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The Role of Online Communities in the Formation of

Critical Opinion and Discourse on Current Issues in Philippine Society

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Ma. Beatriz Corina P. Astudillo

April 2014

THE ROLE OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN THE FORMATION OF

CRITICAL OPINION AND DISCOURSE ON CURRENT ISSUES IN PHILIPPINE

SOCIETY

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by

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ABSTRACT

Astudillo, B. (2014). *The role of online communities in the formation of critical opinion and discourse on current issues in Philippine society.* Unpublished Undergraduate Thesis, University of the Philippines, Diliman.

This thesis study describes how Filipino online communities aimed at critiquing and effecting social change promote the formation of critical opinion and stimulate discourse on current issues in Philippine society. It is guided by findings from previous studies which suggest that the success of an online community is determined by several influences and attributes such as: the community's purpose; its degree of technological mediation; the usability and sociability of communicative platforms used; and the characteristics of the population of its members who interact with one another, such as their personal backgrounds and motivations for participation, as well as the size of the population itself. Using a framework of concepts integrated from media richness theory, participatory communication models, activity theory, Habermas' theory of communicative action, and media system dependency theory, the study analyzes popular online communities Filipino Freethinkers (FF) and Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) as media for social action by: profiling members in terms of their socio-economic characteristics, social and political orientations, participation in the community, and media dependency; analyzing the content, socio-political orientation, and structural and functional attributes of these online communities; and examining the impact of community activities (both online and offline) on participants' interaction with one another and response to social issues.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Issues in Philippine society are influenced, among other things, by the Filipino value system. In the context of national development, Filipino values have been described as ambivalent (Gorospe, 1988; Jocano, 2001), or capable of producing both good and bad effects. The conflict and lack of resolution between drastically different orientations and opposing values can be attributed to processes in the past that have cast Filipino culture in various contradictory molds, and has been a source of instability in Philippine social institutions and society as a whole (Garcia, Zulueta, & Caritativo, 1984; Gorospe, 1988).

Filipino values also orient Filipino politics and governance. This is evidenced by several features of the Filipino political landscape, such as the prevalence of patron-client relations (characterized by values such as *utang na loob* or debt of gratitude) (Sison, n.d.), particularism and the primacy of kinship ties (Sison, n.d.), and extensive Church influence, or what Montiel (1994) referred to as the union of religion and politics. That such aspects of the Filipino value system, while positive in some contexts, have prevented Filipinos from honing the self-discipline needed for nationwide socio-economic progress is beyond debate. The impediments placed by negative aspects of the Filipino value system on the path to national development have taken the form of certain contentious issues and have given rise to different perspectives with various approaches to addressing these issues.

Filipino socio-political orientations can be dichotomously described as either conservative or liberal; the former adheres to principles upheld in tradition and religion while the latter subscribes to rationality and pluralism of perspectives. Tolosa (1994)

cites a need for ideological consciousness or greater knowledge of personal orientation in order for Filipinos to take an active role in national development.

Historically, the media, particularly print, radio, and television, has played a key role in mobilizing collective responses to social issues. In contemporary times, the Internet is growing in popularity as the choice medium of the citizenry to voice their sentiments, individually or through the various collectivities existing online.

The notion of community has always been intrinsic to the Internet. This is supported by research conducted by prominent scholars such as Howard Rheingold into the Internet's evolution, which have found it to be a product of the confluence of various technological developments that originated independently of each other but all of which served to connect people through computer-mediated communication (CMC).

As the Internet and its features and user populations continue to evolve, activism and social movements have gone online (Maeby, 2010; Breuer & Farooq, 2012) to take advantage of its ability to extend our offline, physical experiences and connect us to those that we may not have encountered otherwise. That much is well known, but exactly how online communities are able to influence members of society–through aspects such as their technological features and structure, user populations, content, and others—are still unclear. Integrating the online and offline existence of Internet-based collectives, the study aims to examine the ability of socio-politically oriented online communities to influence and stimulate critical opinion among individuals, and consequently, to impact the larger society.

B. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

Research Problem:

How do online communities and networks oriented towards critiquing and effecting social change promote the formation of critical opinion and stimulate discourse on current issues in Philippine society?

