Studying Facebook as a Facilitator of Community in Catholic Congregations

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the
Master's degree in Religious Studies

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Abstract

The current wave of digital religion searches to understand where the online and the offline meet and how they influence one another. The purpose of this research is to determine the relationship between the online and offline communities to demonstrate whether the former facilitates the latter. This research investigated three public self-identifying Catholic Facebook groups. Data was gathered through three waves, textual analysis, ethnography, and semi-structured interviews, to understand the influence offline communities have on offline communities. The data was analyzed through six elements of virtual analysis, to evaluate the evidence of virtual community in the three groups. In the end, this paper found that although these Facebook groups are indeed virtual communities, their ambiguity demonstrates their online community is more an extension of the offline life than something that influences it. Further analysis is needed to investigate the relationship between online and offline religious communities.

Keywords: digital religion, cyberspace, Catholics, Facebook, virtual community, Internet, virtual 'space', Identity

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1.1 Background

Given the rapid growth of social media, it is not surprising that spiritual and religious leaders, congregations, and individuals have used these tools to boost religious participation. A 2011 survey demonstrated that 74% of Protestant groups were actively using Facebook as part of their religious practices (Roach, 2011). In 2014, a Burson-Marsteller study, *How World Leaders Connect on Twitter*, stated that Pope Francis was the political/religious leader with the most influence on Twitter. The growth of the use of social media as a form of religious communication has changed the way individuals and religious groups worship as well as the way they live their everyday lives.

Religious activity on the Internet originated in the form of websites, discussion boards, and forums that offered online spaces where communities, groups, and individuals could express themselves (Helland, 2002). This activity has since spread out to social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter (among many others). These SNSs are attractive to people of faith and their religious communities (Miller, Mundey, & Hill, 2013). They facilitate communication around practices, beliefs, and experiences between individuals or groups separated by geographical distances, so long as one has a network connection. They give a sense of being close to one another, though oceans may separate them.

Religion is growing at a swift pace in the online world, especially within social media environments (Helland, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2014). It is common for individuals to share their faith or even engage with faith-based content, especially on Facebook, where the medium's interface helps to facilitate mass communication of religious

activities and ideas (Helland, 2012). Here, one can interact with people of all faiths, not just their own. Some religious leaders even encourage the use of Facebook or other social networks as a conversion and discussion tool since it centres on communication (Brunet, 2014; Rosen-Molina, 2009).

Facebook is a powerful social network platform that allows individuals and religious groups to share their faith online, but it also goes beyond that. It connects like-minded individuals and allows the opportunity to exchange information regarding a multitude of themes such as spiritual, religious, and secular. It also gives the same opportunities to those who do not share the same faith and beliefs to network, communicate (Helland, 2012), and discuss their differences of opinion on the Internet. A study in 2014 demonstrated that 20% of adults in the U.S. reported that they had "share[d] their religious faith on social networking websites or apps (such as Facebook or Twitter) in the past week" (Pew Research Center, 2014). Also, 46% said that they saw others share their religious faith on an online platform. Facebook lists that their mission is to "give the people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" ("What is Facebook's Mission Statement?", n.d.). Facebook also states that people use the platform to "stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" ("What is Facebook's Mission Statement?", n.d.). Their latest statistics indicate that there are close to 2.5 billion daily users that active on Facebook (Statista, 2020a), making it one of the top popular social media platforms on the Internet. This traffic is an increase of almost 1 billion daily users over the past five years (Statista, 2020b).

Opinions are divided on whether the extensive use of social media for conversation and communication of religious content is beneficial for society. Supporters argue that these

social network platforms allow users to participate in discussions with multiple individuals, creating relationships regardless of the distance that separates them (Rosen-Molina, 2009). They also argue that it connects younger generations to religion (Brunet, 2014). It makes information more accessible as individuals have the ability to access information in their preferred format when they desire. Others dispute that social media creates passivity by discouraging individuals from actively searching for information and viewpoints online. Facebook gives its users in their feed suggestions of posts that are influenced by their profile and search history content they are more likely to engage with (Lukerson, 2015). This restriction means that unless they seek information outside their faith and beliefs, they may not interact with diverse content. Moreover, it also means that religious information would not appear on an individual's Facebook feed if they do not actively seek it

Many studies that investigate religious activity online try to discover the variables surrounding religion on the Internet, such as why and how religion exists in digital space. Others try to find what motivates people to use social media (or the Internet as a whole) for religious purposes, as well as the gratifications they receive. However, there is limited research on the effect that online community building has on offline communities (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). Since there are limited insights about Facebook and that aspect of community, this study will investigate how Facebook groups impact the community facet of Catholic congregations in their offline world.

1.2 Research question and hypothesis

Today, there is a widespread belief that the Internet, especially social media, is destroying people's sense of community. In my thesis, I will argue that, to the contrary, social media enhances community and makes it more accessible to many across the globe. I

hypothesize that the virtual world that takes its shape as Facebook groups extends the community aspect of religion because it brings people together who may not be able to communicate daily, including those who participate as observers. The virtual world therefore simplifies and enhances communication and interaction between members of these Facebook groups and their offline counterparts.

As previously stated, not everyone is in agreement that social media has a positive effect on community and social interactions. Some believe that communication which does not happen in a face-to-face environment, is not beneficial to our sense of community (Armfield & Holbert, 2003). Others believe that religious use of the Internet is a threat to the institutions in an offline context (Arasa, Cantoni, & Ruiz 2010; Armfield & Holbert, 2003). Although my research acknowledges these opposing views, I will show that Facebook, through all its technological advances and advantages, is an extension of the offline parishes. These differing opinions will help me contextualize my argument that Facebook enhances one's sense of community.

The technological advances of Facebook allow a level of connection that can extend beyond friends, family, and one's congregation. It enables one to communicate in ways that would not be possible in face-to-face interactions (Boyd, 2010). Facebook helps create relationships, not only with people of the same congregation or faith but also with others outside their beliefs. The technological aspects of Facebook facilitate communication on a greater scale (Helland, 2012). It offers the use of photos, memes, GIFs (graphical interchange format), and much more beyond the spoken word of offline face-to-face conversation. It also allows one to save posts and share them with others, both in and outside their social groups (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). It eliminates space and time barriers; one can

search for information at any time and access it when desired (Boyd, 2010; Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). This interaction can take place on a multitude of intelligent devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and computers. Catholic congregations have an important presence on Facebook, which is accentuated through their numerous groups and pages. This technology helps to facilitate communication between members of their churches and their pastors with their communities. Some pastors even post or live stream their sermons on Facebook, allowing those who were unable to attend to still benefit (Boyd, 2010; Brubaker & Haig, 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

My research investigates whether social media, specifically Facebook, facilitates community development and whether it complements offline community. It takes into consideration the fact that the Internet is still relatively new and that it is continuously evolving. It helps understand the relationship between the virtual and the offline worlds. I think it is essential to know what effects the virtual world can have on the offline world as the Internet is rapidly expanding. Now, more information is remotely accessible through the Internet than ever before. Research on digital religion studies shows that one of the biggest motivators enticing Christians to use Facebook is to help others (Brubaker & Haig, 2017). They do so by offering comfort, advice, and suggestions to those they encounter on the platform. They also perceive Facebook as a medium through which they can have a spiritual connection with deities through prayers, ceremonies, and rituals, to name a few. Facebook provides access to religious messages and other content that enhances this spiritual connection (Brubaker & Haig, 2017).

There will be four other chapters in this thesis, which include the literature review, the methodological and theoretical framework, the data analysis and discussion, as well as

the conclusion and future studies. Firstly, the literature review will provide an overview of areas that digital religion scholars have previously investigated as a means to give a foundation for this thesis, and to highlight directions for future research. Next, the methodological and theoretical framework will introduce various frameworks in digital religious studies to help build the pathway for my research. The chapter will provide details on the specific methodologies that were employed to gather the data. In the data analysis and discussion section, I will introduce the Facebook groups investigated in my research. In that section, I will also analyze the data gathered from group contents, the interactions between members, as well as the responses from the members who participated in my interview. Lastly, the conclusion and future studies section will summarize my findings and explore possible directions for future research in the field of digital religion.

2. Literature Review

The literature review below provides a history of the research already present in the study of digital religion and identifies important waves of research, themes, and scholars in the field. This section will help lay the scene and introduce the concept of digital religious studies as viewed by major scholars in the field to frame my question and understand the study. This literature will help demonstrate how my research contributes to the new wave of research in the field. By identifying the gaps and future of the field, I place my research project in this vast and quickly evolving works of digital religion. The research mentioned below will link to themes that will resurface in my data analysis, creating a connection between my research and the field.

In this literature review, I have attempted to discuss the major themes within the broad area of study that my research occupies: digital religion. The first part of this review addresses the categorizations of a field in constant evolution, while the remaining section discusses the general themes that are associated with the study of digital religion. My literature review also addresses the reality of the constant evolution and elusive nature of the Internet: "indeed, the Net is ambient, nowhere in particular but everywhere at once" (Taylor 2003, 301). For over three decades, the Internet has been a platform used as a 'space' where spirituality and religion are practiced. These discussions and the "religious use of the Internet" can be traced to the early 1980s (Campbell 2006, 4). The digital world provides scholars with a new 'environment' which can be observed, providing "insight into the manner in which religious beliefs and practices adapt to change in society." (Helland 2007, 956).

Ess and Dutton (2013) describe the rise of Internet studies as a vast field of study of the Internet that incorporates perspectives of both the social sciences and humanities,

including various focus areas and subfields, such as "online religion" (p.635). It brings together a variety of disciplines and a broad scope of theoretical and methodological approaches. Most scholars in the field share an understanding that the Internet should be approached as a social context and space where culture is made and negotiated, and not just as a technological tool or force. Studies of digital religion draw on this by approaching the Internet along with other forms of new media as technologies which create unique mediated contexts, spaces, and discourses where religion is performed and engaged (Campbell, 2017).

People are no longer as interested in attending church or other religious gatherings. Much of the research on the topic centers on young adults. In a 2007 study, Robert Wuthnow proposes that what may factor in the decrease of church attendance in young adults may be marriage, children, and employment. He notes that many young adults tend to postpone having children and getting married, which can influence their church attendance. He also posits that full-time employment rates in women have also increased, reducing the amount of time they can dedicate to church involvement. Jeremy Uecker *et al.*, in 2007, conducted a study with college students and found similar factors. In 2019, Gallup, a global analytics and advice firm, reported a drop in church membership across the United States among adults (Jones, 2019). From 1998-2000, they report that about 68% of American adults were church members, dropping to 52% in 2016-2018 (Jones, 2019). They posit that this decline is due to the fact that fewer Americans identify with a religion and are therefore less likely to be part of a church. They also report that this decline is most significant amongst Catholics, membership being at 76% twenty years ago, and decreasing to 67% today (Jones, 2019).

Not only is the attendance that is declining, but the value attributed to church is also at a decline (Barna Research Group, 2020). In their research, The Barna Research group

goes beyond tracking church attendance, and tracks those who practice Christianity through three variables: when someone calls themselves Christian, when they prioritize faith, and their church attendance (2020). They have been collecting survey data for the past 20 years through 96, 171 surveys. In 2020 they launched their new State of the Church project, and reported that only 1 in 4 Americans (25%) is a practicing Christian. A drop of nearly half since 2000. They also report that one third (36%) less Americans attend church weekly than did in 1993 (Barna Research Group, 2020).

This decline is not entirely a phenomenon exclusively in America, but one that can be observed on an even larger scale (Campbell 2004). In 2001, Escott conducted a survey which indicated that participation is going down for many, even though they continue to maintain contact with their local church (Campbell, 2004). By contrast, in 2004, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that "64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes" (Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004, in McKenna & West 2005, 942-943). This data demonstrates that for the new medium of the Internet, that religion is a common communication facet (Helland 2007). In 2000, data demonstrated that there were more individuals using the Internet for religious and spiritual objectives than for online banking or dating services (Helland, 2007). Although this is no longer the case, the Pew Research Online in 2004 reported that although more people do their banking online, 35% of Internet users still search for religious/spiritual information on the Web. Bulletin boards were created to facilitate the new move of communication into the digital world where people can post and respond to messages on various topics (Helland 2002). Some sections of the World Wide Web, such as the religious and spiritual ones, continue to evolve rapidly (Helland 2002).

Since 2003, this significant change in the digital world has continued rapidly, especially with respect to social media. Social media takes many different forms, such as social news sites that support the sharing of articles, blogs, news items, and more (Gancho, 2017). There are also social networking sites that allow users to upload photos, videos, and tag friends (such as Facebook and Twitter – this is where my research takes place). There are social bookmarking sites that allow you to bookmark your favourite items, such as recipes, images, and music. Lastly, there are the social sharing sites, which can be subparts of other forms of social media, such as wikis, blogs, forums, and message boards (Gancho, 2017). Today, when we think of popular social media, we think of sites such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram. They are user-driven applications which are all growing rapidly (Kapoor, Temilmani, Rana, Patil, Dwivedi, & Nerur, 2017). For example, in 2017, Facebook had 1.97 billion users (Statista, 2020a), and remains one of the world leaders of social media in digital space.

This digital world, sometimes referred to as cyberspace or virtual world, is a new kind of place, an electronic space between computers that is "'everywhere and nowhere'. It is 'like Oz---it is, we get there, but it has no location' in physical space" (Stenger 1991, 53). According to some of its most avid participants, "in cyberspace we can go anywhere, do anything, be anyone we chose. We slip in and out of virtual identities as easily as we change our clothes" (Cowan, 2005, 257). Digital religion happens in this virtual space. The next sections will explore what digital religion is, and the state of the field so far.

2.1 What is digital religion?

Religion as a whole is a complicated concept to define, attempts either being too general or too narrow (George 2005). There is no universal definition of religion on which

everyone agrees. It then becomes difficult for me to define what digital religion is without a definitive definition of religion. For the purpose of this literature review and my research, religion will include popular forms of religion as well as traditional institutionalized forms of religion (Helland 2002, 2004, George 2005). By religion here I refer to "organized systems of spiritual beliefs" (Campbell 2005, p.5). Specifically, this will consist of Catholicism, a denomination of Christianity, as my research will look at three self-identifying Catholic Facebook groups.

Hurd (2001) sees technology itself as a "consequence of humanity" (in George 2005, 64), the next natural step. The Internet is used daily for a multitude of reasons, including spiritual and religious life. The data shows that almost two-thirds of American adults use the Internet for faith relevant reasons (Hoover *et al.*, 2004 in McKenna & West 2005, 942-943). The Pew Research Center reported in 2014 that 1 in 5 Americans share their religious faith on the Internet, and 20% said they shared it on social media (Pew Research Center, 2014). They also reported that nearly half of adult Americans see others share their faith on the Internet (Pew Researcher Center, 2014). As Brenda Brasher notes, "[o]ne of the best-kept secrets of cyberspace is the surprising amount of religious practice that takes place there" (2001, p.9).

For the past few decades, there has been a significant change taking place in the way that people practicing religion are influenced by communication technology (Campbell, 2013). The first of the cyberchurches entities were often created by independent groups seeking to replicate or mirror some aspects of their church life online. They did so either through the design of the online 'space', or through the many resources they offered, such as sections to leave prayer requests. Following this trend, cyberchurches fully emerged, trying

to replicate the aspects of offline church service online using technology such as Internet relay chat (IRC), offering sermons, and singing through podcasts and RealAudio players. It provided a limited engagement between church members. As the virtual world continues to evolve, more continue to take advantage of its technological allowances. An example of which is *Second Life,* an online software that allows online worship experiences with more interactive options, such as avatars for members to engage with one another (Campbell, 2013).

