SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research
Online ISSN: 2672-7080

SEARCH 17(2), 2025, 71–86
DOI: 10.58946/search-17.2.P5
https://fslmjournals.taylors.edu.my/search/

Between pulpit and platform: Parasocial bonds in Filipino priests' social media ministry

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ABSTRACT

Framed by Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction and Lou's (2022) elaboration of trans-parasocial relations, this study examines how Catholic priests who create digital content relate to their social media followers. Three focus group discussions (N = 20) with active Facebook and TikTok users in the Diocese of Malolos were recorded, transcribed, and inductively analysed until thematic saturation was achieved. Participants turn to priests' posts for scriptural insight and a sense of connection, yet their engagement rarely extends beyond viewing, "liking," sharing, and brief expressions of thanks. Priests seldom reply, solicit topics, or host real-time dialogue; thus, the collective reciprocity, co-creation, and mixed synchronicity that Lou describes as hallmarks of trans-parasociality are largely absent. The resulting ties remain parasocial: one-sided and deferential, even as priests adopt influencer cues such as eye-catching thumbnails, follower milestones, and donation links. This coexistence of platform logic and clerical hierarchy refines the parasocial theory by showing how institutional authority can inhibit the transition to trans-parasocial engagement, a dynamic under-explored in influencer scholarship. Practically, the findings suggest that low-risk co-creation trials (e.g. periodic Q&A streams, follower-chosen reflection themes, lay-moderated comment threads) could test whether structured invitations to dialogue deepen engagement without diluting pastoral authority. Multi-site, longitudinal research is recommended to assess whether such interventions can shift Catholic digital ministry toward genuine trans-parasocial collaboration.

Keywords: ***Digital content creators, parasocial relationships, trans-parasocial relationships, Catholic priests, social media followers***

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INTRODUCTION

A social media influencer is defined as a content creator on social media who has established credibility in their industry or field. These social media users have access to a large audience and can share information to persuade others through their authenticity and reach. Consistent with Abidin (2016), an influencer is a user who mobilises audience attention through cultivated parasocial ties. Social media influencers have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They post regularly on their chosen social media channels and generate a significant number of enthusiastic, engaged followers who pay close attention to their content.

In 2020, a Catholic priest from Bulacan, Fr. Fidel Joseph Roura, was recognised as one of the top social media influencers by the Catholic Social Media Awards (CBCP News, 2021). As the parish priest of the Quasi-Parish of Our Lady of La Salette in San Jose del Monte City, Fr. Fidel has a Facebook page and YouTube channel for his vlogs, reflections, and archives of his homilies.

Fr. Fidel Roura is among the members of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church who, because of its ever-increasing popularity, use social media to reach out to their flock. According to the Digital 2023 report, there were 84.45 million social media users in January 2023 in the Philippines, equating to 72.5% of the country's total population (Kemp, 2023). Social media is particularly popular among the youth; there were 76.40 million users aged 18 and above using social media in the Philippines at the start of 2023, according to the same report.

As reported by the Philippine Daily Inquirer, another priest, Fr. Fiel Pareja, said he has turned to the popular video-sharing platform TikTok precisely to connect with young people, not just Catholics but also those who belong to other faiths (AFP, 2021). Wearing a cassock and clerical collar, he said he attempts to make his videos interesting while reciting Bible verses and offering prayers. In the same report, Fr. Luciano Felloni, another popular Catholic influencer, said that TikTok and other social media platforms have become important tools to keep the Catholic Church relevant.

In a survey among the readers of the US Catholic (Sanna, 2023), 80% of their respondents said they use social media to interact with Catholic priests, influencers, or parishes. Moreover, 57% said social media made them better Catholics. Significantly, 89% disagreed with the statement that priests and vowed religious clergy should not have publicly visible social media accounts. They believed that the members of the clergy's presence on social media made them feel more connected to the broader Catholic community.