Research Objectives:

1. To provide information regarding the background and origins of such communities;

2. To profile the participants in such communities according to their:

    a. Socio-economic backgrounds;

    b. Social and political orientations, if any;

    c. Motives for participation in the online community; and

    d. Tendencies regarding participation and interaction with others in the community;

3. To analyze the nature of such communities as communication media according to their:

    a. Structural attributes, which pertain to the rules, norms, and roles that mediate community interaction;

    b. Functional attributes, or the technological features and design of the community media; and

    c. Socio-political orientations and purposes;

4. To describe the posts, comments, and other communicative content in such communities and the modes through which these are communicated, based on

accounts of community administrators and on data gathered within a time frame of one month;

5. To examine the impact of the online and offline activities of such communities on the following attributes of participants:

   a. Their interactions with other members;

   b. Their participation in the community; and

   c. Their response to specific social issues (i.e. values, opinions, and approaches to addressing social issues)

C. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

By analyzing the role of online communities in effecting social change in response to particular issues, the study intends to identify strengths and weaknesses in the structure and functioning of online communities in order to find ways through which online communities can be improved as a medium for social activism. Another aim of the study is to discover new opportunities for further integrating online communities to traditional communities and life in physical settings, as well as to suggest viable, new online and offline approaches for online communities oriented towards influencing opinion and effecting social change to further their causes. The study is also intended to forecast possible new directions for such online communities in terms of orientation, membership, technology, and other aspects.

The significance of this study lies in the capacity of its subjects, the online communities oriented towards influencing society, to effect much-needed social change, as well as the ever-increasing relevance of Internet mediation with regard to the

formation and progress of social collectivities and movements in social and political contexts.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conducting a sound and valuable study on online communities oriented towards a specific purpose—in this case, those with the desirous aim of stimulating social change—entails looking into similar past research endeavors that have contributed to this relatively young area of study in order to understand and participate in the ongoing dialogue, and steer it towards new directions that would shed light on more facets of the dynamic world of online collectives. With this purpose, the researcher referred to journal articles, conference papers, books, and other scholarly materials found through online search engines, databases, and library catalogues to form a literature review that discusses the history of the Internet and how it came to be a haven for various types of groups, relevant aspects of online communities, and Internet-mediated social action.

A. ONLINE COMMUNITIES

1. Defining online communities

The continuing evolution of Internet technologies as well as its user populations has had a varied impact on the nature of social relations. These can be observed in the numerous communities that have flourished on the Internet, which Van Dijk (2006) refers to as *virtual communities*. Van Dijk (2006) wrote that these communities are viewed by some as a solution to the "lost community," (pp. 164-165) or the post-World War II disintegration of traditional communities such as families, neighborhoods, and work groups that has been attributed to privatization and individualization.

Preece (2001) argued that there is no accepted definition of online community. Early efforts to define online communities were focused on differentiating these from those that existed offline. Van Dijk (2006) defined online or virtual communities as

"associations of people not tied to time, place and physical or material circumstances, other than those of the media enabling them" (p. 166) and wrote that such communities are created electronically through mediated communications. In contrast, he defined *organic communities* or physical communities as those restricted by time, place, and physical conditions and limited to physical contact, thus finding basis in face-to-face communication. Compared to organic communities, which are relatively stable units characterized by close-knit communication and shared activities, virtual communities are "loose affiliations that can fall apart at any moment" (p. 166) consisting of people who tend to have more diverse backgrounds but are united by specific interests or activities; thus, virtual communities are also called *communities of interest*.

The tendency of initial research to compare online communities with face-to-face communities (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; and Schuler, 1996, in Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003) was weakened by findings that communication mediated by the Internet and other related technologies has become a normal part of people's existence (Rainie & Packel, 2001, in Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). Despite the fact that the various early components of the web have had to undergo decades of evolution before achieving their current level of sophistication and availability, several scholars now argue that a distinction between online and offline communities is unnecessary or erroneous (Wilson & Peterson, 2003, in Porter, 2004; Van Dijk, 2006). Blanchard (2004, in Porter, 2004) wrote that physical and virtual space both frame human interaction, citing the variety of communication modes through which virtual community members interact, which includes face-to-face, telephone, and mail. Blanchard (2004, in Porter, 2004) further suggests that virtual and physical communities

can coexist. Instead of the separateness of offline and online realities, Van Dijk (2006, p. 166) argued that the content of communication in networks and in virtual communities is largely determined by the reality of the organic communities with which one is familiar. As such, Van Dijk (2006, p. 167) predicted that, though virtual communities lack many of the physical qualities that enable traditional communities to solidify and preserve their own culture and identity, and cannot therefore replace traditional community, virtual communities will become increasingly integrated to traditional communities. The bridge between virtual communities and online communities as identified by Van Dijk (2006) is the *communities online*, which he described as organic communities with virtual counterparts on the Internet. He distinguished these from online communities by defining the latter as completely virtual communities that thrive only on the Internet. However, no label for online communities that have extended into the physical setting—the kinds of communities with which the present study concerns itself—was included in his writing.