New developments have permitted the rise of Internet campuses within a multitude of multisite churches, as well as webcasting of services and sermons via smartphone and Facebook applications that are becoming increasingly common (Campbell 2013). Instead of being an alternative social space, for many, this digital technology becomes an integral platform that alters and extends religious practice. Therefore, the term 'digital religion' refers not only to religion that takes place online but points to how the religious practices themselves are shaping the digital media 'spaces'.

2.2 Waves of research

For the first 10 to 20 years, the study of the digital world of religion was primarily qualitative. Campbell and Vitullo have identified four waves of research in the past three decades. In the first wave, authors such as Campbell, Dawson, Cowan, and Lövheim, spoke about the emergence of virtual communities and observed their presence from various perspectives. Here, they saw online communities as separate from their offline religious practices. Their interest was on the possibility of describing emerging online religious groups as a community, and whether those religious communities could be qualified as authentic when compared to their offline counterparts (Campbell and Vitullo, 2016).

In the second wave, authors such as Helland, Hadden & Cowan, and Hojsgaard & Warburg, attempted to identify and categorize the common characteristics of online communities and the way their members were interacting online. They were interested in whether members of religious communities online viewed them as authentic, even though they represented a novel form of social-communicative practices than those established in their offline congregations (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). In the third stage, authors such as Cheong & Poon, as well as Campbell, started to recognize that not only were there forms of religious communities emerging online, but there were offline religious communities discovering ways to use digital platforms and technologies to serve their membership and enhance their ministry work (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). They considered how communities online and offline could be characterized as part of a whole (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). Many Internet users do not see a disconnect between their offline social life, networks, patterns of being, and their online communities.

In the fourth, and current stage, authors are examining the intersection between offline and online religiosity, establishing the implications of the connection between 'user-believers' and new media technology for community (such as Cheong & Poon 2009, and Campbell 2010), identity (such as Cowan 2005, and Lövheim 2006), rituals (such as Helland 2007, and Grieve 2010), and authority (such as Campbell 2007) (in Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). They examine the integration of online and offline 'spaces'. They examine the relationship between the two communities and how their members can assimilate their faith between both realities (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). Scholars now recognize that the Internet is embedded in the everyday. This project is therefore situated in the crux of the offline and

online world, trying to understand how they relate to one another, and how one affects the other.

Not addressed by these scholars, however, is the question of whether and to what extent online community practices may influence or shape offline religious communities. In the early stages of research on online communities, the focus was often on how they tried to replicate their offline habits, religious practices, and communication as members sought to import them onto the Web (Campbell and Vitullo, 2016). This means that these online communities that have links to their specific offline religious communities often reflected traits of those institutions, whether intentionally or not. However, research has also shown that online communities are programmed with different DNA than offline ones. This can be seen in the potential of digital media to surpass time-space boundaries and structural hierarchies; hence online communities display more dynamic qualities than traditional structures of offline communities (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016).

2.3 Categorizations in the study of digital religion

Different categorizations can be seen within the study of digital religion. One of the most popular and most used by researchers is one that Christopher Helland introduced in his 2000 article *Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas.* This categorization centers on two methods of communication, the one-to-many and the many-to-many. The first category that he discussed is *"religion-online"* (Helland 2002, p. 294). Here the information found about religion is presented in a way that utilizes the Internet to communicate in a one-to-many form. Even if information regarding doctrines, dogmas, and organizations is found, it is impossible for participants to contribute their opinions, beliefs, or other input into the website (Helland 2002). Such controlled environments include sites

such as www.vatican.va as well as www.scientology.org (p. 294). These sites offer information to the users but are limited by the fact that users are unable to reciprocate communication.

The second classification that Helland proposes is named "*online-religion*". This fashion of participation "closely mirrors the ideal interactive environment of the web itself" and favours the many-to-many communication (Helland 2002, p. 294). Here, users are permitted to interact with the websites in various active and interactive ways. This interaction can include online prayers, worship, and meditation, and is accomplished through links, chat rooms, and bulletin boards (Helland 2002). Settings not only allow users to contribute personal beliefs, but it enables users to receive personal feedback. Such environments can be found on sites such as www.partenia.com (pp. 294-95). These two categorizations of research within digital religion split the researched sites into two categories: those where there is one-to-many communication, where the users cannot interact with the site, and those where there is many-to-many communication, which encourages users to interact with the site and other users. The field of study is not limited to this categorization.

Anastasia Karaflogka, in her 2002 article *Religious Discourse and Cyberspace,* brings forth two different perceptions of cyber religion: "religion *on* cyberspace" and "religion *in* cyberspace" (pp. 284-285, italics added for emphasis). The first one, religion on cyberspace, refers to the information provided or uploaded to the Internet by any religion, church, individual, or organization, that is not only accessible online, but can also be found offline. Here, the Internet acts to transfer and mediate information that has already been endorsed and determined by diverse religious traditions found outside of cyberspace

(Karaflogka, 2002). The second one, religion in cyberspace, refers to religion that is created and only exists in that same cyberspace. Here, the Internet operates as a creative space where new religious ideas and information are created in cyberspace (Karaflogka, 2002). Both perceptions of cyber religion (religion *on* cyberspace VS religion *in* cyberspace) that Karaflogka discusses look at information found on the Internet. and whether it links back to the offline world where it was created, or if said information of religious content and tradition originated in the online world. This provides two different approaches to look at information gathered by research.

Morten Hojsgaard, in his 2005 article *Cyber-religion: On the cutting edge between the virtual and the real,* somewhat disagrees with Karaflogka's idea that cyber-religion is something that is exclusively in cyberspace, and finds it problematic. He criticizes the notion that religions may have an "essence or existence" separate from human existence, which contradicts the idea of religion as "synthetic constructs of human thoughts, acts, organizations, etc." (p. 51). Since the creator of the Web page who began the conversation does not exclusively live on the screen, it is impossible for those religious sites to be restricted to cyberspace as they were born in the offline world. Despite those objections, Hojsgaard agrees that cyber religion is a distinct part of the digital world that people have designed and participated in since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Hojsgaard, 2005).

He proposes a model of cyber-religion that contains three analytical parameters: mediation, content, and organization (see fig. 1 in this paper, or fig. 4.1 in Hojsgarrd's article, *Cyber-Religion: on the cutting edge between the virtual and the real,* 2005). The proposed mediation parameter parallels somewhat the question of location as raised by Karaflogka.

This dimension spreads from "virtual communication" at the center of the model, towards "body-centered communication" at the edge (Hojsgaard, 2005, p.52). This refers to communication either happening in cyber-space or outside of cyber-space, in the offline world. This parameter cannot be the only aspect of cyber-religion, but must be combined with another, such as content. The second parameter, content, spreads from "reflection of cyber culture" at the center of the model, towards "reflection of religious traditions" at the edge (p. 55). This refers to the content either being a reflection of cyber culture (dynamic, fluid, technology-driven, *etc*.), or being representative of established religious traditions.

The third and last perimeter of the model refers to organizational matters. It spreads from "no institutionalization" at the center of the model, towards "complete institutionalization" at the edge (p. 55). That is not to mean that all cyber-religious environments are anti-institutionalized. Some of them are starting to institutionalize, and we can expect that more will continue to develop hierarchical structures. Therefore, for one to consider an Internet-mediated religious group that is solely on the Internet, they would need to not become institutionalized (Hojsgaard, 2005). According to his proposed model, the "prototypical 'cyber-religion' is mediated or located primarily in cyberspace, its contents reflect the main features of the postmodern cyber culture, and it is only sparingly organized" (Hojsgaard, 2005, p. 55).

Heidi Campbell, in her work, proposed four categories of research on religion and the Internet. The first category was "observational analysis" (p.7). This category encompasses researchers who focussed on the idea of cyber religion itself. They used surveys, online observations, and interviews with webmasters and Internet users to attempt to evaluate the effects of cyber-religion (Campbell, 2006; see also Campbell 2003). The second category is

that of "philosophical/theological examinations" (p.7). This includes scholars that are investigating a single issue, such as sacred spaces, to try and interpret the influence of cyberspace, and the way that the internet can be used to restore the connection between individuals and their religious ideas and beliefs (Campbell, 2006; see also Campbell, 2003). The third categorization, which is the least developed of the four, is "theoretical development" (p.7). This category recognizes that need to develop, test, and implement conceptual frameworks to interpret the empirical data generated in the field of computer-mediated studies (Campbell, 2006; see also Campbell, 2003). The fourth and final categorization is "social ethnography" (p.8). Scholars in this category investigate the way distinct online cultures and communities communicate, form social identities, and negotiate relationships (Campbell, 2006; see also Campbell 2003).

These categorizations were a great starting point for the contextualization conveyed in different works of the field and offered a way to consider the various methods and focal points. However, as the diversity of studies in the field has multiplied since the introduction of Campbell's categorizations, they appear to be somewhat limited and even incomplete. For instance, research in ritual and authority are not covered in these categories (Campbell 2006). Since the publication of the categorization, Campbell has attempted to recontextualize the field of Internet religion studies outside of her proposed categories of research. She has since contextualized the field through the various discourses, topics, and narratives employed by religious users and researchers (Campbell 2006). She goes on to identify common themes and concepts in the field of religion online on which researchers are focussing: theology/spirituality, religion, morality/ethics, practical/ministry applications, religious

traditions, community, identity, authority/power, and ritual (Campbell, 2006). Others have also attempted to categorize the waves of research into the field.

In the introduction of their 2005 collection of works, Hojsgaard and Warburg highlight three separate waves of research. The first wave of research focused on "the new and extraordinary aspects of cyberspace where religion could (and probably would) do almost anything" (Campbell 2006, p. 8). The researchers analysed the new technology of the Internet and how it was forming opportunities for new religions and practices to take place online. It also addressed how the computers were transforming religion, and even culture in general (Campbell 2006). The second wave, according to them, focused on a "more realistic perspective" where it was recognized that it was not only the new technology that was bringing about these new forms of religion online, but these latest developments could also be attributed to the people using the technology (pp. 8-9). As for the third wave of research, they think that it "may be just around the corner" as methodologies begin to mature within the scholarship created from different environments (p. 9).

These pursuits in defining the state of the field of digital religion (also referred to as virtual religion), and where the research stands, portray the recurring need to outline and demonstrate how religion and the Internet interact, how they overlap, and how they can be researched and understood as an "evolving area of study" (Campbell 2006, p. 8). This simplifies the task of determining what has been done so that we can approach religion and the Internet in new and innovative ways, as the field is in constant evolution.

2.4 The religious, technology and the Internet

This section explores what people do on the Internet as a way to situate religion in virtual space. Internet users use the Web for a variety of religious reasons, causes, and

initiatives. These can include virtual pilgrimages, tours of sacred temples, and even real-time rituals that take place in sacred places (Helland 2007). The Internet is effecting change in religious communities around the world. Temples are being wired with high-speed Internet connections; people are even being hired to develop and maintain these newly established networks (Helland, 2007). The Internet is becoming more accessible in different and somewhat surprising areas around the world.

An activity that users can enact online is sometimes referred to as 'virtual pilgrimage', which became popular in the late 1990s, and could bring people to a variety of destinations through virtual means. This form of pilgrimage offered users the chance to travel through cyberspace, and become a "virtual tourist" at some of the most sacred events taking place around the world (Helland 2007, p. 968). It also offered the chance for users to visit places that were otherwise inaccessible to them. For instance, through virtual reality, an individual who is not Muslim can experience the Hajj, people can view a sacred chapel, take a walk deep inside the Vatican, and even travel to sacred sites that no longer exist (e.g., Second Temple at Jerusalem), or that are mythical (Helland, 2007). It brings many inaccessible parts of the world to those who wish to visit them, making them just a click of the mouse away. Anyone with a stable Internet connection and a computer (or other smart devices such as a phone) can visit these spiritual places. It can even facilitate the connection between these spiritual and religious places, favoring communication between them (Meintel 2012).

The Internet is not only used by believers, but also by religious groups to convey their messages and information. For certain religious groups, the Internet is used only as a tool to display their information and not an environment where religious beliefs and practices are shared (Helland 2002). Often, official websites of religious groups are

professionally designed. The information found on the platforms and the environment created is controlled; nothing is left to chance. This gives religious organizations the same sense of control as they have offline in the form of one-to-many communication when information is presented, and no interaction is allowed (Helland, 2002). By omitting an interactive interface for their followers, they are enforcing the distribution of information and restraining the communication of personal beliefs that may not be in line with those of the institution. This authority also extends across the world, sometimes offering their followers new spiritual and religious resources (Meintel 2012).

Christopher Helland, in his 2002 article *Surfing for Salvation,* points out the importance of recognizing that the Internet can represent a different experience for each individual. Everyone utilizes the technology of the Internet is various ways, and base their usage on their understanding of the Internet, what it is, and what it can be used for (Steinfeld 1986). In some ways, this understanding can limit the use of the Internet for an individual who may not understand its potential. For example, if they believe that the Internet is only intended to find information and not participate, they might never seek to actively participate online.

Among the varied forms religious activity can take online, one of the most popular religious use of the Internet is that of gathering religious information (Campbell 2004; 2006). Some even search for information about religious traditions other than their own (Howard 2010; McKenna and West 2005). Religious activity online can also be found in platforms such as Myspace, a social media site popular in the early 2000s, where communication, interaction, and the exchange of information are found and displayed in what we now view as personal profiles of those who use the platform. Here people can share music, art, rituals,

beliefs, and so much more. It is a good way for individuals to express their personal religious beliefs and share them with the world (Walker 2010).

2.5 What attracts people to cyberspace?

Some researchers have examined what motivates individuals to navigate the digital world and what they seek to benefit from cyberspace. Many things attract users to cyberspace. One of the main aspects is the ability for users to access religious sites or places that would otherwise not be accessible to them. It brings communities and people together and facilitates communication between users across the world. One of the ways that the technology of the Internet plays a positive role in the lives of its users is through digital religion (George 2005). It is believed that through the technology of the Internet, many individuals will never physically travel to a church, but that they will instead seek substantial spiritual experiences through their 'travels' on the Web, (George Barna, 1998 in George 2005).

Cost is also something that attracts users to the Internet. The Web is an inexpensive, effortless, and effective way to communicate religious information on an enormous scale. This reach for communication is something that could no longer be accomplished by previously employed media (Helland 2007). Cost is also a factor in regards to travel. Viewing festivals, pilgrimages, and rituals online has many advantages, one being that you save on airfare and other travel-related expenses, not being surrounded by giant crowds, or struggling to find accommodations (Helland, 2007). On top of all those savings, staying at home and watching from your personal space means that you remain anonymous; you do not need to communicate and explain to others who you are or why you are there (George 2005, 66).

For several diaspora traditions, the Internet is used not only to travel to different realities and sacred sites but, perhaps more importantly, to re-connect with their sacred homelands (Helland 2007, 970). It offers them an opportunity to shorten the distance between diaspora communities, and to connect with one another, despite living in different nations. "In effect, the Web became a medium that allowed for new relationships to develop between people and places" (Helland 2007, 967). These members are also using the Internet to create awareness and inform others of the needs of their homeland, help raise money, distribute funds and supplies. This method of awareness has been used both individuals and organizations to help facilitate philanthropic ventures (Helland, 967). The Internet multiplies the sources of religious authority that are available. It also increases knowledge, the dissemination of information, and opportunities to discuss religious topics (Meintel 2012), making it available to anyone who has access to an Internet connection, a computer, and who wants to be active in the virtual religious community.

2.6 Digital experience: real or not?

Other researchers are interested in determining whether the digital experience is real. This will help establish the genuineness of the experience for my three Facebook groups. There is considerable debate over whether virtual religious experiences can be considered real or not, or whether they can be compared to offline experiences. "The ruling of the U.S. bishops' secretariat for the liturgy was that no sacrament can be received by electronic communication […] since technology cannot replace the physical presence among gathered people" (George 2005, 66).