Parasocial and trans-parasocial relations: From one-way attachment to reciprocal co-creation

This study explores the online bonds between Catholic priests who produce digital content and thus function as minor social-media influencers, and the faithful who follow their accounts. Building on Horton and Wohl's (1956) seminal notion of parasocial interaction, defined as a one-way, media-driven attachment in which audiences extend affection and attention to an inaccessible persona, the project asks whether, and to what extent, such ties achieve the richer, two-way qualities that Lou (2022) labels trans-parasocial relations. Lou defines a trans-parasocial relationship as one that is collectively reciprocal, co-created, and

sustained through both asynchronous and occasional synchronous interactions (e.g., live streams, offline meet-ups). In theory, followers do more than "like" or "share": they shape future content, receive direct acknowledgements, and participate in real-time exchanges that reinforce a sense of joint authorship.

Because social-media platforms blur the line between producer and consumer, Catholic followers today can collaborate with priests by commenting on homilies, suggesting topics, or engaging during live liturgies. Yet whether that potential is realised remains an empirical question. The present research treats parasociality as a baseline condition and applies Lou's criteria of reciprocity, co-creation, and mixed synchronicity to gauge whether, and when, priest–follower ties move toward the trans-parasocial end of the continuum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media research now paints a coherent picture of how influencers translate attention into action. Credibility, sustained engagement, and perceived relational closeness form the "active ingredients" of influence and show up repeatedly across contexts. In brand settings, Cho et al. (2022) mapped these three qualities as the pillars marketers should balance when selecting creator portfolios. Audience-based studies confirm that the pull of an influencer lies in authentic service. Saudi young adults follow creators who broaden knowledge and model self-improvement (Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023), while Southeast-Asian consumers are most persuaded when influencers seem credible, attractive, and similar to themselves; these effects are magnified by peer endorsement (Sharipudin et al., 2023). Even during the COVID-19 crisis, the same triad underpinned public-health persuasion, as emotionally trusted creators normalised distancing and hygiene practices (Adhrianti et al., 2023). Hess et al. (2022) explained the mechanism; parasocial bonds endow influencers with reputational capital that outweighs traditional celebrity status and fuels word-of-mouth promotion.

Taken together, these studies reveal a sequential logic—initial credibility sparks parasocial affection; sustained exposure deepens that attachment; and perceived similarity funnels affection into concrete behaviour, whether purchasing trainers, sharing a petition, or embracing health protocols. The next set of studies shows what happens when that one-way affection is invited into dialogue; they trace how reciprocal cues turn parasocial warmth into trans-parasocial collaboration. Recent scholarship extends this logic from parasocial to trans-parasocial relations (TPR), referring to ties that become reciprocal, co-creative, and sometimes synchronous. On live-stream platforms, real-time feedback turns casual viewers into loyal patrons and buyers (Kim et al., 2022).

Lou (2022) showed that transparent sponsorship disclosures, often assumed to dampen persuasion, can strengthen trust when delivered in an authentic voice, while Carter (2022) demonstrated that even partial TPR amplifies the advertising impact of pre-existing parasocial feelings. Together, these studies argue that authenticity-based parasocial and trans-parasocial dynamics are the engine driving engagement, loyalty, and behavioural change in both commerce and public health. Yet virtually none probe religious influencers, where clerical authority, spiritual gratifications, and ethical norms may reshape the pathway from credibility to action. Investigating Catholic priests

as content creators, therefore, fills a clear empirical gap and tests whether established influencer theory travels into the domain of faith-based communication.

Despite this growing body of work, two critical gaps remain. First, almost no research explores religious influencers, whose moral authority, sacramental responsibilities, and doctrinal constraints may short-circuit the credibility-to-behaviour pipeline documented in commercial settings. Second, existing studies seldom examine audiences whose primary motivation is spiritual rather than material benefit. By focusing on Filipino Catholic priests, public figures who simultaneously occupy clerical, communal, and influencer roles, this study addresses both voids. It evaluates whether the pathway from credibility to parasocial attachment, and potentially to co-creation, holds when platform logics collide with ecclesiastical norms.

Study framework

Horton and Wohl's (1956) classic account of parasocial interaction portrays the emotional bonds audiences form with media personae as essentially one-sided, sustained through the illusion of face-to-face intimacy that broadcast media afford. Contemporary platforms complicate that dynamic; Lou's theorisation of trans-parasocial relations argues that social media now permits influencers and followers to engage reciprocally and co-create meaning, even if such exchanges are still uneven (Lou, 2022). To understand why these digital ties emerge between Catholic priests who create content and the lay faithful who follow them, this study situates trans-parasociality within three foundational communication theories.

