on their social media pages, especially when they try to suit their content and messages so that their audiences can comfortably understand what is being relayed.

In the context of social media in general, social media influencers share a cooperative principle when they interact with their followers. Therefore, they tend to paraphrase their content so that their audience can comfortably understand the message being relayed. Specific to this study, priests utilize different tactics to spread the Gospel via social media to make their content more engaging and suitable to each platform and their audiences.

As explained by the priests in this study, they attempt to make their content relevant to the times, either to the liturgical calendar of the Church or to current and trending topics on social media. They tend to make the messages short and simple so that busy people can easily appreciate them, while those who are going through difficulty can more readily relate to the content.

Perhaps what would best describe the communication process of the lived experiences of the priests would be one of Avery Dulles’s Models of the Church (1991), more specifically the Institutional Model of the Church. The lack of interaction on the social media pages of priests reinforces the institutional model because the Church’s messages and teachings are addressed to all their social media followers, under the ambit of priestly authority. As described by Dulles, the communication

process in this model is predominantly linear, less participatory, interactive, and dialogical.

Dulles (1991), however, explained that this institutional dimension is necessary for a “balanced ecclesiology.” He points out that the Church can only create effective communication not by demolishing its institutional structure, but by correcting imbalances, exaggerations, and misconceptions that exist about the Church in the light of recent developments in social sciences.

In this case, priests become a hybrid authority where they extend traditional religious authority into the digital realm. As digital content creators and social media influencers, their authority and influence are derived both from their religious role and their ability to adapt to the norms and trends of digital communication.

However, when the priests who produce and distribute social media content further evolve their content to reflect the daily socio-cultural realities experienced by the people of God, the model may transform into a prophetic one. According to Eilers (2003), the prophetic model of the Church, when speaking through its leaders such as the priests, will call out injustices, exploitation, prejudices, oppression, and discrimination, like how the prophets in the Old Testament would speak in the name of God.

Their content will still be rooted in the Bible and teachings of the Church, and they can further use their influence to persuade people to make concrete changes in the socio-cultural, political, and economic situations that pervade the country and oppress those who have less. While this places the priests in a unique but crucial position to shape public discourse, it also opens them to risks such as backlash and cancel culture, especially if their views do not align with those of their audience or challenge dominant cultural narratives.

In this case, the priests contribute positively to the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard, 2008), as they make religious content more accessible and engaging to a larger audience. Acknowledging the pervasive nature of media in the everyday lives of people, religious organizations have communicated their messages through traditional and new media platforms. While these somehow alter how religious leaders engage with their followers and how religious symbols and narratives are disseminated, this process also helps integrate faith into the digital space, thus enabling religious leaders to engage in a way that transcends traditional church settings.

This study's findings also resonate with Campbell's (2017) concept of "religion online," which explores how religious practices are evolving through digital media platforms. According to Campbell, religious organizations and clergy are increasing their use of online spaces to facilitate spiritual engagement, thereby transcending the limitations of physical space. The findings from this study reflect this dynamic, as priests in the Diocese of Malolos leverage social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to share their homilies, reflections, and prayers. By doing so, they extend their reach beyond traditional parish boundaries, effectively engaging with a broader audience, including younger and more digitally engaged individuals.

For example, many of the priests in this study specifically mentioned the benefits of reaching people who may not be physically present at Mass, or are disconnected from their local religious community. Through platforms such as Facebook, where many of their followers already congregate, priests are able to maintain a continuous presence in the lives of their parishioners. This is in line with Campbell's assertion that digital spaces provide new avenues for religious practice and community building. The priests' ability to adapt their pastoral roles to fit into these digital spaces aligns with Campbell's view that religion online allows for a wider, more accessible form of spirituality, especially in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

The analogy of priests as "fishers of men" in the context of social media can be a compelling way to illustrate how the priests who are participants in this study seek to engage and connect with a wider audience in sharing their faith.

Like how Jesus told his followers to be fishers of men (NABRE, 2010, Mt. 4:19), the priests use their knowledge, pastoral training, and skills to fish for souls whenever they preach in their respective parishes. In the context of social media, priests are casting a wider net to seek to engage and connect with a larger audience in sharing their faith. The digital content they create (e.g., blogs, social media posts, and videos) are their means to bait fishes, attract followers, and invite them into conversations about faith.

These priests, whenever they are creating digital content, are capitalizing on their authority as well as authenticity, and their social media pages serve as a wider net to reach a broader audience, thus attempting to harvest a larger yield of souls for God.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study attempted to understand the lived experiences of priests who produce content on social media using the method of *pagtatanong-tanong* among five priests from the Diocese of Malolos.

As shared by the participants, the priests construct their authenticity in their social media pages by managing their online identities, and by blending their traditional roles as religious leaders and the demands of digital communication. By leveraging their knowledge, experiences, skills, and personalities, they maintain relatability while reinforcing their authority in the spiritual realm. This role, in turn, allows them to effectively engage with their followers in a mediated ministry, where religious teachings are conducted through online platforms. Their presence in social media contributes to the mediatization of religion, enabling teachings of the Church to reach a wider audience and building virtual communities among the faithful.

As hybrid authorities, the priests' social media content enables them to mediate religious teaching while adapting to user engagement strategies of the social media platform they are posting on such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and WordPress. This blending of traditional religious preaching and current digital communication technologies enables the priests to reach a mostly younger, technologically-savvy audience.

In turn, this contributes positively to the mediatization of religion where religious content is brought to online space, ensuring that faith and spirituality remain relevant in the digital age. Social media is akin to a wider net cast by priests as a tool for their ministry and a medium that transforms how a wider, diverse audience experiences religion.

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## Grant Support Details

**Author Contributions:** All research activities and writing were done by R.E.M. Bartolome. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received institutional support from the Far Eastern University - University Research Center through the provision of research time. No external funding was received for this study.

**Acknowledgements:** The author acknowledges the support of the Far Eastern University - University Research Center through the provision of research time that facilitated the completion of this study. The author also thanks the priests from the Diocese of Malolos who generously shared their time and experiences for this research.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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