McKenna and West in their 2005 article *Give me that Online-time religion: The role of the Internet in spiritual life,* study whether participation in online religious groups can

yield the same benefits that have been associated with involvement in a traditional religious organization in the offline world, for example, a church, temple, or mosque. "Places of worship have long served needs of members beyond simply providing a place for them to express their faith" (McKenna & West, 2005, p. 944). Many of the benefits, such as increased social support or self-acceptance (amongst others), associated with the participation in a traditional religious group, have also been shown to increase for those who partake in virtual groups that center on Identity (McKenna & West, 2005). There are many reasons why an individual will gravitate towards an online group. Many of the participants in these online discussion forums do not actively attend church. Therefore, their participation in these virtual groups gives them the chance to obtain crucial benefits that they would not necessarily receive otherwise (McKenna & West, 2005).

Howard, in this 2010 article *Enacting a Virtual 'ekklesia': Online Christian Fundamentalism as Vernacular Religion,* interviewed two couples who revealed that their "online communication has largely replaced the social functions of their brick and mortar churches" (p. 732). According to Howard, "the religiosity of an online communication act resides in the individual actor's experience" (p. 732). For these couples, notably in the case of a member named Dean, the satisfaction gained through this virtual ekklesia is powerful and even surprising. As he put it during an interview: "we find a life and fellowship on the Internet that is embarrassing to admit! Who would have thought? Who would have believed it? [… that] the [holy] Spirit is able to pierce through beyond mere characters floating on a screen" (Howard 2010, p. 739). When they have church online, "their online vernacular religious expression creates a new kind of ekklesia", one that happens without the aid of religious institutions (p. 739). Although this ekklesia is completed by the members, it does

lack a specific geographic location, it is placeless, making it unlike any other congregation seen before (Howard, 2010).

People are going online for a multitude of reasons, using the Internet in a limitless fashion to gather information, discuss, and argue about religion, post prayer requests, chat, and even participate in online religious rituals (Helland 2007). According to Helland, the Internet also has limitations, and there is a "disconnect that occurs between an individual and the event when it is being watched through the screen of a computer" (p. 968). A certain genuineness of the experience is lost. For example, a virtual pilgrimage lived through the usage of a virtual avatar representing the believer, allowing the Internet user to travel to his destination virtually. There is a lack of embodied connection between the avatar, the user, and the actual real-world location of the sites (Helland, 2007). True, people can certainly watch the event and even experience it through a computer screen, but they remain disembodied, in that their body cannot physically be part of the event, removing a layer of authenticity from the experience. Virtual pilgrimage is solitary, done alone, and usually not witnessed by anyone other than the participant (Helland, 2007). Those present in person at the site have no knowledge nor awareness of this online participant. They are invisible, and therefore do not participate in the activities that occur (Helland 2007). That does not mean that the "spiritualizing of the Internet", as Heidi Campbell (2005) calls it, should be underestimated (Helland 2007).

New mediums are created so that the virtual traveler can experience a stronger connection with the sacred place. "In the rapidly developing world of computer-mediated communication, however, the full implications of this activity have yet to be determined" (Helland 2007, p. 975). Therefore, although it seems like the connection could not be as

strong as it would be in person, we have no way of knowing if it will always be that way, considering the fast-changing Internet technology. As one Webmaster (Sanitsuda, 2000) says: "If monks don't adapt, they will soon lose their role in society" (in Taylor 2003, p. 302). But even though they try to make Buddhism more accessible across the planet, "there is no indication that a Net community will replace monastic community, as 'Dhamma Web sites … will never decrease the importance of monks as role models for Buddhists'" (Sanitsuda, 2000 in Taylor 2003, p. 302).

For instance, there are now several Internet-based virtual reality (VR) systems that people can use to facilitate the interaction with each other in a "three-dimensional computer-generated world", where things seem to be present in their reality (Schroeder, Heather, & Lee, 1998, para. 3). One of the first worlds to be studied in this virtual/digital-oriented world is the E-Church. Although several "other religiously-oriented worlds" (para 3) have since been created, this E-Church provides both VR and text-only systems, making it a great platform to compare different forms of social interaction (Schroeder *et al*., 1998).

However, virtual worlds are not as new a concept as one would assume; multi-user dimension/multiplayer real-time virtual worlds were created in the 1970s, being featured in various online-roleplaying games since then (Radde-Antweiler 2008). Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (2008), looks at a VR program called *Second Life,* where users can create a virtual second life where they take the shape of a digital avatar. "It is assumed that 200,000 to 600,000 residents are 'living' an active 'Second Life'. There are usually approx. ten to thirty thousand residents online at the same time" (p. 175), making it a very popular 'place'. *Second Life* is not only seen as a game where you can invent a life but also as an "enhancement of real-life possibilities on an economical, a social as well as a religious level" (p. 175). In this

world, you can visit temples to perform rituals and prayers. You get to wear religiously appropriate garments, and even wash your hands in purification ceremonies. This world is limitless. It even contains an exchange of real money when visiting certain sites, such as it would in real life, to help 'maintain' these sacred 'places' (Radde-Antweiler 2008). These people are living their lives in this virtual world and going through real experiences. "If current trends hold, computers and computer networks will play an increasingly significant role in the religion of the future" (O'Leary 1996, p. 57).

Through these websites, people may be able to "go to the 'Holy Land-online', as the Pontiff did his pilgrimage" (MacWilliams 2002, p. 317). But these virtual pilgrimages are still not the 'real thing', as, on a basic level, it is instantaneous, contradicting the idea that a pilgrimage is a hardship involving personal sacrifices (MacWilliams, 2002). Online and offline are not the same, "(…) at the most basic levels of social interaction, online and offline shopping are hardly comparable" (Cowan 2005, p. 258), in that the online experience is vastly different from offline. Cowan goes too far here in his statement, in that they may not be the same, but they are certainly comparable. We can acknowledge some of the differences, such as not running into friends or getting interrupted by a sales attendant when shopping online. There is a lack of physical queues, such as smell, taste, and even hearing. Even though you can 'see' the store, the experience lacks some aspects of offline shopping and is only a representation of its potential (Cowan, 2005). While those aspects mentioned by Cowan are not unfounded, some aspects of online shopping are certainly comparable to offline shopping, such as the satisfaction of receiving your items, trying your clothes out at home, and even returning them for different sizes. The lack of identicality to offline shopping does not make online shopping any less real or authentic.

Often, ritual requires some form of "specialized offline behavior" on the part of the participants enacting the ritual (Cowan 2005, p. 259). We cannot be online without being offline, but we can be offline without being online. Until a time where things are reversed, the online world will never exist without the offline one (Cowan, 2005). This applies to social life in general, not only on a religious level. First, despite the industry stating that we are all "globally connected", that the Web can be accessed by anyone, anywhere, and at any time it is simply incorrect (p. 262). Although the Internet reaches more individuals every day, there are more people across the world that lack Internet access than those who have it. Therefore, as long as the basic needs, such as water, housing, and medical care, are more important than instant messaging and checking email, this gap will exist. Secondly, this technology is fragile and dependent on complicated hardware, software, servers, routers, and so on (Cowan, 2005). That means that in the case of a thunderstorm, one heading to church might grab an umbrella, but that same storm can easily crash the Internet Server and cut all communication in the area. "It is a simple equation: no Internet, no online church service" (Cowan 2005, p. 262).

2.7 A question of identity

Churches and religious institutions have developed websites, and now provide services online, such as broadcastings, discussion groups, chats, and the ability to request prayers from religious leaders. "The fact that the majority of studies published so far focus on Christianity suggests that the interests of religious organizations have also played a role in shaping the aims of the research" (Lövheim 2008, p. 205). That is not to say that all Internet research centers on Christianity, it can also be seen through other traditions such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism, *etc.* Christianity only has one of the most

mentions from scholars, the other being Paganism (Campbell, 2006). As many of the websites are Christian, many of the research studies are therefore focused on Christianity. Some researchers, such as Larsson (2003), argue that the "relative anonymity of computer-mediated communication makes it easier for young people to find alternative sources of information about religious beliefs and practices, pose questions to religious leaders or approach them in order to talk about problems and existential questions" (in Lövheim 2008, p. 206). The relationship between younger people and the Internet is one that is more individualistic, and that speaks of autonomy, the finding of the self, the identity (Lövheim, 2008).

The finding of the self, or the construction of identity, is the measure by which a person (an individual) understands themselves distinctly from others, but also in relation to others in their environment (Lövheim 2004), as a unique entity. This identity of theirs is continuously being formed and shaped over time, constructing a memoir or a story of the self, using the lessons learned during their lives, in their past, and their present (Lövheim 2004). There is a certain fascination found in the field where scholars try to determine if the same conditions that structure identity formation in face-to-face interactions are also found on the Internet. This means that the studies have neglected to look at how Internet users are not independent of their offline lives and how that it influences them (Lövheim 2004). Castells (1997) and Baym (1998) point to how the different positions and experiences of individuals in the offline world may influence the skills and resources they bring to their online interactions (in Lövheim 2004). As young peoples' social models for behaviour are disappearing as their interests move towards discovering what is 'new' and 'cool', it makes them perfect targets for commercial companies and the entertainment industry who seek to

expose them to their own version of social and role models (Ziehe, 1994, in Lövheim, 2004, pp. 61-62), moving away from the traditionally acceptable, towards a more modern adaptation.

According to the theory of social identity, as long as the social group they follow adds "positive features" (social support, self-acceptance, inclusivity), to a person's social identity, they will remain a member and continue to participate in the group (McKenna & West 2005, p. 945). But, if the identity of the religious group contributes negatively to that individual's 'self-esteem', they "may be unable to discard that identity and no longer identify with the group" (p. 945), causing irreparable damage that may permanently alter their identity. On the other hand, the vast number of available groups that are devoted to all the shades of virtual belief allows the individual the opportunity to find a group that will have similar beliefs and values, which may be more of a possibility online than locally, especially in smaller remote regions (McKenna & West 2005).

It seems as though many of the same benefits associated with the participation and the membership in a "traditional religious institution" can also be associated with that of membership in "a virtual group devoted to one's religious beliefs" (McKenna and West, 2005, p. 953). For members of virtual religious communities, these communities are just as important to their daily lives as is their religious membership and involvement in their local religious community. A person's virtual identity can grow into an essential aspect of the self (McKenna and West 2005). The strength of the group in which the individual is a member is established by regular attendance and exchanges on common topics. One possible weakness is the possibility that the individuals may be lying, that they are misrepresenting their identities (Schroeder *et al*., 1998). Though this is possible in all research involving people,

here, it is facilitated by the anonymity of the Internet. It is clear that religious identity is neither simply absorbed through the Internet, nor is it purely imported from the offline context. "Identity is both constructed and performed, as Internet users draw on multiple resources available online" (Campbell, 2012, p. 71), and offline (see also Lövheim 2004). This is great for those who lack opportunities in the offline context, opening up a whole new world of possibilities (Campbell, 2012; see also Hennebry & Dawson, 1999).

What cyberspace brings that the offline world does not is the ability to determine the identity free of location; members are free to join any community, not only those that are in shared geographical space (Walker 2010). According to O'Leary, an individual undergoes a particular sort of transformation in cyberspace, an "anonymity" that allows "a previously unknown freedom to construct an identity divorced from gender, age, or physical appearance" (1996). It gives the person the freedom to be who they want to be without being 'tied down' by their body.

A recent study by Wendi Bellar (2017) combined in-depth interviews with digital diary reports to investigate mobile applications (apps) audiences in how Evangelical Christians choose and employ religious apps. They also looked at how the engagement in those apps informed their 'religious identities'. In their research, they use identity as synonymous with "understanding the self", similarly to Goffman in his 1959 article, *The Presentation of Self Everyday Life* (in Bellar, 2017, p. 114). An individual's identity informs how they may understand their lives in regard to other social actors and structures influencing their lives (Bellar, 2017). Understanding religious users' culture and community is essential to comprehend how "online tools are used to construct religious identities" (Bellar, 2017, p. 114). The study's results support the idea of a storied identity, where

individuals are constructed from multiple sources: online, offline, and mobile (differentiated due to its modalities and environments). This allows the individuals to continue re-constructing their identity through different resources, such as online sites and mobile apps, but also in relation to others and their networked community (the way in which individuals define themselves in relation to their religious group) (Bellar, 2017).

2.8 Methodological and ethical issues

There are several methodological and ethical issues present in the study of online interaction. Allen (1996) points out that the structure of websites on the Internet can signal to users (and researchers) the rights and obligations of the platforms. For instance, there are both 'public' and 'private' spaces as well as communication channels that exist simultaneously within the field of study. It is unclear where the public and private lie in cyberspace, as so much of it appears public. It can be hard to discern what is someone's opinion and what is simple information found on the World Wide Web (Schroeder *et al.*, 1998).

There is also a question of whether or not the activity being accomplished online is genuine or not, as it can be very ambiguous (Helland, 2005). So far, it is impossible to evaluate the activity that happens in private digital spaces, such as a cyber-confessional. Although it seems that individuals are using the Internet to have some kind of personal interaction with a religious professional, such as a priest, "for all we know, they could be talking about the weather" (Helland 2005, p. 8). All we can do is assume that the experiences are authentic and that the people using these services are doing so in good faith and with accuracy. But at the same time, I think this could also be said about a real-life confessional, or other means of communication such as telephone, letters, or other means of

communication. All those modes of communication offer levels of anonymity to the participants, even if not on the same level as online communication. One of the advantages of online communication that is not present in the other forms of communication, is the speed in which it can happen, especially when compared to letter mail. Online communication can be instantaneous, only a microscopic amount of time separating the time the message is sent, and when it is received (Quan-Haase, 2012).

2.9 Elements of community in a digital world

There are different elements of community in the digital world identified by researchers in the field. As my research studies whether a community's social media (here Facebook), can facilitate offline community, it is essential to be able to identify if a virtual group is, in fact, a community. The first question that should be asked is whether or not virtual communities are possible. As the Internet became more and more of a reality, some claim that the Internet accommodates the formation of new forms of community without limiting factors such as the distinction of class, differences in space and time, stereotyping, and gender discrimination (Dawson, 2004). Virtual community is always available, as the day never ends in the virtual world (Healy, 1997). Early research lacked empirical evidence and often assumed that virtual communities were present without addressing why or how. As communities are multifaceted, not all virtual groups are communities (Dawson, 2004)

It is, therefore, important to define criteria that make a virtual community. As Internet studies grow, more and more researchers have tried to address the question. Rheingold, in his 1993 book *The Virtual Community*, argued that virtual communities emerge on the Internet when there are enough participants in a 'public' discussion for an extended period, demonstrating a connection and creating webs of relationships in the virtual

world. Therefore, his parameters of virtual community rely on public discussion, one that happens over a long period of time and demonstrates ample emotion. The issue with these indicators is that they are not truly measurable. Therefore, we need a more definitive approach to be able to define a group online as a virtual community. It is important to note here that although there are hundreds of years of research, that there is no consensus on a definition of community (Brint, 2001; Dawson, 2004).

There are, therefore, many approaches to detecting the presence of community on the Internet. Nancy Baym, in 1998, put forth four formative factors of virtual community: technical factors, cultural factors, social factors, and immediate situational factors. The first of these, the technical factors, are the systematic influences of the technological networks being used. These variables can include Internet connection, how many computers are connected to the same network, their flexibility, programmability, and user-friendliness. It can also include whether the interaction is synchronous or asynchronous, as it impacts the interaction that can happen in the virtual space. In synchronous systems, operations are instantaneous (such as replies), and seem more normal, while in asynchronous systems, there may be a delay in operations (Baym, 1998; see also Dawson, 2004).