First, uses and gratifications remind us that media users are purposive actors who select channels and content to satisfy cognitive, affective, social-integrative, and even spiritual needs (Katz et al., 1973). This motivational lens explains why lay followers might actively seek priests' Facebook pages or TikTok homilies to deepen scriptural understanding, reinforce their Catholic identity, or experience fellowship online—needs that can be met even when interaction remains mostly one-way. Second, the Media Richness Theory (MRT) contends that communication channels differ in their capacity to convey nuanced, equivocal information; video, rich in vocal tone and facial affect, reduces uncertainty more effectively than text-only posts (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Framing priests' live-streams and quote-cards through MRT clarifies how the affordances of each format can enable, or constrain, the potential for genuine reciprocity that trans-parasociality presupposes. Finally, the Mediatization Theory holds that institutions adopting media logics inevitably reshape their practices and authority structures (Hjarvard, 2008). Priests who vlog or solicit "stars" thus negotiate algorithms, engagement metrics, and personal branding, blurring boundaries between pastoral ministry and influencer culture; their online relationships with followers are therefore significant not only for individual devotion but also for what they reveal about the evolving forms of Catholic authority and evangelisation.

Trans-parasocial relations are approached as a function of users' spiritual and social gratifications, the communicative richness of the channels they choose, and the broader mediatised context in which contemporary priesthood now operates, allowing us to probe both the extent and the cultural meaning of these digital bonds. Building on Horton and Wohl's (1956) classic notion of parasocial interaction and Lou's (2022) definition of trans-parasocial relations (TPR), we treat a priest-follower tie as "trans-parasocial" only when all three criteria are met:

1. Collective reciprocity – priests routinely acknowledge or reply to follower messages.
2. Follower co-creation – followers shape future content topics (e.g., via polls, live Q&A, or user-generated segments).
3. Mixed synchronicity – interaction occurs both asynchronously (comments, DMs) and synchronously (live-stream chat, in-person meet-ups).

Ties that lack any of these features are coded as parasocial. This threshold, stated a priori, guides the interpretation of all findings that follow.

Statement of the problem

Grounded in these intertwined perspectives, the present study asks:

What is the extent and character of the (trans-)parasocial relationships between priests as social-media content creators and the lay faithful who follow them online?

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design that relied on focus-group discussions (FGDs) to capture the collective reflections of Catholic social-media users who follow priests from the Diocese of Malolos. FGD was chosen because group interactions can unearth shared attitudes and tacit norms that individual interviews may leave hidden (Creswell, 2014). Three sessions were convened in parish facilities in Valenzuela City, Meycauayan City and Marilao. The first two groups comprised seven participants each, the third six, giving a total of 20 discussants. Purposive sampling identified initial volunteers who followed at least one diocesan priest online, and snowball referrals expanded each group until thematic saturation was anticipated. All participants were 18 years or older and reported viewing or interacting with a priest's Facebook or TikTok content at least twice a week. Written informed consent outlined the study purpose, voluntary participation, audio-recording, and the use of pseudonyms in all reports; the moderator also reminded participants that confidentiality could not be fully guaranteed in a group setting and urged them not to share others' comments outside the session.

A semi-structured discussion guide prompted members to describe how they discovered a priest's page, the forms of interaction they engaged in, and their perceptions of reciprocity or co-creation with the priest. Sessions lasted 70–90 minutes, were audio-recorded, and were followed by detailed field notes on non-verbal dynamics. Transcripts were analysed manually using an inductive, constant-comparative procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Open codes were first written in the margins, transferred to a spreadsheet, and iteratively clustered into higher-order categories until stable themes emerged. Thematic saturation was deemed reached when the third FGD generated no codes not already present in earlier sessions (Guest et al., 2006). To enhance reliability, a code–recode check was performed two weeks after the initial pass on 25% of the data; concordance exceeded 80%, and discrepancies led to minor refinements before final application of the codebook. An audit trail containing raw transcripts, coding tables, analytic memos, and decision logs was maintained to demonstrate dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Emerging themes were triangulated against contemporaneous field notes and against the public posts of the priests discussed, and a concise thematic summary was emailed to six randomly selected participants for member checking; all affirmed its accuracy, and two offered clarifications that were incorporated.

The researcher's positionality required explicit reflexivity. As a practising Catholic who serves on the Diocese of Malolos Commission on Social Communication and occasionally collaborates with some parish-media volunteers, the researcher enjoyed rapport and logistical access but also faced risks of acquiescence bias. To maintain objectivity, only volunteers with whom no direct supervisory relationship existed were invited. Each session began with a disclosure of the researcher's dual role and an explicit request for candid, even critical, opinions; neutral, non-leading prompts guided the discussion; and a reflexive journal was kept to bracket assumptions and to note instances where data appeared to confirm personal expectations. During analysis, memos flagged comments that aligned too neatly with those expectations and prompted a search for disconfirming evidence and negative cases. Together, the sampling strategy, manual constant-comparative analysis, code–recode check, audit trail, triangulation, member checking, and sustained reflexivity provide a robust foundation for the trustworthiness of the themes through which the study explores whether priest–follower ties remain parasocial or verge toward trans-parasocial interaction.

RESULTS

Social media pages of priests being followed

All discussants indicated that they follow P1's public Facebook page (≈ 5 million followers) and TikTok channel (≈ 1 million followers). Other frequently mentioned accounts include P2's reflection series [*In Other Words*] (≈ 330 k Facebook; ≈ 40 k TikTok), P3's question-and-answer page [*Ask Me Why*] (≈ 16 k Facebook), and P4's culinary-themed blog [*The Lord Is My Chef*] (≈ 1.5 k Facebook). Additional priests followed via personal Facebook profiles were labelled P5 and P6. Participants also referenced the multi-priest programme *Ang Batingaw Online*, which features bishops and clergy in segments such as [*Online Bible Study*] and [*Crosswords*].

While a few participants had subscribed to these pages before the pandemic, most began following during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when on-site worship was suspended. Several said the pages appeared organically in their Facebook or TikTok feeds; others, especially parish media volunteers and catechists, sought them out to glean ideas for their own content or classroom teaching. Across all three focus groups, the dominant motive was spiritual: participants described the priests' online material as a ready source of guidance, reflection, and inspiration.

> *For me, I follow them because apart from attending masses and hearing the homilies of our priests, we learn from them (priests on social media) as well. They help us deepen our learning of the readings and the Gospel which is why it is good to follow them as they enhance our understanding of the readings.*
>
> (Participant O)

When asked about their impressions and insights on the contents being produced by the priests, the participants in the first focus group said they can understand the homilies better and learn from the lessons imparted by the priests on issues related to family life, and voter education, for example.

Discussants from the second focus group said the contents being produced by the priests are timely, and the contents of the posts such as reflections are relatable as they are based on personal experiences.

> *They provide something to their audience to help them realise aspects of their life, or when they are going through something, the contents serve as a light or key to a better way.* (Participant L)

The discussants were also asked the content format they preferred, video or social media cards, and the participants gave differing views. Some said they prefer to watch videos as they can feel the emotions of the priests and thus can relate better to what is being preached. Others said they prefer social media cards or photos as they can easily come back to them.

The participants were also asked which aspects of the content produced by the priests they did not like. Participants in the first focus group said they found none that they did not like. Some participants in the second and third focus groups expressed some disagreements both on the manner the priests present their views, as well as the contents of their messages.

> *Some are not sincere about what they are doing. They are just there to seek attention.* (Participant M)

> *Some are OA [overacting]. He becomes overacting, like with his gestures while delivering his homily.* (Participan Q)

> *Some would try to justify what is already wrong, like womanizing. That is true. I heard one, he said – Why didn't you take care of him? He was given [by God] to you. You failed to take care of him. The reason he left was that you are at fault.* (Participant H)

Interactive engagement with the social media pages of priests

Based on the discussions, the participants' interaction with the social media pages of the priests was mostly limited to reacting to their posts and sharing them with their social media contacts.