The second are cultural factors. Virtual settings are also impacted by the cultural backgrounds of those who participate (Baym, 1998). Research has found differences in how students from different cultures, such as Finnish, Korean, or American, use the Internet (Kim & Bonk, 2002). The third is the diversity in social factors. This includes the features of the group, such as the size, its demography, ease of use of the technology, organizational structure, *etc*. It includes what the participants have in common, such as all being students or employees from the same organization (Baym, 1998). The fourth and last of those factors are

more immediate and situational factors. This includes the purpose, assumed or true, of the group. It greatly impacts how the group members interact when there is a productivity purpose to the group, such as to generate ideas, create solutions, negotiate conflict, *etc*., as opposed to when a group is only recreational (Baym, 1998). Although her approach encompasses the factors that can impact a virtual community, it does not indicate how we determine that a group is a community.

Working from these four factors brought forth by Nancy Baym (1998), of technical factors, cultural factors, social factors, and immediate situational factors, another researcher, Lorne Dawson (2004), developed six elements that can be used to evaluate the presence of a virtual community. These are the elements that are used to guide my research. The elements are: (1) interactivity, (2) stability of membership, (3) stability of identity, (4) netizenship and social control, (5) personal concern, and (6) occurrence in a public 'space' (Dawson, 2004). Therefore, a virtual group may be a community if there is a fair amount of interaction between the members through ongoing conversations. These conversations must be stable and should happen frequently enough over long periods of time. It is also essential that the identity of the membership be stable, in the sense that they do not change their names or character displays often. This helps members develop trust in those with which they interact. The group must also have a sense of responsibility, and someone to enforce rules and regulations. The members should not use the group only for practical uses; they should demonstrate an interest in the personal lives of the others in the group. Finally, these interactions must also occur in a 'public' space, where others can witness and participate as needed. In the data analysis section, I will expand on how these elements are used in my research.

Many before have been of the mind that those who use the Internet do so in ways that are continuations or augmentations of their offline lives (e.g., Anderson & Tracey, 2001; Dawson, 2004). It is more likely that the online life complements that of its offline counterpart, than the Internet being a complete substitute for more traditional forms of social interactions. There is no reason to expect that religious use of the Internet would differ (Dawson, 2004). This supports the idea that the Facebook groups that I investigate in this thesis are an extension of the already established offline communities. The Internet allows for many actions that already take place offline, such as announcements, scripture, sermons, hearing confessions, and even providing counselling.

3 Methodological and Theoretical Framework

This research aims to determine if social networks, more specifically Facebook groups, can facilitate offline community. The Internet is most often used to extend and expand the participants' social presence and involvement (Dawson, 2004). The members who are part of offline communities seem to use it in ways that augment or are in line with their current social lives (e.g., Anderson, McWilliam, Lacohee, Clucas, & Cershuny, 1999; Anderson & Tracey, 2001;) (in Dawson, 2004). The Internet is highly social and seems to be a medium with a lot of potential to build community (Dawson, 2004).

Nancy Baym (1998) suggests four factors that need to be considered when detecting the presence of community online: technical factors (the technological aspects of the site itself, reply times and functions), cultural factors (the cultural background of the participants), social factors (the features of the group, such as size, demographic compositions, training in the medium, *etc*.) and more immediate situational factors (such as the purpose of the group). To help identify the presence of virtual community, this research

uses Lorne Dawson's six elements of evidence of virtual community: (1) interactivity, (2) stability of membership, (3) stability of identity, (4) netizenship and social control, (5) personal concern, and (6) occurrence in a public 'space'. His elements were influenced by the work of Nancy Baym. These elements will help analyze the offline community and detect the effects of online on offline.

3.1 Digital methods

There are many approaches to digital methods available when it comes to research in the field of digital religion that can be separated into three perspectives: digital methods as studying environments, digital methods as frames of research, and digital methods as using tools (Tsuria, Yadlin-Segal, Vitullo, & Campbell, 2017). The first perspective, digital methods as environments, means primarily focusing on where the study takes place (Scheifinger, 2016). This means paying attention to the space in which data is generated. Where does the data come from? Is it generated by the online environment, the offline environment, or both (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017)? Therefore, the emphasis is put on the origin of the data, the data itself, and the relation between the users in the group. The second perspective is that of digital methodologies as frames of research, the framework of the study (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017). This framework informs how information is organized and can imply the ways in which the digital might reframe the research; in other words, how the researcher understands the various aspects of their studies (the theory, the digital itself, the goals, *etc.*). It dictates how they understand and define the digital, how they approach it, and therefore, the data and conclusion they extricate from it. Frame is not a method, but rather it informs the researcher's perspective, here of the digital, and influences their methodological approach (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017).

The third perspective is that of digital methods as using tools. This is where my research locates itself. Here we focus on the tools used by researchers to conduct their research in both online and offline environments (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017). Digital tools can take many different forms but fall into two main categories, those that originate offline and are used online, and those that originate online. For example, many use online surveys, but they existed long before the invention of the Internet (Rogers, 2010). These tools can include interviews, surveys, databases, and search engines. My research uses offline tools adapted to the online world, allowing me to capture verbatim what my participants generate in data. This happened through the use of textual analysis, ethnography, and semi-structured interviews.

When it comes to textual analysis, and given the flexibility of the online world, we cannot only look at the written word to conduct the analysis. We must also be open to the analysis of images, pictures, audio, and video (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017), all of which were present in my Facebook groups. There exist many digital tools to analyze data generated by textual analysis used by many scholars, such as Tapor.ca (Rockwell*,* Sinclair, Uszkalo & Radzikowska., 2016), wordle.net (Feinberg, 2014), and Coder KH (Koichi, 2016). Due to the nature of the content of the Facebook groups and the amount of data, there was no need to use software to complete the analysis.

For interviews in the digital world, there are many tools available to researchers. For example, a popular tool is that of email. This allows the respondents to either reply right away, to reply later, or to do so over a period of time (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017). There are alternatives that allow for instant responses, such as more chat-like communication mediums (instant messaging) (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017). This was not an issue when it came to my research,

as my responses did not need to be instantaneous. These tools may also offer more anonymous options so that interviewees need not worry about the impression they are making. It also allows them to hide their emotions behind a wall of text (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017).

For the ethnography in my research, the environment also became the tool to gather data. The technology of Facebook groups recorded the interaction between the members and allowed me to participate through observation, going back to their creation. There are other tools that can be used in such settings, ones that were unnecessary for me, such as Adobe Connect, wiki sites, blogs, and more (Tsuria *et al.*, 2017). The next sections delve deeper into the digital methods and tools used in my study.

Ethnography

3.2 A qualitative approach (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016) will be needed for this research, centering on three waves of data collection: ethnographic work, textual analysis, and semi-structured interviews[1] (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). Ethnographical work articulates the tensions about the extent to which a researcher can simultaneously observe and participate in communities in online environments (O'Leary, 1996). To what extent would participation influence or bias the critical evaluation of a specific community? For this research, the ethnographic work will rely on observations of how offline communities who have an online presence conduct their worship, how they preach, offer support, communicate, interact, and so on (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). To do this, I observed the interactions occurring in the Facebook group, how they are communicating and interacting with one another, dating back to the creation of their groups. As I do not have access to their offline lives, a portion of my interview questionnaire was in reference to these,

[1] Due to human participation in my research, ethics approval was requested and received by the University of Ottawa Office of Research Ethics and Integrity.

to facilitate the interaction of both the online and offline community aspects. In my analysis of the content of their posts, I also investigated the offline events held in their respective communities.

3.3 Textual analysis

Using textual analysis can help scholars understand both meaning-making and community building online. This is argued by Shields and Shields (1996): "[o]ne can talk of a virtual social world, or virtual interaction and a sense of a virtual self even within the context of what exists now: mostly text-based electronic mail and bulletin board postings" (p.6). When it comes to Facebook, this textual analysis also included items such as icons, images, photos, and videos. To complete the textual analysis, I looked at posts and comments shared in the groups by their memberships, photos, and videos of events that they held in their parish, posters of activities that they were advertising, *etc*. This allowed me to build a clear image of the interactions in their online communities.

3.4 Semi-structured interviews

The last portion of the data gathering centered on interviews conducted with a number of members from the online communities connected to the Facebook groups involved in my research. A broad definition of interview is a meeting where questions are asked from a first party to a second party to document the conversation for the gathering of data. This was a semi-structured interview process to guide the conversation, but not in a way that unduly limited the scope of the conversation (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). This allowed for prompts, such as 'why?' or 'please explain?', to help participants provide information in their answer. As the interviews were conducted by email, these prompts were

included directly in the questions so that participants could use them to guide their responses. There were a total of 57 questions covering 15 themes (see Appendix A).

As the members of the Facebook groups also have a specific offline presence in their parish, I examined the impact that the online world of Facebook has on their community, as they contain the same members, both online and offline. The interviews serve to support and to further demonstrate this impact. To build the questionnaire, I started with a list of themes that I had gathered through literature in the field. In the end, I selected 15 themes relevant to my research to help build my questionnaire: community, religion, Facebook, technology, Internet, communication, membership, meaning, bolster religious participation, motivators, family and friends, relationship building, social interaction, frequency, evangelism, criticism/qualities, information, offline life, and online life. These themes helped me organize and analyze my data.

This research also included a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B for a copy of the questionnaire). Participants were asked to provide further information about themselves, such as location, age, and gender. Collecting this data was to better understand the individuals that participated in the research, and to see if there was a difference in the demographics.

4 Data analysis

My research looked at three different self-identifying Catholic Facebook groups. I chose Catholic groups as they are the group with which I am most familiar, both in my personal life, as well as in my previous studies. To recruit these groups, I did a search through Facebook's search engine, filtering for public groups only and using keywords such as Catholic, parish, religious, parish group, and more. I searched for groups that met my

criteria of being public, having more than 30 members, being somewhat active in the past two years, and self-identifying as Catholic. The next step was to then get in touch with the administrators (admins) of the group to request access to their group and permission to gather participants within their membership (see Appendix C for a copy of the request message). To get in touch with the admins, I took advantage of the messaging software associated with Facebook. This allowed me to get in touch with them without having to have personal contact information, such as an email address or phone number. Over 30 groups were found that matched my criteria. Six of the groups responded to my request, and three of them agreed to participate in my study (see Appendix D for a copy of the permission form).

One of the challenges that I faced in reaching out to the admins of the groups is that there are limitations to the messaging software that Facebook offers. If one is not friends with the recipient, which was the case with my interactions, the recipients do not receive a notification that they have received a new message from a stranger. To see those messages, they have to go into another section of the messenger and go even a step further and accept to receive the messages and continue the conversation. This led to many of my messages not being read by the recipients, limiting my responses from the groups I contacted.

Once I had access to the groups, I introduced myself and my research project and started recruiting participants in my study and observing the activity and contents of the posts in the groups (see Appendix C for a copy of the recruitment message). For each of the groups, I was aiming for at least 3 participants in my interview. This was achieved in two of the groups, one of which also had a fourth participant, but the last of my groups only had one participant in the interview. Although my last group only generated one interview, the individual is the creator of the group, and is, therefore, the most familiar with the ins-and-

outs of the group, and was able to provide a significant amount of insight and information. In total, eight members participated in the interview, four (4) of them male, and four (4) of them female, with an average age of 53.1. See Table 1 for the participant demographic breakdown. Each participant provided me with a signed consent form (see Appendix F), and had the option to choose the method of interview, whether it be by phone, email, video call, or other. All 8 of my participants chose to complete the interview by email.

Table 1

Participant demographics

Name*	Gender	Age	Location of the parish
Adriana	Female	51	Adelaide, South Australia
Cameron	Male	42	Great Falls, Montana, United States
Douglas	Male	53	Adelaide, South Australia
Gregory	Male	52	Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Jacqueline	Female	64	Adelaide, South Australia
Kimberly	Female	74	Great Falls, Montana, United States
Rebecca	Female	35	Adelaide, South Australia
Theodore	Male	54	Great Falls, Montana, United States

* pseudonyms

To maintain the anonymity of each of my participants, I generated a pseudonym that I use to refer to each of them individually through these sections. To generate pseudonyms, I used a website called babynamewizard.com and their *NameVoyager Expert* function. This function allowed me to generate popular names in a given year filtered by a chosen letter. For each participant, I used their year of birth, and the first letter of their first name to help me generate individual anonymous names to represent each of my participants so that I could refer to them in a cohesive manner. Each participant was then associated with a random name in the list generated by the website (see Table 1 above for chosen pseudonyms).

4.1 Observations of the groups:

After I found my first group willing to give me permission to include them in my research, I began to gather data. For the groups themselves, I gathered data on the items posted in the groups from their date of creation until April of 2019. I gathered data on the number of members, admins, moderators, views per posts, comments/replies, and other interactions. I also looked at the topics discussed in the groups to see if there was variety, or if it was simply used to inform the other members of parish events. Below you will find those observations on these three groups, the first from Australia, the second from the United States, and the third from Canada.

4.1.1 Adelaide, South Australia

This group is located in Australia, and at the time of my data gathering, contained 125 members (excluding myself). Eight of those members were admins or moderators, helping lend the idea of authority to the group, and make sure that the content posted in the group was appropriate, and in line with their purpose. All the members in the group,

including the admins and moderators, were also part of their offline parish, or were once members in the past and are now alumni. Therefore, all members of the online group have a connection to its offline counterpart.

When a member posted or shared something in the group, the system kept track of who viewed the posts, dating back to the first posts. This data is available to all in the group to see. Taking a look at all the posts in the group at the time of my data gathering, on average, their posts received between 74 and 106 views from group members. Most of those views are by the most active members in the Facebook group, the same that post, comment, 'like', or react, as well as a few members who simply seem to 'observe' what happens without interacting with the posts. That means that they simply look at the content, but don't like, react, comment, or add posts of their own to the group.

When it comes to the group's actual content, most of the interactions happened in the comment sections of the posts. A member added a post in the group, and others added comments and replies to one another. However, there is a lack of actual discussion, and more often than not, ends with a comment or two not aimed to create discussion, but to simply respond to the original post. For example, when a member posted about their pastor's birthday, the single comment it received was another member adding birthday wishes; the conversation did not move any further.

The most active member of the group is not only an admin but also the creator of the Facebook group. He often tries to welcome the new members who join the group by making a post and mentioning that person in it. He posts regularly about parish activities and events, posts pictures from past events, and weekly bulletins. That is not to say that he is the only person to advertise parish events; some of the other active online group members also post

similar items and contribute their own photos of the events. The group is most active around celebrations (religious or not), such as Easter and Christmas, where members post a lot of updates, such as invitations to events, posters, and photos from the events. The more activities there are in their offline parish, the more activity there seems to be in the groups. The best example of this is the Christmas season. In December and early January, the members were very active in the group, posting about the holidays, special events, adding pictures and videos in the group.

There are other types of posts that members contribute to the group, such as inspirational messages, posts about lost and found items, notices of deaths and funerals, and the catholic world at large, such as in regards to the Pope. Although this is a religious group created around the existence of its counterpart in the offline world, the members do not always limit themselves to religious topics in their posts. For example, there are also posts on items less related to the religious community, such as environmental initiatives inviting their fellow members to volunteer their time to help clean the planet.

Although most of the posts originate from the members, they sometimes share posts from other sources on Facebook who are not in the group. Some members share posts from other catholic pages, profiles, and groups with whom they come in contact through their use of the platform, which they think would be relevant to others in the group. Most of the content in the group has been of a religious theme. Some posts have a specific purpose in the group to boost participation in the offline parish events, using posters and messages inviting and encouraging members of the online group to come to attend or participate in the events taking place in their community.