As some discussants in the first focus group explained, they limit their interactions to likes and shares to avoid the notifications one would receive when a person leaves a comment on a post. Another participant explained why he does not comment. When he shares the content that the priests made, he would not put his caption as he would not like to take the focus away from the message of the priest.

> *I guess for me, since I was already able to reflect on one of the posts, what I would want is for others to be able to reflect on it too. If I put a comment, others may read it and may pick up differently because of what I said. That is also the reason why, when I share, I do not put a caption. For me, it is better that I was able to reflect solely on the message of the post, and others will be able to do so as well.* (Participant B)

A participant in the second group discussion, meanwhile, said she would sometimes leave a comment on a post of a priest that she could relate to or that struck a chord with her. *"I just say, thank you, Father, your homily is good. That is all."* (Participant I)

Another participant in the same discussion said that sometimes when sharing content, she would try to recommend it to others so that they can also reflect. *"On my Facebook page, I put the captions, 'this is right,' 'this is what it should be', 'let us reflect'. When I share the OBS (Online Bible Study), I would say, 'let us reflect on this."* (Participant H)

Perceived benefits of priests and their social media followers

The participants were then asked what they gained from following the social media pages of priests. They explained that they can understand the Bible readings better and learn how to apply the Gospel in their daily lives, as the messages of the contents of the priests are practical. They said that through the reflections that the priests post on social media, they can deepen and live fully their faith.

> *When I get home, I would like to reflect, so I would scroll through the pages of pages that I follow, and I would gain wisdom and know how to respond properly to what life brings me. There were times when I would say, 'Here's what I would encounter, how should I respond according to the Lord's will? How will I make sure that what I am doing is aligned with His plans?* (Participant A)

> *Similar to what I said earlier, I get inspired by their messages. So, we can apply them in our lives, and sometimes when we face trials, the timing of the messages that we read or hear is spot on, and we become inspired to apply them. I would say, 'Ah, that I how it should be done.'* (Participant M)

The participants were also asked what they think are the benefits for priests who create content on social media. The participants said their social media presence allows them to fulfil their duty of spreading the word of God, thus enabling them to accomplish the mission given to them.

> *What do they get out of it? For me, it is fulfilment. As a priest, your goal is to teach people the faith and introduce Christ to everyone. So, when they have many followers [on social media], they feel fulfilled because they can accomplish their mission as priests.* (Participant L)

> *Of course, apart from those who are serving in the parishes, we all know that there are a lot more Filipinos who are busy or do not have the time to go out socially. Some are busy with work or school, or with other things. Social media is there to reach them and evangelize, especially those who do not go to church but are willing to listen to religious content. That is why priests find self-fulfilment, especially when they can answer questions like 'What else can I do to make a change? What else can I contribute apart from saying masses inside the church? What else can I do for those who are outside the church,*

> *those who cannot go to church due to their busy schedules? What else can I do?' So that is their way of spreading the Good News through social media.* (Participant F)

Another discussant said the priests get inspired by their followers and are challenged to produce better content as they have a larger audience.

> *They get inspired. Their egos are boosted. Especially when they realise that they have a lot of followers. It may be an indication of how good and effective they are.* (Participant H)

The discussants also mentioned that some priests monetise their pages and accept donations, such as that of [P1], *"[P1] was able to use the platform to earn money. Through that platform, he was able to receive donations."* (Participant J).

A participant in the second focus group discussion voiced her concern regarding the priests' use of their social media pages to raise funds.

> *Extra income, that is what I was pointing out earlier, that some other priests put up their social media pages for personal benefits. Some followers might be discouraged, even though some might understand their intentions, but some may perceive it as no longer for the greater good but instead for their gain. If they can use the donations to help others, that is okay, but if it is for their benefit, for me, it doesn't look good. That is my point.* (Participant M)

Another participant expressed a contrary opinion, stating that it is the responsibility of the priests to use the money they receive for the contents they produce, and they should be given the benefit of the doubt on how they use the donations.

> *We can read in the Bible that if you serve, do not bring anything. It is your right to receive help. That is why we should support them. We need to support them. If they have bad intentions, for me, that is their responsibility. For me, learn from the lessons they impart, apply them in your own life, and share them with others. But for those who do it for personal gain, the Lord will take care of it.* (Participant K)

When asked what they perceive as disadvantages to priests who are on social media, the discussants said the priests are exposing themselves to possible criticisms, if not bashing, especially from those who may be from different faiths. They also said the priests who are on social media lose their privacy as they are known to more people.

> *They no longer have freedom when they go out; everyone wants to have their pictures taken with them.* (Participant D)

Some discussants also noted that when priests make mistakes on social media, sometimes it would go viral and would eclipse the other good things the priests have done.

> *When they commit mistakes and it gets posted, the little mistake is blown out of proportion. When they commit mistakes, despite all the good things they have done, people only see the mistake. Although it happens on and out of the screen, when they do something wrong, they have a lot of bashers. That is true, they are bashed a lot. Out of the many hundreds of good things that they did, one mistake can erase all of that.* (Participant H)

But for most of the discussants, the most alarming issue is identity theft, when scammers create fake social media accounts using the priests' photos and personal information to identify victims and trick them into sending money or personal information.

> *Monsignor did not know that someone supposedly sent him twenty thousand pesos. Then, one time, a balikbayan box arrived here. He messaged the sender and said he did not ask for anything, the sender said some asked her on his behalf. In Guiguinto, supposedly, there is someone who sends mass offerings yearly, but the Monsignor doesn't receive them. That is the disadvantage.* (Participant H)

The relationship between priests and their followers

The participants were asked whether they perceived the priests becoming closer to them because of social media, or whether the priests had become celebrities due to having many followers on social media. Instead, most of the discussants clarified that they feel the priests have become more accessible, and they are getting to know them better.

> *We feel they become closer to us. For example, you have a relative who is an OFW [overseas Filipino worker], and through social media, you feel that you are not apart and are close to one another. So, for priests, social media is used to get closer to us and to share their wisdom and knowledge with their viewers.* (Participant G)

Other discussants recognise that some priests have become celebrities already due to their large following on social media.

> *They have become celebrities. That is true because social media is everywhere. Somebody said to me, 'That priest is from your parish? I've watched or I've heard of him. He is good. He is handsome. They have become celebrities.* (Participant H)

Some of the discussants were also asked what they think followers contribute to the social media pages of the priests. Some said sending stars on their Facebook pages would be a tangible way to help the page. The rest of the discussants believe the feedback given by their followers is the best contribution to the priests' pages.

> *Our comments give them encouragement and affirmation of what they are doing positively.* (Participant O)

> *For example, if they receive a negative comment, they would ask themselves, 'Am I still doing it right? Am I being too much?' Because sometimes, when they do their homilies on video, it is already over the top.* (Participant H)

> *I believe it is possible, as followers, that we gain from their messages, especially if they are good, and that in return, we can be supportive of their endeavours. That I think is what I can contribute to him.* (Participant M)

Some discussants, however, expressed reluctance to give feedback to the priests, since they were not sure if the priests would be open to their suggestions and comments, and worried that the priest might take offense. They said the priests know better what they are doing, and their likes and shares should be sufficient feedback. A participant also said that, "*if we have comments regarding their posts, we can just tell them in person to the priest instead of posting them on their social media pages"*.

Lastly, when the focus group discussants were asked the types of content they would like the priests to create and post, almost all said they would like to have a peek into the daily lives of the priests. The discussants said creating content about their daily lives and routine activities would make them more relatable to their audiences.

> *I mean what are the things they typically do, their routines, this is how they do them. I saw another [priest] doing such but not from here. He was talking about his health, and giving suggestions on how the audience could improve theirs.* (Participant H)

DISCUSSION

The FGD data confirmed that the bonds forming on priests' Facebook and TikTok pages sit squarely at the parasocial end of Lou's relational continuum; followers watch, "like," and occasionally type a brief thank-you, but they seldom shape future content and rarely receive individual replies. Under Lou's (2022) definition, which includes collective reciprocity, follower co-creation, and at least some synchronous interaction, very little in the present sample qualifies as trans-parasocial. Table 1 summarises the five interaction levels and locates the Malolos data at Levels 1–3.