Looking at the group's data, over 93 events have been created in the group, the first of which was in February of 2015 about a youth mass held in their parish. An event refers to a specific item created in the group that lets its members indicate whether or not they can attend and add it to their calendars if they so choose. This does not include the events that are advertised by merely adding a post referring to it or a poster added to the group from one of the members. All members of the group can create an event and invite others; it is not restricted only to admins and moderators (Facebook Help Center: *How do I invite the members of a group to an event on Facebook?).* Over 134 files were posted in the group since its creation (mostly bulletins, but also some flyers and magazines), as well as over 226 photos (mostly from events, but some posters, inspirational messages, funny pictures, and obituaries), and 8 videos from their past events. Many posts since the creation of the group included such additional files, demonstrating that the group members took advantage of the technology available to them through the platform.

4.1.2 Great Falls, Montana, United States

According to the data in the Facebook group, it was created on October 26, 2015, as of April 2019 has 228 members (excluding myself), of which only one is an admin and moderator. Similar to the previous group, the admin is also the creator of the group. As the sole admin, he assumes the role of moderating the comments and discussions to make sure they are appropriate and do not get out of hand. This is also the biggest of the three groups, containing the most members. Their posts receive, on average, between 142 and 206 views from the members. The most significant difference comes with this group compared to the previous one, which is that the posts have initiated more discussion, creating a more active group.

One of the causes of those discussions was significant situations relevant to their offline parish community. Specifically, these revolved around sexual abuse scandals in their diocese and rumored support by priests in their diocese of a political party during the 2016 US presidential election. These two major events generated the most discussion from the members of the Facebook group. For example, there was some intense discussion about the role of the Facebook group and the actions of priests showing support by attending a political rally for an election candidate. The members mentioned their discontent towards the priests' actions or their support in that there were no wrongdoings. There were also documents to help guide members in the 2018 midterm elections. Those documents generated further political discussion from the members in the group, as well as others outside the group. As some of the posts do not originate from the members but are shared from other pages, groups, or individuals, members can contribute in discussion with others around the world who are commenting on these special posts, which allows for a broader conversation.

Similarly to the elections, members shared about the sexual scandals in the Catholic church, including letters from their diocese in response to the scandal. There were some angered reactions to the scandal from the members in the comments sections of the posts. They posted reactions and responses from others (such as videos from another priest) on this scandal. Discussion on controversial topics was not limited to the elections and sexual scandal, but was also on issues such as pro-choice posts (prayer groups, group gatherings), and about the death penalty. All these items were specifically related to relevant to situations in their offline community.

Looking back at the data collected from this group, only 17 events were posted in the group since its creation pertaining to the parish. Much like the events created in the Australian group, these items allowed members to indicate to the event creator whether or not they would be attending, and enabled them to save the event to their Facebook calendars. Along with those event posts, 2 videos and more than 60 photos were posted in the group from members as of April 2019. Of these, where they had most interactions, they had, on average, between 13 and 15 comments and replies, more than the other two groups.

Here, there are also other miscellaneous posts, such as remarks on events (e.g., "lovely job making the church beautiful"), and shout-outs to the group and parish members for accomplishments, birthdays, *etc*. There are also posts about volunteering opportunities, helping the less fortunate, donations, and posts inviting members to participate in the initiatives. Similar to their 'about' section, the creator/admin made a post stating that this group is not an official page from their parish, but a place where members can have discussions, keep up to date with parish events. Members are also asked to refrain from "advertising commercial ventures and partisan political materials" (Theodore, August 20, 2018, United States, Email Interview). This was prompted by the disappointment in the turn of the posts found in the group, as there were a lot of political conversations.

Comparison with the other two groups, this group seems to have more activity and discussion between the members of the church. Unlike those two groups, there are no weekly bulletins posted to the group or much information about mass times, but there is some information about church events, both future ones inviting members to join, and past ones, showing photos and videos of the events. This variety of posts fits well with the needs of this group as there are many relevant situations in their community that seem to encourage

discussion between the members of the group. This group then allows for that discussion to happen from anywhere, and at any time of the day

4.1.3 Toronto, Ontario, Canada

This third group is much smaller than the other two, only having 50 members as of April 2019 (excluding myself). Of those members, there are two that are admins and moderators, one of them also being the creator of the group. This is a small portion of the community as a whole, as there are over 600 families registered in the offline parish community. It is also a few years older than the other groups, having been created on November 20, 2011. Since then, 14 events have been created in the group. Similarly to the other groups, these posts let members notify the creator if they intend to join, and save it to their own calendars. There were also 4 videos, 3 files, and over 122 photos posted in the group by members

Much like the other groups, they also share posts from other sources, such as groups, pages, and individuals. However, the majority of the activity comes from the creator, who is also and admin. This can be seen through his various posts to the other group members and through his comments on other members' posts. He has contributed a lot of posts about future and past events in their parish, and schedules for mass, which are posts that we have not seen in the other two groups.

Unlike the other three groups, this one ran a poll in the Facebook group about my thesis, asking the other members whether or not they would accept that I join the group and include them in my study. The consensus was to give me permission to join the group and recruit participants from their members. This was an excellent way for the admin to include the members in the process. Although there is little discussion per se, there are some

comments, 'likes', and some reactions on some of the posts in the group. This is also the official page of their parish, which is distinctive from the other two groups. It adds a layer of official parish authority that is not as present in the other groups.

4.2 Interview response analysis

The bulk of the data gathered in this research project was collected through the interviews completed with members from each of the three Catholic Facebook groups. The data collected was separated into themes related the six elements of virtual community that I discussed earlier from Lorne Dawson (2004), and are as follows: (1) interactivity; (2) membership; (3) identity; (4) membership and social commitment; (5) personal involvement; (6) and occurrence in a public 'space'. Data from the groups' observations has also been incorporated into the analysis.

4.2.1 Interactivity

As Dawson (2004) described in his research paper, for the first element of interactivity, I am looking for a significant level of interactivity between the members of the three Facebook groups, whether it be through discussions, posts, comments, replies, 'liking', or reacting to a post. As none of the groups had a messaging function, the data was gathered through the interviews and the virtual interactions observed from the members in the three Facebook groups.

Facebook's platform allows for a multitude of file formats to be shared in their groups. It provides a variety of ways the members of the groups can use to interact with one another and the platform itself. Examples include videos, audio, PDF, photos, words, comments, replies, 'liking', and reacting to posts in the group. It also allows individuals to access the platform from various devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and computers,

giving them access to the platform at any time from almost anywhere. It also allows members to share and communicate information using the method and location of their choosing, such as from home or on the go on their smart portable device. In all three groups, I observed that the members used a variety of formats to post or share with other members. There were photos and videos from past events, documents, shared posts from other locations (as described above), posters advertising future parish and community events, weekly bulletins, obituaries, inspirational messages, and more. This was also reflected in the answers that I received from my participants, for example from Rebecca: "latest bulletin, some photos of events" (August 25, 2018, Australia, email interview), or from Jacqueline: "[m]ainly about events coming up or reviews/photos from events that have taken place" (November 7, 2018, Australia, email interview).

Some of the interactions between the members take the form of discussion on various topics, ranging from politics to church decisions to church events. The topics depend on what is relevant to each of the groups in their offline lives, as they are located in vastly different political and geographical locations. This is especially seen with the Facebook group from the United States, where they had some major political events in the past years (such as elections), and sensitive situations in their diocese (such as sexual assaults towards minors by priests, or priests seeming to demonstrate support of a political party). This Facebook group gave them a new platform to discuss these situations outside of regular weekly mass gatherings, where they may not wish to have such conversations. This also came through in the interview responses from participants from that group. For example, from Kimberly: "discussions about downloads (e.g., Pennsylvania priest sexual abuse)" (July 24, 2018, United States, email interview), or Theodore: "some announcements and

discussions about the bankruptcy due to sex abuse" (August 20, 2018). These discussions did not apply to other groups as they were located in different countries where such events were not as relevant to their everyday lives; they had discussions on other topics, such as environmental initiatives for the Australian group.

One of the other items sometimes seen in the groups are prayer requests and offers of prayers, although most participants reported that they rarely, if ever, posted such items themselves. Only one reported that they did post such items, while another participant reported that they do, "[e]specially in times of serious world events" (Jacqueline, November 7, 2018). This is another way that they interact with one another, offering their support to others in their group, as one might do in person to someone experiencing personal struggles.

These group members that participated in my interview are regular attendees at mass. Some of them even attend most, if not all, religious events in their parish (or as their busy life permits). For example, Gregory (February 4, 2019, Canada, email interview) "attend[s] nearly every parish religious event", similarly to Douglas (September 11, 2018, Australia, email interview) who attends "[m]ass each Sunday, and other gatherings of volunteers". They are considerably active members of their community, which for some of the participants translates to their participation in the Facebook groups, especially the creators, who are the most active in their contributions to the contents of the online groups. Therefore, they are those that interact the most with other members in their group, and the platform itself, creating group events where members can indicate whether or not they can attend.

Not only are these creators the most active in the groups, but they are also the primary administrators, moderating their respective groups. For two groups, the Australian and Canadian ones, there are also additional moderators that help if needed. They have the

authority to add and remove individuals in the group, block people, and remove posts that they deem inappropriate in their group (Facebook Help Center: *What is the difference between an admin and a moderator in a Facebook group?).* This is reflected in the group, as moderators have more permissions than the other members, and are listed as admins in the group, informing others of who authority figures are. Gregory, the creator of the Canadian group, stated in his interview that "[a]s the admin [he] vet[s] content and will remove any content that is inappropriate. This has never happened" (February 4, 2019). Although it may have never happened that a post has been removed due to its content, members are aware that inappropriate posts may be removed at the discretion of those who are moderators, and therefore moderate their own comments, as was mentioned by Cameron: "I think the creator of the site occasionally deletes controversial discussions and advertising, but most of the discussions self-moderate" (July 20, 2018, United States, email interview).

When asked how often they communicate (online or offline) with members of their online Facebook group, in what manner, and on what topics, the participants' answers varied from never to once a month. Adriana responded: "[i]f you mean the parish community Facebook group – never" (September 15, 2018, Australia, email interview). Some communicate in a variety of ways, such as by "posting photos or commenting on other posts" (Douglas, September 11, 2018). Others prefer a more private method of communication, and if they want to "correspond with an individual member, [they] might message them through FB[*sic*], that privacy thing" (Kimberly, July 24, 2018, United States, email interview). Although some of the members do not communicate directly on the group feed, they often take advantage of the technology offered through Facebook's software, such as the messenger, to communicate with others in their communities. Others also

communicate in person as they "see many of the members every week at church and communicate face-to-face" (Cameron, July 20, 2018).

There are a variety of technological tools available online, such as skype, facetime, texting, video chat, email, phone calls, *etc*. Modern technology offers many different tools for consumers to use to communicate daily, to help them feel connected with those who live far away. Jacqueline takes advantage of those tools to "have video chats with [her] daughter who is interstate. [They] message most days" (November 7, 2018). Theodore and Ariana also take similar advantage of technology to breach the gap between themselves and their friends and family: "video chat with kids living away from home. Texting with friends in the community" (Theodore, August 20, 2018). This helps to facilitate communication with those in their social and personal groups.

I also asked the participants how much of their group usage is motivated by a desire to be social or feel connected with others. Only one responded that "not much" of her usage of the group is motivated by such desires (Kimberly, July 24, 2018). The other seven participants answered that a portion, if not all of their use, is driven by the need to feel connected and be social. For example, Adriana explained that for her, it is "[t]he largest percentage. [She] joined Facebook to keep in touch with [her] family and friends when [they] moved away from [their] 'home' state" (September 15, 2018). Both her and Cameron generalised a part of their answer to incorporate Facebook in general, "[a]lmost all of my FB[*sic*] use is to feel connected to friends and family". He continued his response specific to the group: "[t]he group for our parish doesn't necessarily make me feel more connected, perhaps just better informed" (July 20, 2018).

This brings to the front the idea of being informed and interacting in the group as an observer. Some of the members are active as they often make their way to the Facebook groups to read what others have posted and to get current updates on the parish events and activities. This can be seen in the groups themselves in how many views each post receives from the members. For all three groups, at least 70% of their members view the items posted in the group, indicating that even though they do not 'voice' their presence, they are still present in their virtual community.

The participants were also asked if the group facilitated their social lives. Six of the participants answered that it does not, while the other two participants answered that yes, it does. Jacqueline said in her response, "[n]ot mine but I'm sure it would if I was younger" (November 7, 2018). She does not deny that it is possible that for some it might facilitate their social lives, and even opened the possibility that it could have, if Facebook were what it now is when she was younger. Douglas, on the other hand, responded that "[y]es, a big part of [his] life is involved with the church through this group" (September 11, 2018). Douglas is the creator of his Facebook group in Australia, and as the main admin, is the most active member in the group. This can be seen through the regularity at which he posts in the group. He interacts the most with the other members of his group, through his own posts, his comments on other posts in the group, his likes, and reactions as well.

To help ascertain each of the participant's interactions with the group, I asked them how often they posted in their respective groups. Answers varied from never, to once a month, to rarely. Those most active are the creators, as they are also the admins and maintain the group, as I mentioned earlier in this section. They are the ones who post the bulletins, mass information, and even advertise the majority of the events posted in their respective group.

Others generally post as responses, or the occasional original post. We can see this being reflected in two answers, as well as the actual content of the groups. The first from Cameron, "[m]ost of [my] posts are answering someone else's question or responding to another topic" (July 20, 2018). This is contributing to pre-existing conversations, as opposed to initiating one. The second is from Adriana, "I have only ever commented on someone else's post once or twice. I acknowledge things within the group by 'liking' the posts" (September 15, 2018). Here Adriana referred to another way one can 'participate' in the group without using words: 'liking' a post. These days, you can add a reaction when you like a post other than the simple thumbs-up 'like' that Facebook had in the past, allowing more flexibility to interact in the group without drafting a reply (Facebook Brand Resources: *Reactions)*.

Another question asked the participants what they posted in the group, and if there were items such as prayer requests, and if so, how often and under what circumstances. Four of the participants answered that, up to this point, they had not noticed any such posts in the group (Jacqueline, Douglas, Rebecca, and Adriana). The other four participants responded that they have indeed seen such posts in their group, ranging from weekly to once in a while in frequency. Their responses indicated that members post such items in the group in response to an incident, such as a death or an illness. Members do not simply offer prayers and prayer requests on a regular day unprovoked. This is reflected in Cameron's response, "[y]es. Probably weekly. Usually for sick friends and family or for the families of recently deceased individuals" (July 20, 2018). They offer or request prayers in moments of sadness and grievance in their fellow members' personal lives.

I was also interested in seeing whether their pastors were active in their group and if they ever posted their sermons either in their Facebook group, on another page, or even on social

media platforms other than Facebook. All the participants responded that their pastor did not post their sermons anywhere on social media, nor were they in the group. One participant even responded that his priest is "averse to it" (Gregory, February 4, 2019), and does not want to make his sermons available in such a manner. Three of the responses (Cameron, Kimberly, and Douglas) demonstrated a desire for their pastor to be more active on social media and that the members of the groups would like it if he made his sermons available. This is reflected in Cameron's response, "[n]o. We've tried to get him to. He's shy!" (July 20, 2018).

The interview protocol also included a question asking if their Facebook group members, themselves included, or their pastor posted gospel or inspirational messages. They were also asked to provide some details on the posts. All the members except Adriana responded that some of their members do post such items in their groups. Kimberly and Douglas also specified that their pastors did not post such messages. The responses showed that these posts were usually shared around a holiday or a special event. Cameron stated that sometimes it "might be to get folks to re-think stewardship, discipleship, etc." (July 20, 2018). Jacqueline mentioned in her response that when members post inspirational messages and pictures that they may inspire others to join the next event: "[s]ome members to[*sic*] post inspirational messages and photos as in describing an event they attended and how they were inspired by it. I believe this inspires others to attend the next event or to seek further information" (November 7, 2018).