Table 1. Continuum of priest–follower interaction: From basic parasocial to full trans-parasocial engagement

Level	Follower Action	Priest Response	Relational Label
1. Consumption	Viewing / lurking	None	Basic parasocial
2. Light engagement	"Like," emoji, share	Generic "God bless" post	Warm parasocial
3. Contribution	Comment, question	Occasional mass shout-out	Parasocial-plus
4. Reciprocal exchange	Live-chat, Q&A, follower-driven topic	Direct real-time reply	Incipient trans-parasocial
5. Co-creation	Collaborative content, lay-hosted segments	Shared authorship credit	Full trans-parasocial

Note: Levels 1–3 were observed in this study; Levels 4–5 represent aspirational stages requiring explicit co-creation cues.

Most interactions occupy Levels 1–3, confirming sacralised parasociality; the absence of Levels 4–5 reveals the structural barrier to trans-parasociality. Such clustering also flags three analytic pressure-points: motivation, branding, and participation, around which the following discussion is organised. Level 1 traffic speaks to basic devotional and informational needs; Level 2 reflects a modest desire for emotional resonance; Level 3 shows tentative outreach that stalls when reciprocity is not signalled. Together, these strata illuminate where and why, the priest–follower relationship plateaus before genuine co-creation can emerge. The analysis below explains why those richer ties remain elusive, using three interconnected lenses: (1) motivational fit and media affordances, (2) clerical branding and celebrification, and (3) the participation gap that keeps follower creativity at the margins.

Motivational fit and media affordances: Why one-way still works

Uses-and-gratifications research shows that audiences turn to media that satisfy their cognitive, affective, and social needs. Participants in this study echoed that logic: short homily clips deepen biblical understanding; live-streamed rosaries provide comfort; a priest's post on voter ethics signals that the Church "walks with the people." Because those needs are met through consumption alone, followers feel no pressing reason to request more dialogue. This outcome is consistent with Alhothali and Aljefree's (2023) finding that knowledge and self-improvement, not reciprocity, drive much influencer engagement.

The Media Richness theory sharpens the paradox. In principle, video livestreams and comment threads make two-way exchange easy. Yet clergy seldom answer comments in real time, and followers hesitate to probe or debate "so as not to distract Father." The high-richness channel is therefore used in a low-richness way; an outcome Kim et al. (2022) did not observe among lifestyle streamers who converted real-time chat into sales. The difference illustrates how clerical authority moderates technological affordance; the pull of the pulpit still governs even the most interactive platform.

Such hesitation has deep historical roots. The reluctance to question or banter with a priest also reflects a centuries-old deference to clerical authority that took shape under Spanish colonial rule, when church and state were virtually inseparable and the pulpit served as the primary platform for both moral and civic instruction; that historical hierarchy still shadows digital space, discouraging followers from treating the priest–follower exchange as a conversational peer relationship and reinforcing the one-sided dynamic identified here.

Clerical branding, celebrification, and the double-edged halo

Priests in Malolos have nonetheless absorbed core elements of platform logic, such as thumbnail-ready images, follower milestones, and (in a few cases) donation links. Campbell (2020) describes this blend of ministry and metrics as clerical branding, defined as a self-curated presentation of priestly identity online and a subset of what Driessens (2011) calls celebrification—the media-driven transformation of clergy into celebrities, distinct from personal branding (actor-driven) and platformisation (infrastructure-driven). The present data show both sides of that coin. Followers speak with pride of P1's multi-million reach, using celebrity adjectives ("viral," "famous") that echo Hess et al's (2022) thesis that parasocial bonds fuel reputational capital. Yet the same participants' voice disquiet over the loss of priestly privacy and over donation prompts that risk turning sacrament into

spectacle, concerns parallel to Purvis' (2021) critique of "celebrity priests" and Gray's (2023) warning that online popularity can overshadow sacramental life.