With a better idea of what was found in the three groups, I wanted to know what the participants noticed on the wall of their Facebook groups. The group wall refers to the section that contains all the posts, comments, images, *etc*., that members add to the group

(Techopedia: *What is a Facebook wall?*). The common interview responses from the participants were funeral or retirement notices, upcoming and past events, photos, bulletins, and announcements, among others. These are reflected in the response from Adriana: "[n]otices about upcoming events or pictures of past events" (September 15, 2018), as well as the response from Theodore: "[d]eath/retirement notices, links to Catholic news sites, announcements from the Diocese, fundraisers, parish life events, school events" (August 20, 2018).

Closely related to the previous items and limited by the technological allowances of the Facebook platform, I asked the participants what kind of files they saw posted in the groups. The three groups do not use all the benefits of the technology available to them. The examples given were videos, memes, images, photos, audio, posters, advertisements, and articles. All of them were listed in the responses from the participants reflecting on the fluidity of the technology Facebook offers. Douglas listed a variety of items posted in his group: "[l]argely photos and text, advertising events. The weekly bulletin and quarterly magazine are also posted" and even mentioned that it "definitely aids communication" (September 11, 2018)). Cameron, in his response, mentioned that "[t]ypically just text and occasionally letters (.pdf) or announcements" are posted in the group, but that "[s]ometimes video or appropriate memes, but they are rare" (July 20, 2018). All of these options, in addition to all the virtual tools, help members communicate their information in various ways to try and generate participation both online and offline.

4.2.2 Membership

Dawson (2004), in his research on the elements of virtual community, stated that it might be a virtual community if there is stability in membership, that the members post

frequently enough over a long period of time. This allows to determine if we are in the presence of what is more than a simple place where individuals exchange information on a passing topic of common interest. Another researcher, Liu (2006), mentioned that it is important that the members visit the group frequently, that they remain on the site while they are aware that other members might be on the site at the same time. This is where I somewhat disagree with Liu when it comes to this new Facebook platform: because of its technological allowances. One of the advantages of being a member of a specific group is that you do not need to be actively using Facebook's platform to participate. The software will send notifications when something happens in the group, prompting members to see what has been posted. This favours more interaction, as it allows group members to reply, comment, and post on their own time, taking into account everyone's schedules. It is as though they are always 'there'.

One of the items that I noticed while being a member of the three groups is that they all have a relatively stable membership, many of the members have been a part of the group since its creation. This can be seen in the groups, first through the history of posts from many of the same members, but also from those who seem to be participating in the group by observing. When looking at the views posts have received since the creation of the group, we can see that the same members are still actively viewing posts in the group. This allows them to view the conversations, updates, posts, and events advertised.

As the creators of the Facebook groups, three participants did not discover the groups but facilitated their creation. All three remain part of their group and are active in the role of members and moderators. Others in the groups learned about its existence from various sources, such as the creators themselves, fellow group members, the parish bulletin, and

Facebook. None of these members went searching for the group themselves. Once they learned about the group, they were motivated to join to keep in touch with other members of the community, as well as a way to share information. "I was invited by the creator. I believe we were already FB[*sic*] friends. It seemed like an important thing to be a part of so I can keep in touch with my faith community" (Cameron, July 20, 2018).

In their answers to the questionnaire, the participants mentioned that only those who are members of their offline parish would be interested in being part of their online Facebook group. As Cameron states, "I don't think people who don't belong to our church would be attracted to it" (July 20, 2018). Adriana made a similar statement in her response, "I don't think the group has a significant social media presence to encourage those on the periphery of from outside the worship community" (September 15, 2018). What seems to influence those members to participate in the group, is (1) their desire to stay in touch with their peers, (2) to keep informed, and (3) to get access to photos and information without having to make a special request as they are freely available in the group. The first is reflected in Gregory's response, "I believe they like staying in touch with fellow parishioners in a social media setting that they are at ease in" (February 4, 2019). The second is reflected in Douglas's response, "[k]eep informed" (September 11, 2018). And the third one is reflected in Jacqueline's response, "[t]here are photos of events therefore people see their friends. Also, it's a way of seeing what is happening without having to ask" (November 7, 2018).

Also mentioned in one of the participant responses about what influences individuals to join the group, is the obstacle of how many members of their community do not have Facebook. In her response, Rebecca said, "whether they are on Fb[*sic*] would be the first hurdle" (August 25, 2018). This indicates that a large portion of their offline parish members

does not have a Facebook account. As was mentioned above, only people who have a Facebook account can access Facebook and request to join the parish groups. If older generations of parish members do not have access to a device that lets them join Facebook or do not know how to create a Facebook account or someone who can help them, they are unable to join the group. Regardless of whether they found the group relevant and wanted to join. This obstacle seems to be foremost present for these three Facebook parish groups.

One of the questions in the interview protocol asked the participants if they found that Facebook filled a void in their lives. Douglas (September 11, 2018), the creator of the Australian group, responded that it does not, for him, as Facebook is time-consuming in his already busy life. Cameron said that although it facilitated keeping in touch with friends and family with whom he would not be able to interact, that it does not fill a void (July 20, 2018). Theodore, the creator of the United States group, on the other hand, is not sure. If it were not for his contacts and family members that also use the platform, he might just delete his account entirely. He believes that Facebook "isn't a very good invention for society, but at this point a necessary evil" (August 20, 2018). All the other participants replied that yes, to a degree Facebook does fill a void in their lives. It is reflected in Adriana's response, "[s]adly – yes! In an ever increasing and ridiculously busy world, it does help me keep up to date with what is happening in the lives of my family and friends who are overseas or interstate" (September 15, 2018). A connection between Theodore and Adriana's answers is that they seemed reluctant that Facebook plays such an essential role in their lives. It appears as though it is filling a void that was unwittingly created by society.

For my research, as I am looking at congregations with a specific presence in the offline world, the participants were asked whether they know all the members from their Facebook

group in their online life. Only Gregory (Canada) reported knowing all the members of the online group in person, which is not surprising as both an admin and creator of the group. Theodore (United States), also an admin and creator of his group, reported not knowing all the members of his group in the offline world. The other members of his group also responded the same. Douglas (Australia), an admin and creator of his Facebook group, reported that he did not know them all in his offline life. This is likely because his parish has three different mass centers, and that he may only interact with the members of his group in the offline world. It is a similar situation for the other three participants from his Facebook parish group. Jacqueline mentioned in her response that although she does not know them all (November 7, 2018), this gives her the opportunity to interact with members of her community that she may not see in her offline parish.

In all three groups, the participants mentioned that almost all the members of their Facebook group are current members of the offline congregation. For the Australian group, some members are from other mass groups within the parish, as Douglas mentions in his response: "[s]ome of the members are from other mass centres, and are thus people whom I've never met" (September 11, 2018). Therefore, it is harder for them to know if they are all part of their offline parish, as they may have never had the opportunity to meet in person. Some members of the online groups were once members at a time in their lives, and are now alumni. Although most of their members come from their congregation, as mentioned above, the members of the Facebook group only represent a small percentage of their whole congregation, as seen in the answers from Gregory: "the group is small and the offline congregation is large" (February 4, 2019), and from Theodore: "[o]nly about 10% of families

in the parish are part of the FB[*sic*] group (estimate)" (August 20, 2018). The members of the other Facebook groups provided similar answers.

All the participants reported that they at least know some of the online group members in their offline lives. Usually, they interact with the members offline at parish events such as church and other religious celebrations and gatherings. This is reflected in the answer that Douglas provided in his interview response, "[a]lways, after mass, during mass, at other spiritual and volunteer events" (September 11, 2018). This is similarly reflected in Adriana's response as well, "[w]ith regards to the members of this Facebook group, I would see some of them at mass and would communicate with them there" (September 15, 2018). The relationship between members does not only exist on one plane but is overlapped from the offline to the online community.

To push the idea of interaction within social media 'space', I also wanted to establish if the members had a presence online other than Facebook. This helped identify what other facets of their offline social community lives have also started to occur in the online world. Two of them (Theodore and Jacqueline) do not have a presence online other than Facebook. The others reported that they did on platforms such as Instagram, Google, and LinkedIn. This is seen in Cameron's response, "[y]es. Other social media too (Instagram, Google)" (July 20, 2018). Their social interactions online are not limited to Facebook or their parish groups. They also interact with others in their social lives through various platforms that fit their individual needs, whether one a personal or professional basis.

4.2.3 Identity

According to Dawson's research, we might be in the presence of a virtual community if the members of the group maintain a stable identity, which is indicated by their displayed

name and character/photo in their profile (2004). When one thinks of communities, they think of trust, which requires a considerable measure of stability when it comes to identity. It is essential in a community that the members know who the other individuals are. However, cyberspace and all its virtual places provides anonymity, which allows for a multitude of identities. Given the flexibility and the technological allowances of computer-mediated digital communications, Liu (2006) proposes that it is more likely that community ties will be forged if the same nickname has not been used frequently by multiple individuals in the community space, and that individuals do not change their names often.

Identity is something that Facebook is continuously working on maintaining for its members, in the sense that they have added safeguards to maintain a sense of security. For example, an individual can only change their name on Facebook every 60 days. If they continue to change it too frequently, Facebook will disable that feature (Facebook Help Center, *Why can't I change my name on Facebook?).* Facebook also has guidelines in regards to the actual names themselves. For example, names cannot contain symbols, words or phrases, offensive words, and more (Facebook Help Center, *What names are allowed on Facebook?*). Facebooks' rules are not limited to the names a user can display. If you suspect that someone is falsifying their identity, or fraudulently representing themselves as your friend, you can report their accounts to Facebook, and block them from viewing your profile and sending you messages. Facebook will then review the report and account, and take the appropriate actions (Facebook Help Center, *Reporting Abuse*).

The three groups have a relatively stable membership; many members have been part of the group since its creation. They are also the same members of the offline congregation. This can be seen in the groups through the history of posts from many of the same members

and from members who participate as observers. When analyzing the posts' views since the creation of the group, we can see that the same members are still actively viewing the posts in the group, curious to see the conversations, updates, posts, and events. As the members mostly know one another in the offline world, it is harder for them to assume a false identity and remain under the radar. This is especially true in the case of the groups located in Canada and the United States, as they only have a single mass center. Also, for Canada, their creator currently knows all the members of their group.

During the interview, I asked the participants to speak to their feelings towards their Facebook group to understand their relationship with the online group. From their answers to the interviews, we can see that those who participate actively in the groups are happy to have it, and do not fear posting due to unknown audiences. Others may be reluctant to participate actively in the group and prefer to be passive participants and simply read the posts and be up-to-date on parish events and discussion. Some are also neutral about the group; they are happy that it is there, but they could also go without the group if it were to cease to exist: "I joined out of curiosity, but probably wouldn't miss it is[*sic*] it wasn't there" (Adriana, September 15, 2018).

Some of the participants did mention concerns in regards to fake news (Gregory, February 4, 2019) and fake accounts (Kimberly, July 24, 2019) that have been found on the platform over the past few years. It can be hard for people to assess whether or not a profile is real, as there are more and more accounts of false profiles appearing on Facebook. People who have a Facebook profile can receive friend requests from friends and family that are already in their friends, or their accounts get hacked, and spam messages are sent to their contact list. As mentioned above, this is something that Facebook is aware of, and that is

actively working on reducing the number of fraudulent accounts on their platform. However, this seems a daunting task given the ever-evolving nature of technology. In 2018, Facebook removed over 1.3 billion 'fake' accounts, and estimates they prevent millions of fake accounts from being created using their detection systems every day (Community Standard Enforcement Report, 2019). On the count of fake news, many articles featured on Facebook may have the look and feel of an actual article but contain false information. This leads to a lack of trust and a sense of fear amongst those who participate in the Facebook platform. This can result in a reluctance to post personal information on pages, groups, and feeds. Facebook is also working on reducing the misinformation and false news found on their platform (Facebook for Media: *Working to Stop Misinformation and False News, 2017*). Kimberly mentions in her response that "[b]ecause of [fake accounts and hacking she] never share[s] things such as 'tell how we met and share'" (July 24, 2018).

All three groups require that an admin or moderator accept a potential member request to join the group; therefore, members cannot join without permission. This allows admins the ability to vet the members who request to join. The participants answered that potential members need to have a connection to the parish, either by being a current member of the offline parish, or by being an alumnus. In the Australian group, the creator often welcomes new members and asks them which mass center they normally attend. One of the groups even requires that the potential members answer a few questions: "[a]re you a parishioner of (…) (this group is for parishioners only)? (…) If you are not a parishioner, are you looking for information about mass timings or parish events? If so please visit (…)" (Gregory, February 4, 2019). These are questions that one would not be asked if they were to attend mass in person in a parish where they were not members. It leads to believe that membership

in the online group is more rigorous than in its offline counterpart, and identity is even more scrutinized. Douglas made a similar remark in his response: "In the real world, anyone can come to mass and be part of the community. We don't actually ask for evidence that they are Catholic, so you might say on-line membership is scrutinised a bit more" (September 11, 2018). This allows the admins and the moderators to scrutinize their members more than they would in the offline world to better verify the identity of a potential member before allowing them to join the group.

4.2.4 Membership and social commitment

The fourth element of the presence of virtual community as identified by Dawson (2004), is that of membership and social control. We may be in the presence of a community if the members in the virtual space display a sense of responsibility for maintaining the rules and regulations of the group to sustain their communications. These rules and regulations protect members from various forms of deviance, such as harassment, spam, flaming, account hijacking, *etc*. Research shows that members commit to a specific online group through a specific rules and punishment system designed to protect the integrity of the platform, here being Facebook (e.g., Dawson, 2004; Du Val, 1999).

For these Facebook groups, their 'about' sections mention their purpose, and some guidelines for members to follow. For the group located in the United States, their 'about' section is short and to the point letting them know that it is not the official page of their parish, that it is a place where members can have discussions and keep up to date with parish events, and to please refrain from advertising their commercial ventures and political matters. In this group, one of the members (not an admin or moderator), posted a reminder that the group was not a place for negativity and hatred in response to the situation described in the

above sections on priests clapping during a political event. That post generated a lot of debate from the other members of the group. This prompted another member to request that the creator clarify the purpose of the group, as members did not enjoy what they referred to as 'political ranting'. The creator then made a post to clarify that the group was created to facilitate discussion on topics relevant to their diocese as they face multiple crises. He specified that he would intervene if the discussions became personal attacks and name-calling or commercial postings, giving the members further guidelines about the type of discussions that are acceptable in the group. In his interview, Theodore, the creator, mentioned that the only post he has had to remove was a commercial one, leading to believe that the members have been following the guidelines to date, and self-moderate their posts (August 20, 2018).

For the Australian group, their 'about' section invites members to participate in the discussion and to take advantage of the information to help guide them to be part of the group. They request positive contributions and look forward to getting to know the new members, both in the group and in the offline world. Eight of their members are admins or moderators to help members from all three mass centers and deal with issues if any do arise. Since the creation of the group, they have not faced issues such as the ones from the United States, and have not had controversial discussions in the group. In his interview responses, Douglas, the creator, responded that "[s]everal people are administrators. Members can post, administrators can remove posts if in their judgement they are not suitable" (September 11, 2018, Australia).

The Canadian group's 'about' section welcomes members and mentions that the group was created to allow parishioners to interact and support each other in their own online

communities on Facebook and hope that it will serve as a natural extension of their real-world parish life experience. Since then, the creator has provided the group with a PDF document outlining the guidelines of the group, and commanding respect, privacy, and good judgement. The document reminds members that by joining as a member of the online community, they accept to abide by the guidelines as outlined. The file is freely available in their group documents so that the members can download it and refer to it when they post or comment in the group. Unlike the other two groups, this one is the official page of their parish, which may be why they have a set of guidelines that is more established.

Of all the members in the groups, the creators are the most active. Not only are the creators the most active in the group, but they are also the main administrators, moderating their respective groups. For two of the groups, the Australian and Canadian ones, there are also additional moderators that help if needed. They have the authority to add and remove individuals in the group, to block people, and to remove posts that they deem inappropriate. This is reflected in the group, as moderators have more permissions than the other members, and are listed as admins or moderators, informing others of who are the authority figures in the group (Facebook Help Center, *What is the difference between an admin and a moderator in a Facebook group?)*. Gregory, the creator of the Canadian group, stated in his interview that, although it has never happened, that the moderators are there to remove content if needed (February 4, 2019). Members are aware that inappropriate posts may be removed at the discretion of the moderators and therefore moderate their own comments.

As mentioned above, all three of the groups require that an admin or moderator accept a potential member request to join the group. When I asked the participants about those who are joining the group, they answered that prospective members must have a

connection to the parish, either by being a current member of the offline parish or an alumnus. The Canadian group even requires that the potential member answer a few questions when joining the group. This is a different approach that would not take place in the offline world, leading to believe that membership in the online groups is more rigorous. Admins and moderators scrutinise the members before they join the group, to ensure that they are members of their parish. This also allows them to establish the identity of the individual joining (as per the above element) within the guidelines of their group, stabilising the group membership.

4.2.5 Personal involvement

The fifth element of community Dawson (2004) identifies in his research is that of personal involvement. One might be in the presence of a virtual digital community if, as also Rheingold (1993), and Wellman & Guilla (1999) have suggested, the interaction between the participants in these computer-mediated communication Facebook groups is more than instrumental. Although it may be so in nature, serving to inform individuals and share information, it also needs another layer. As Brint (2011) suggested in his research, generally, in communities, members must demonstrate that they have an interest in the other members of the group. They do not all have to do so, but some of them do. They need to show interest in others' endeavours.

This is something that can be seen in each of the three Facebook groups, in a multitude of ways. The first is the simple fact that members continue to share photos of events congratulating the offline community and parish event organizers on their success. They celebrate the accomplishments, not only of their parish but of the individuals as well. There are also, throughout the groups, personal posts, where members will congratulate fellow

members on their personal accomplishment, or one of their children's achievements, adding an extra layer to their interest in their personal lives. The members are very supportive of achievements and celebrations in the groups, whether they are parish-based or personal.

The fact that the Facebook groups only represent a small section of the congregation as a whole is an interesting reality. This means that the group's reach is quite limited, as the members of the congregation will not receive a notification of new posts, comments, or messages in the group if they are not a member of the Facebook group. This is seen in the fact that the Facebook groups have less than 250 members, which is low compared to the number of members in their offline congregations. Therefore, one of the first challenges that these groups face is whether or not the members of the congregations are members of Facebook in general. This was seen in some of the answers from the participants, such as Douglas: "Our community has a high percentage of elderly so the majority do not have Facebook" (September 11, 2018). An individual cannot join or get notifications from a group hosted on Facebook if they do not have a user account and profile. Unlike other social media platforms such as Twitter, one cannot generally see posts without being logged into the system.

Although the Facebook groups do not represent the majority of the members who are part of their offline congregations, those who participate do so by actively contributing to the contents or observing by continuously reading new content. A few participants responded that they doubted their Facebook group had any impact on their community and that if it did, it was most likely minimal (e.g., Theodore; Adriana). Others are of the mind that it allows them and other members in the online group to stay connected with the parish, learn about the events, share, exchange information and news, as well as facilitate discussion with one

another. This was seen in answers from Gregory: "[i]t has helped [them] stay connect[ed] online and to information of mutual interest (…)" (February 4, 2019), as well as Douglas: "[i]t helps us spread the word of the many things that are going on", adding that it "[brings them] together" (September 11, 2018). While the groups may be small in numbers, they still take advantage of their membership to create a small and safe community space where they can interact, support, and share with one another.

While observing the groups, I noticed that although most of the posts are viewed by at least 70% of the members, only a handful of members are active. Active in the sense that they post updates, photos, videos, *etc*., or they 'like' items in the group. More people seem to be in the group to get information than to participate or engage in discussion. This observation was echoed in the responses from the interviewees; "[o]f course there's quite a percentage that are only on the books and don't participate" (Kimberly, July 14, 2018). This goes along with what I mentioned earlier: not all the members show interest in the other members' lives; only some of them do. It also goes back to the question of participating through observation. Those that do not necessarily actively post in the group, may not do so out of lack of interest in their fellow members, but simply because they do not have anything they want to share, and are happy knowing about another member's life events. Similar situations could take place in group conversations in the offline world. Others may simply show their interest by 'liking' the posts. Facebook allows for varied audiences.

When it comes to the importance of the Facebook group for their community, most of the participants answered that they do not find that it is important for most. Still, those who participate are glad that the group is available to keep in touch with other members, get updates on events and news, and to communicate with one another. As only a small

percentage of the congregation as a whole are members of the Facebook group. Since those in the group who are active participants are a small representation, it is hard to evaluate the extent of the importance of the group on the community as a whole. Theodore made a similar reflection in his interview response: "[f]or the people that use it, I think it is somewhat important (…) but it is a small subset of the whole community" (August 10, 2018). Kimberly also responded on a similar path: "(…) it has very little important[*sic*] because of the few people who are in the group" (July 24, 2018).

Although it might be hard to establish the importance of the online group for the community, most of the respondents said that their community was somewhat or moderately influenced by the Facebook group. One of the advantages of the technological allowances of the platform itself is that it allows for different pathways of communication, discussion, understanding, and awareness. Gregory, one of the participants, stated that "it allows [them] to express [their] support for each other online and in the recent past when there was dispute to air [their] concerns openly" (February 4, 2019). Others state that they have no awareness of this influence or that there is little to no influence. Some even question what that influence could be. For example, Jacqueline's response was: "[n]ot to my knowledge. If yes, how?" (November 7, 2018). Adriana, on the other hand, searches to identify what could be the cause of the lack of influence: "[n]ot to a large extent. There is very little 'dialogue'. Mostly what I see in my newsfeed is the promotion of parish and/or mass centre event" (September 15, 2018).

In the interview questionnaire, the participants were asked if their pastors were part of their groups. Although none replied that their pastors were in the group, or even on social media, they expressed that there is a want for them to join their group to be part of their

online communities. As Cameron stated in his response in regards to his pastor posting his sermon on Facebook (in the group or other): "[n]o. We've tried to get him to. He's shy!" (July 20, 2018). He shows that there is a desire for his pastor to be present online. Kimberly, also from his group, responded that she wishes that her pastor would post his sermons and be present online (July 24, 2018). That desire is not only seen in the members from that group but also the one from the Australian group, as seen in the response from Douglas, who, similarly to Kimberly, wishes his pastor would post his sermons and be active in their online group (September 11, 2018). There is a desire, as mentioned above, for the group to continue growing and become more than it currently is, giving it potential for future growth.

To better establish this element of community, I also asked the participants to indicate the reason that the groups were created for their communities. The common thread in the answers from the participants (including the creators), was that the groups were created for members to interact with one another, to increase communication and discussions about parish life, the church, and more, outside of weekly mass. It was also meant to be another place where members could find information about parish events. This is seen, for example, in the interview answer from Gregory, the creator of the Canadian group: "[i]t was created to allow parishioners to interact and support each other in our own online parishioner community on FB[*sic*]. The hope was that it would serve as a natural extension of our real-world experience of parish life" (February 4, 2019). Although it may not as of yet be an extension of their offline parish life, as reflected by the fact that only a small percentage of the members of the community are part of the Facebook group, that is not to say that an increase in membership and participation is not forthcoming. Participant answers already demonstrate a wish for their pastors to be present online and in their groups. On the other

hand, the other two creators did not provide much information regarding why their groups were created. One of them only stated that they created or started it (Theodore, August 20, 2018, United States). The third creator went a little further and stated that he created it because he "thought it was a great way to share information and keep in touch" (Douglas, September 11, 2018, Australia).

I also wanted to establish the meaning that the Facebook groups have for each of the participants. Three participants responded that the online group did not mean a lot to them, as featured here in Theodore's response: "[d]oesn't mean a lot. I started and maintain it as a service, but if it went away I wouldn't be upset" (August 20, 2018). One of the recurring themes in the participants' responses was that it was meant to be another way for the members to communicate and connect with one another, not that all of them choose to communicate this way. It seems as though some members enjoy the group, while others would not miss it if it were disbanded. As Cameron stated in his response, "[i]t is simply another way we communicate. Some folks love it, others do not" (July 20, 2018). Some participants continue to mention that they would rather communicate in person as with Adriana: "I would rather connect with the members of my worship community in real life" (September 15, 2018). As Douglas mentions in his response, it is "[a]n effective way of keeping in touch and spreading good thoughts" (September 11, 2018).

To delve deeper into the question, I asked the participants what the Facebook group means for their community. Most of the participants went into more depth to answer this question than the previous ones. A few of them mentioned that the community as well would feel that although the online group is convenient to have, they would not necessarily miss it if it was not available: "[i]t is handy to have, but we don't need it" (Cameron, July 20).

Recurring themes in the rest of the responses were keeping in touch, connecting, and communicating with other members of the offline community that they often see in their parish on an online platform. As one participant stated, it could mean that the "parish is trying to get up to speed" with a technological world (Rebecca, August 25, 2018). The groups' meaning and survival depend on the participation of the members and the perseverance of those who maintain the group. As Adriana stated in her response, "I think there is a small handful of people who work hard to keep it 'alive', but (…) only a few people within the community who actually take notice of the posts" (September 15, 2018). So long as they continue to fuel the group, it will have a chance to become more.

A recurring thread is although the Facebook group is a great way to communicate information to a large group, unless someone has a Facebook account, they will not be able to access the information that is being communicated. This is reflected in Jacqueline's response, "[a] great way of getting information across to more people. However, not everyone in our Church community uses Facebook" (November 7, 2018). This means that the Facebook groups' membership has not attained their full growth and that more members could join the group as time goes, as new members join the parish, and as current members of the parish acquire their own Facebook accounts. As Gregory states, the group "adds to [their] sense of closeness and connection with each other" (February 4, 2019). The more the virtual community grows, the more opportunity there is for personal involvement and connections to be made.

All the members who participated in the questionnaire answered that some of the posts in the groups were indeed intended to bolster participation and advertise various events in their community. Not all the posts are personal or to create discussion. They are trying to

engage the members in both their online and offline communities. As Douglas states, "[y]es, we advertise religious events and encourage attendance" (September 11, 2018). Events advertised in the groups are bible studies, funerals, fundraisers, concerts, masses, special community events, some seasonal events, such as Easter Ceremonies and Christmas events. Although one of the functions of the groups is to increase communication and discussion, another seems to be to increase member participation in the offline community (church-related or not) events. Some of these are also personal events, not organized by the community, but inviting the community to join nonetheless. The issue that can arise here, and that is mentioned earlier, is that if only a small percentage of the parish is represented in the group and have access to its information, it is only reaching a fraction of the full parish membership. Therefore, the Facebook group can only be as effective as its reach.

To establish personal involvement, I thought it would be essential to determine for each of the interviewees how much of their group usage is motivated by a desire to be social or to feel connected with others. Only one participant responded that "not much" of their usage of the group is motivated by such desires (Kimberly, July 24, 2018). The other seven participants answered that a portion, if not all, of their use of their Facebook group is driven by the need to feel connected and to be social. For example, Adriana answered that for her, it is the largest portion, and that she joined the platform to keep in touch with her friends and family when she moved to another place (September 15, 2018). Cameron also states that most of his use of Facebook is to feel connected with his friends and family. Although the parish group is not necessarily to feel more connected, but certainly better informed (July 20, 2018).

The participants were also asked to report whether there has been an increase in participation within the community since the creation of the Facebook group. One must be reasonably active in the church (such as by attending mass) to be able to judge whether or not there has been an increase. All three creators are of the mind that yes, there has been an increase, if marginal. The other members responded that they either did not think so or that they did not know. It is especially hard to judge for the Australian group, as their parish is divided into three mass centres, not all of them equally active in the group. The groups need a better representation of their parish to advertise and increase participation through the groups. In their current states, the interview participants reported that their groups are not as they were expecting and need to grow, both in membership and participation. Their thoughts are that if more members were in the group and were more active, the group would be more successful. Once again, circling back to the need and desire for their virtual community to continue growing.

The participants do not only use Facebook to participate in their parish groups. Theodore, Cameron, Jacqueline, Rebecca, and Adriana, in their responses, all reported that they use Facebook to keep in touch with their friends and family whom they are not able to see regularly in person. Their digital community extends beyond their use of the Facebook groups, allowing them to communicate and interact with other members of their communities that are not active in the online group or the parish regularly. This is reflected in Adriana's response, "[t]o see what my friends and family are up to – to keep in contact with them" (September 15, 2018). Gregory, Adriana, and Douglas mentioned that they use Facebook to share stories, adventures, and more, with others in their social circles. This is reflected in Gregory's response, "[t]o share my adventures and thoughts with others and to

learn about their adventures and thoughts" (February 4, 2019). Other items mentioned were for messaging, finding information, knowledge, sharing hobbies, and interests. This was reflected in Kimberly's response, "[m]essaging, info, knowledge" (July 24, 2018). The participants use Facebook as a diverse tool that fits their individual needs and personality. Some (e.g., Adriana) prefer to browse and see what others post, while others (e.g., Gregory) like to post their own content.

As the participants use Facebook for multiple reasons and purposes, I asked them if they found that Facebook filled a void in their personal lives. Douglas (September 11, 2018) responded that it does not for him as Facebook is time-consuming in his already busy life. Cameron (July 20, 2018) said that although it facilitated keeping in touch with friends and family. he would not be able to interact with otherwise, that it does not fill a void. Theodore, on the other hand, is not sure. If it were not for his contacts and family members that also use the platform, he might just delete his account entirely. As mentioned above, he believes that Facebook is not favourable for society, but that at this point, it is necessary (August 20, 2018). All other participants replied that yes, to a degree, Facebook does fill a void in their lives. This is reflected in Adriana's response (also mentioned above) that in a busy world, it helps her stay in touch with her friends and family (September 15, 2018). Both Theodore and Adriana seem a little reluctant that Facebook can have such a critical place in their social lives.

4.2.6 Occurrence in a public 'space'

The sixth and final the element of community is that of occurrence in a public 'space'. When I refer to 'public' space, I refer to two items: one being the three groups, and the other being Facebook in general, where anyone who has a network connection and account can

view what is 'happening' in this digital 'space'. This is based on Dawson's sixth element of virtual community, where he states, along with Jones (1997) and Liu (2006), that computer-mediated communication must happen in a space where others can witness the interactions, especially if they are those who could potentially contribute (Dawson, 2004). Community implies a shared experience between numerous members in the same 'space'. Not all he members need to be active all the time, but they must be able to witness the interactions. There can also be lurkers, those who are not part of the group but may still witness what happens in the public 'space' (Dawson, 2004).

One of the specific requirements that I had for the three Facebook groups was that they needed to be public groups versus a private group. In a private Facebook group, only those who are members of the group can view the members and what they post in the group. Although this makes the group a public 'space' for those who are in the group, potential members cannot view the group before joining. While in a public Facebook group, you can see the members and what they post in the group, whether you are a member or not. This allows for a more seamless public 'space' for newly coming members, and potential members (Facebook Help Center, *What's the difference between a public and private group and do I change it?*).