Such ambivalence suggests that mediatisation is only partial; priests embrace engagement metrics, yet followers continue to authenticate them through a sacramental lens that prizes humility and doctrinal fidelity over sheer visibility. Algorithmic prominence may lift a priest's profile, but the very expectation of clerical modesty curbs overt self-promotion, creating a halo that elevates influence while restricting how interactively it can be exercised. As a result, celebrification broadens admiration without supplying the reciprocity and co-creation needed for a truly trans-parasocial tie.

The participation gap: Why co-creation stalls

Muntinga et al.'s (2011) COBRA model and Jenkins' (2006) participatory-culture thesis predicted three ascending levels of engagement: consuming, contributing, and creating. Participants from the Diocese of Malolos followers rarely cross into the third tier. They share posts or leave emojis but do not remix content, submit testimony videos, or vote on sermon themes. In earlier parish-media research (Bartolome, 2022), the pattern was the same, suggesting a persistent participation gap in local Catholic digital culture.

Several factors likely converge: (1) liturgical training primes listeners to receive rather than co-author messages; (2) followers fear theological missteps that might appear disrespectful; and (3) priests, worried about doctrinal clarity, seldom solicit lay content beyond routine "amen" responses. These constraints keep the relationship dynamic in a "parasocial-plus" zone, which is warmer than broadcast TV but short of the co-creative practices that define influencer communities in gaming, beauty, or fitness niches.

Lou's (2022) framework presents trans-parasociality as the logical destination once a platform affords reciprocity and audiences are willing. The present study nuances that expectation by showing how clerical authority functions as a structural ceiling; even on feature-rich channels, priests and followers inhabit a pulpit-centred habitus that normalises respectful distance and discourages co-creation. This results in sacralised parasociality, where algorithmic signals of influence coexist with traditional hierarchies of obedience and reverence Admiration grows, but dialogue stalls.

This finding does not invalidate Lou's model; rather, it specifies the cultural boundary conditions under which the model's three antecedents, namely collective reciprocity, follower agency, and synchronous exchange, fail to ignite. In faith-based contexts where theological authority is non-negotiable, reciprocal affordances must first be legitimised by that authority before audiences feel licensed to participate. Until such legitimation occurs, platform interactivity will amplify reach, but not relational symmetry, leaving priest–follower ties suspended in a one-sided yet spiritually resonant bond.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in the parasocial / trans-parasocial framework, this study shows that priest–follower ties on Facebook and TikTok remain chiefly parasocial. Followers readily consume, "like," and share priests' content for spiritual insight and a sense of community, yet the reciprocity, co-creation, and synchronous exchange that define trans-parasocial relations (Lou, 2022) seldom materialise. Although priests employ platform logics such as catchy thumbnails, engagement metrics, and donation links, their interaction is still

filtered through a sacramental lens: listeners defer to clerical authority, and clergy rarely solicit real-time feedback. The result is admiration tinged with unease about "celebrity priests," echoing wider debates on clerical branding and mediatization.

For the Diocese of Malolos, the practical implication is straightforward; small, structured invitations to dialogue such as monthly Q&A live-streams, follower-voted reflection themes, or lay-moderated comment threads provide a low-risk way to test whether reciprocal engagement can deepen without diluting priestly authority.

The study, therefore, extends Lou's model by demonstrating that trans-parasocial relations are not an automatic culmination of influencer–follower interaction; their emergence is contingent on institutional culture. The notion of sacralised parasociality underscores how clerical branding can amplify pastoral reach while leaving hierarchical communication norms intact. Future multi-site, longitudinal research should test whether this boundary condition persists across other faith traditions or weakens when clergy embed deliberate co-creation mechanisms such as scheduled Q&A streams or follower-driven content series into their digital ministry.

Limitations and future directions

This conclusion must be read in light of several constraints. The study drew on a single Philippine diocese and a selected group of 20 highly engaged followers; thus, findings may not generalise to other regions or casual audiences. Focus group settings, combined with the researcher's insider role, could have encouraged socially desirable responses despite reflexive safeguards. Finally, the research offers only a cross-sectional snapshot; longitudinal data are needed to see whether parasocial patterns intensify, plateau, or evolve toward genuine co-creation. Future multi-site, multi-wave studies will be essential for testing whether the recommended co-creation strategies can shift Catholic digital ministry along the parasocial-to-trans-parasocial continuum.

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