All members of the group can view the activity at any time from any location, so long as they have a device on which to do so, and a network connection to access the platform. This means that not only is this a public 'space', but it is also a portable public 'space', in that members can participate in the group, or witness the interaction according to their own lives and schedules. This works to be even more inclusive for all the members, as they do not need to be in the group at a specific time or place to be actively part of the community. This

allows for a more real public space, as non-members of the group can stumble upon the group, as one might in the offline world, and witness the interactions in the digital community. The potential views from others are higher as it is not limited to those only in the group. It adds a layer of authenticity more reminiscent of an offline community.

All three of the Facebook groups meet the six elements of community as outlined in the above sections, some more ambiguously than others. All three groups allow members to interact with the other members, and all three groups have a fair amount of that interaction, by both active posts, and by viewers. All three groups have stable memberships, where members have been the same from early on, and have been contributing since the beginning. All three groups have stable identities, as they are all part of their offline communities and therefore known by the members. Facebook has guidelines in place to help protect identities. The three groups all have some form of guidelines set by their group, as well as those that are set by the platform. In each of the groups, the members show interest in the lives of others in the group, which often displays itself when a member is living a hard experience or celebrating success. As was mentioned above, these groups take place in a public 'space' where other potential participants can witness the interactions.

5 Conclusion and Future Studies

My hypothesis was that the virtual community that takes its shape as Facebook groups extends the community aspect of religion as it brings people together who would not necessarily be able to communicate in person on an everyday basis, even if it is through participation as an observer in the group. The purpose of my research was not only to determine whether or not virtual community was present in the Facebook groups, but to investigate the influence online community can have on offline life. To do so, I searched for evidence that the Facebook groups were indeed a virtual community which assisted in answering my research questions.

As Campbell (2020) mentions, the study of digital religion investigates how the religious practices and spaces found offline and online relate to one another. As more start to integrate their religious lives with available technology, researchers are interested in how those practices and spaces blend, bridge, and begin to blur into one another (Campbell, 2020). In my case, these took the form of offline parishes in a specific location that also have a public Facebook group dedicated to their community. These communities showed a potential for their Facebook group to represent an online community, making it possible for me to assess the influence the online has on the offline.

To investigate my question, I analysed three Facebook groups that met my criteria, observed the activity in their groups, as well as interviewed some of the members of their

communities. Through these data, I identified whether or not the online Facebook groups were indeed virtual communities and if they could be compared to their online counterparts. To do so, I borrowed Lorne Dawson's six elements of virtual community: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship and social control, personal concern, and occurrence in a public 'space'. Using these elements, I discussed whether or not the three Facebook groups meet the requirements to be considered an online community. Through my analysis, I determined that the three groups all demonstrated evidence of all six elements to various degrees.

The most substantial evidence of these elements for the three Facebook groups is that of occurrence in a public 'space'. This element is facilitated by the technology that Facebook offers to its users. While activity takes place in the group, it is open to all members of the group, not only those who engage in posting. It is also open to views by those who are not members of the group, although they cannot participate in the group, they can certainly observe what is happening (Facebook Help Center: *What's the difference between a public and private group and how do I change the privacy setting*?). It is also demonstrated by the fact that many view the posts (Facebook records that data), but are not active participants in the conversation. Therefore, they can 'witness' this interaction that is happening in the public 'space' of their group, emulating situations that could take place in offline public spaces. Therefore, the three groups demonstrate strong evidence that they meet the requirements for this element of virtual community.

The second strongest evidence of the elements proposed by Dawson is the stability of identity. This element refers to the consistency of the identities of the members in the groups. This is demonstrated through two layers of stability. Given the fact that in all three groups,

the creators reported knowing most, if not all members, it would be difficult for one to lie about their identity without raising suspicion. In fact, in the Canada group, there is an extra step to this, as when joining the group, one must answer some questions: "(a)re you a parishioner of [...] (this group is for parishioners only)? (…) If you are not a parishioner, are you looking for information about mass timings or parish events? If so please visit (…)" (Gregory, February 4, 2019). This allows them to make an informed decision on whether or not the person requesting entry into the group is a member of their offline community. Also, given that many of the group members interact in person, it would be likely that someone changing their name, or having a stranger in the group would be noticed. The second layer of this element is once again due to what the technology allows. Facebook has implemented a restriction so that one can only change their display name once every 60 days, unlike other platforms. Therefore, all three groups demonstrate enough evidence of stability of identity to satisfy this element of virtual community.

The third strongest evidence of an element of community is that of netizenship and social control. This element is about the members demonstrating a sense of responsibility in maintaining the rules and regulations of the group, to sustain their communication. Once again, Facebook's technology plays a role here, as it allows for groups to have admins and moderators that have extra permissions in the group. For example, they are the ones who control who can and cannot be members, giving them authority over them. Their names are listed in the group in the admin and moderator section so that members can be aware of who they are. In their interviews, the creators and some members acknowledged that the admins would remove inappropriate content if posted, even if this had yet to occur. Although the admins and moderators may not have acted on their ability, the members are aware that a

rule exists, spoken or not. The Canadian group does list specific rules in their 'about' section, and the American one does mention what members should avoid posting. Therefore, all three groups demonstrate enough evidence of netizenship and social control to satisfy this element of virtual community.

The next element to show significant evidence in these three groups is that of stability of membership. This refers to members posting frequently and over a long enough period of time. This is stronger for the American and Australian groups as they have more members, and therefore more potential for active participation in the group. The Canadian group also shows such evidence, if a little more ambiguously. In the contents of the groups, one can see that members have been interacting with one another since the creation of the groups 5 to 9 years ago, through comments, reactions, and likes. There is also evidence in all three groups that many of the members participate through observation. They may not actively contribute to the conversation, but they regularly visit the site to view what is posted. One of the advantages of the Facebook group is that members get notifications in various forms when new content is added to the group (email, push notification, SMS, *etc*.). That means that they do not have to check if there is new content, as they are informed directly by the software. It is as though members are always in the group, even when they are away. There is sufficient evidence discussed in my data analysis to demonstrate this element of community in all three groups.

The next two elements are a little more ambiguous in their evidence within the three groups. This first of these is that of personal concern, which relies somewhat on the next element of interactivity, which is necessary to determine whether or not the interaction between the members is more than instrumental, and that members demonstrate an interest

in the other members. There is evidence of this element to varying degrees in the three Facebook groups. Through the posts and the answers to the interview questions, it can be seen that the members of the groups are interested in each other's lives, as they congratulate successes, mourn losses, and share photos of community events in the group. Therefore, the interaction in the groups is not only instrumental, but has another deeper and more personal layer than what would be found in a simple virtual bulletin board. However, ambiguity takes shape from the fact that in some cases, the groups act as simple virtual bulletin boards. At the same time, there are moments where more interaction is present in the group, and they better represent the elements of a virtual community as defined above.

The final element is also a little ambiguous. For the interactivity element, I was looking for a significant level of interactivity between the members of the Facebook groups, be it through discussions, comments, posts, replies, reacting, or 'liking' a post. This is the weakest element of virtual community found in the groups. That is not to say, however, that there is no interaction. All of these forms of interaction are present in all three groups, but to varying degrees. This is especially true for the Canadian group, which has the least interaction, as the most active member is the creator and admin of the group. In the other two groups, it generally depends on situations in their offline lives, as when there are events or situations offline impacting their lives, there is more activity in the groups. This is also reflected in the answers the participants provided in their interviews. Although the evidence is a little more ambiguous, there remains enough evidence to satisfy this element of interactivity in determining the presence of virtual community.

Based on this assessment, I come to the preliminary conclusion that although these three groups do demonstrate evidence that they are virtual communities, they are so only by

the extension of its offline counterpart. The influence of the online group has on the offline group is ambiguous at best. The extent of virtual community found in these online groups leads to the conclusion that virtual community is only an extension rather than the independent strong center of community that would be necessary for it to influence the offline life. It is much more evident that the offline influences the online in their cases, as can be seen in the topics of discussions taking place in their groups as a reflection of their offline lives. Therefore, the online group becomes an extension of what already exists in the offline space, as opposed to its own unique separate community. There is some evidence that shows that the members use the Facebook community as an additional tool that members can use to communicate and interact with one another when they cannot do so in person, and that it can sometimes take the shape of a virtual bulletin board. It is this ambiguity of the virtual community that makes it an extension rather than an influencer.

More research would be needed to determine the true impact that online and offline communities have on one another. Future research will need to analyse a more significant number of Facebook groups, both public and private, to truly determine the interaction between the two 'spaces'. It would also be essential to investigate other social media platforms. This fits perfectly in the current stream of digital religion studies, as stated above, where scholars are already starting to investigate where online and offline converges. It would also be essential to look at how new technology, such as augmented reality, can augment virtual reality (Campbell, 2020), and the impact it will have on offline communities. It will be interesting to see the shape virtual religious space will take as technology continues to expand and becomes limitless.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. **Community**
    a. Are the members in the group the same as those from your offline congregation?
    b. What impact has this group had on your community?
    c. What is the importance of the Facebook group to your community?
    d. Has your community been influenced by this Facebook group? If yes, how?
2. **Religion**
    a. What kind of posts do you mostly see in the group?
    b. What is the role of Facebook in your religious / everyday life?
    c. Do you believe that this Facebook group has impacted religion in your life?
    d. How often do you participate in religious events offline? What are some of those events?
    e. In what way has your religion affected other aspects of your life?
    f. Is religion an important part of your daily life? Why or why not?
    g. Tell me about a particular spiritual/religious moment you've had when you felt very close to god. Where were you? What were you doing? Were the Internet and social media in anyway involved?
    h. Do you ever offer prayers, or send out prayer requests on social media?

i. What one word describes your religion best? Why?

j. Have your religious beliefs changed much since you've started participating in social media or using the Internet?

3. **Facebook, technology, Internet**

a. How is the Facebook group moderated?

b. Why was this Facebook group created?

c. Describe your feelings about your relationship with the Facebook group.

d. In what other ways do you use the Internet and social media?

e. How did you hear about the Facebook group? What motivated you to join?

f. What are the limitations of Facebook that you have encountered?

g. Do you ever seek information about other religions on the Internet?

h. Is your pastor actively involved in the Facebook group? On social media in general?

i. Has your faith been challenged by the modern world and its technology? How so?

j. Do you do any online shopping? What do you generally buy?

k. Do you use sites such as Netflix, amazon prime, or crave TV, among others, to watch movies, TV-shows, etc.?

l. Do you read or watch news media on the Internet? Why? What kind?

m. Do you play any online games?

n. What other information do you search for on the Internet?

o. How often do you use search engines such as Google, Bing or Yahoo, amongst others?

4. **Communication**
    a. How often do you communicate with the other members of the FB group? In what manner? On what topics?
    b. Do you often use video chats, or chats such as LINE, texting, email, etc. to communication with your friends, family and community?
5. **Membership**
    a. What are the requirements for membership in the FB group? Are they the same as for the church?
6. **Meaning**
    a. What does this Facebook group mean for you?
    b. What does this Facebook group mean for your community/church?
7. **Bolster Religious participation**
    a. Are any posts intended to bolster participation at community or religious events?
    b. What kind of events are advertised in the group?
8. **Motivators,**
    a. What do you think influences people to want to join this group?
9. **Family and friends, relationship building, social interaction**
    a. How much of your Facebook group usage would you say is motivated by a desire to be social or feel connected to others?
    b. Does this group facilitate your social life? How so?

10. Frequency

a. How often do you post in the group?

b. Has there been an increase of participation within the offline community

    i. since the creation of this Facebook group?

11. Evangelism

a. How often do you employ religious language or arguments in platforms such as Facebook?

b. Do some members post items such as prayer requests? If so, how often and under what circumstances?

c. Does your pastor ever post his sermons on Facebook? Either in the group or on a different page?

d. Do any of your members, including your pastor, post gospel passages? Inspirational messages? If yes, could you describe them? What purpose do they have?

12. Criticism/qualities

a. What concerns you about the FB group?

b. Is there anything in the Facebook group that is unsatisfying in comparison to the offline world?

c. What do you think are the most pressing issues of this group?

d. What are the most difficult and rewarding aspects of this group?

e. Has the Facebook group been useful? If not, why was it not useful? If yes, how was it useful?

13. Information

a. What kind of information is usually posted in the wall?

b. What kind of files are usually found in the posts? E.g

c. . video, memes, images, photos, audio, files such as posters, advertisements, articles and so on.

14. Offline Life

a. Do you often communicate in person with the members of Facebook? If yes, under what circumstances?

b. Do you personally know all the members of this Facebook group in person? If not, how many do you know?

15. **Online Life**

a. What are the ways in which you use Facebook?

b. Do you have a presence online other than Facebook?

c. Do you find that Facebook fills a void in your life?

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Please respond to the following questions by filling the blanks.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your sex?
    a. F _____
    b. M _____
3. What is your place of residence?
    a. City _____
    b. State/Province _____
    c. Country _____

Appendix C

Request Message

Hello!

My name is Anabel Therrien; I'm a Masters student under the supervision of Dr. Peter Beyer at the University of Ottawa, (Ontario, Canada). I'm currently doing my research on the topic of Catholic congregations and their communities in Facebook groups. I will be investigating the aspect of community as seen in both the online and offline lives of the community. I'm interested in observing and interacting with this group as well as interviewing three of your members on a voluntary basis.

No personal information will be used in the research, nor will it be shared - everything will stay anonymous. Volunteers in the interviews may refuse to continue their participation at any time during the interview. Members can contact me privately and individually if they are interested, or if they have any questions or concerns. Please feel free to message me here, or by email at XX.

Thank you very much for considering my request.

Appendix D

Permission Form

[Month, Day, 2018]

I [Name], admin of the [Name of the Facebook group], give Anabel Therrien, Masters Student at the university of Ottawa permission to study, participate, and recruit participants in our Facebook group for her research project: Studying Facebook as a facilitator of community in Catholic congregations.

Members participation in the study is voluntary. She or he does not have to answer any questions that feels uncomfortable. No personal information will be used in any report written about the group.

_____

Admin (print)

_____ _____

Admin (signature) **Date**

_____ _____

Email **Phone**

Appendix E

Consent Form

uOttawa

Université d'Ottawa
Faculté des Arts
Département d'études anciennes et de sciences des religions

University of Ottawa
Faculty of Arts
Department of Classics and Religious Studies

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
University of Ottawa • Ottawa, ON

Title of Study: **Studying Facebook as a facilitator of community in Facebook Congregations**

Investigator: Anabel Joanne Therrien
Department of Classics and Religious Studies
Phone: [redacted]

You are being asked to be in a research study of online and offline catholic communities in Catholic congregation Facebook groups. You were selected as a possible participant because you are over the age of 18 years old, your are part of the Catholic congregation on Facebook, and its offline counterpart. Please read this form, ask any questions that you may have, and if you wish, indicate your consent to participate in the study by signing and dating the form

The purpose of the study is to better understand the relation between online and offline Catholic congregation communities. Ultimately, this study will be the basis of a Masters thesis.

Purpose of Study

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview and answer questions on a variety of themes. The Interview will take place at a time of your choosing, and through the medium of your choice. Possible mediums are Facebook chat, email, video chat or phone. The interviews will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes and can be divided in two sessions.

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected media. All audio recordings will only be accessible to the principal investigator and her thesis supervisor. They will be saved in a password protected secure location for up to X years, where physical files will be shredded, and virtual files securely deleted. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. Pseudonyms will be used to safeguard your identity.

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or the University of Ottawa. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as

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well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study at any time feel free to contact me, Anabel Therrien at [redacted] or by telephone at [redacted]. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators, you may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research by email at [redacted], by phone: [redacted] by fax: [redacted]

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name (print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____