According to Sproull and Arriaga (2007), the term online community came into usage starting only from the mid-1990s. Prior to that period, such groups that may be classified today as online communities were instead referred to using the technology that supported them, such as "newsgroups," "listservs," "mailing lists" and "BBSs" (Sproull & Arriaga, 2007). Early definitions, such as Rheingold's in 1993 (in Ridings & Gefen, 2004), were also preoccupied with assigning implications of place on the term "virtual," owing to traditional associations of community to a geographic area such as a neighborhood (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Thus, the term "virtual" came to indicate the lack of a physical location as a home (Handy, 1995, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Preece (2001) wrote that initial approaches to analyzing online community either viewed online community as a social phenomenon, or focused on the supporting software's structure. Since then, some scholarly definitions have been formed in consideration of both perspectives. Preece (2000) in Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, and Abras (2003) defined online communities as "a group of people who interact in a virtual environment; have a purpose, are supported by technology, and are guided by norms and policies" (p. 1). Such general definitions have been deconstructed into several aspects that were emphasized, specified, or built upon by other scholars. Ridings and Gefen (2004) assign the label "virtual" to communities whose interaction is primarily electronic or facilitated by technology. They also expand the notion of interaction by acknowledging that interaction and communication among community members occurs with some degree of regularity and for some duration (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Porter (2004) volunteers a relatively inclusive definition of an online community as a group of individuals or business partners whose interaction centers on a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially mediated by technology and guided by some rules and conventions. By including business partners, this definition recognizes that communities bring together not just individuals but also business firms; thus, networks of electronically mediated relationships among firms may be considered as virtual communities.

Porter's (2004) definition also acknowledges that virtual communities vary in terms of their degree of virtualness (Virnoche & Marx, 1997, in Porter, 2004) and may be called *fluid communities* (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, in Porter, 2004), in which relationships among members are sometimes facilitated by face-to-face encounters, and

in other instances, technologically mediated. Furthermore, the definition encompasses technologies that are not computer-based, such as mobile technology, as long as they are used to support virtual communities. Lastly, emphasis is given to the significance of social norms, roles, protocols, and policies in shaping and upholding the community structure, which is the case in both traditional and virtual communities (Brint, 2001, Wilson & Peterson, 2002, in Porter, 2004).

Despite these modifications, the notion of community cannot be applied to all online collectivities and sites of online discourse (Erickson, 1997; Fernback, 1999, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Groups that do not qualify as communities include some discussion groups and chat rooms that lack permanence or consistency in the participation of its members (Jones, 1997, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

2. The nature of the Internet as a medium for online communities

The proliferation and diversification of online communities in the past two decades owes much to the nature of their medium: the Internet. The new digital media function through the process of *remediation*—that is, refashioning traditional media forms like print, television, film, and radio and expressing these in interconnected networks (i.e. the Internet). Bolter and Grusin (1999) wrote that the Internet as a medium "reforms its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience" (p. 19) and instead of disrupting culture, actually emerges from within existing cultural contexts and extends these into new spaces.

The Internet is marked by what Bolter and Grusin (1999) refer to as practices of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*. Immediacy is tied to the immersive quality of the Internet, which strives to create a sense of presence. In order to do so, the virtual reality of the

Internet should replicate the viewer's daily visual experience as closely as possible, filling the viewer's field of vision continuously so that he/she forgets that he/she is actually "wearing a computer interface" and being fed a stream of information from a graphic image that he/she interprets to be a visual world (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 31).

Hypermediacy specifically pertains to the certain features of computer interfaces, particularly the "windowed style" of web pages, that allows interactive applications to be accessed simultaneously and randomly. In other words, hypermedia offers a "combination of random access with multiple media" (Mitchell, 1994, in Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 45). Because each window is simultaneously "automatic and interactive," hypermediacy reinforces Internet users' desire for immediacy.

Immediacy and hypermediacy come together in the dimension of cyberspace, which is distinguished by enthusiasts from "the sensorial world of the organically human" as a "digitized, pure, immaterial world" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 181), a "parallel world of potential workspaces" (Tomas, 1991, in Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 181) that spans a global network. Owing to its capabilities of "providing forums for people to gather in surprisingly personal proximity," enthusiasts who zealously praise its ability to defy physical limitations have lauded cyberspace as a means for transcendence. However, others question this notion of personal proximity by pointing out how not only geographical location (urban or rural, or in the industrialized or developing world) but also socio-economic status determines how and whether users can access the Internet in the first place and potentially limit Internet use for some people. Thus, Bolter and Grusin (1999) prefer to describe cyberspace as a "tightly defined network of computers, economic status, and considerations of time and space" that is not immaterial, but rather,

"very much a part of our contemporary world" (p. 182). The existence of cyberspace is preserved through constant remediation of a multitude of elements of offline reality: electric communications networks; visual spaces for various art and communicative forms; known and historical places and "nonplaces" (such as theme parks and shopping malls) for social purposes; and earlier forms of media (print, radio, film, TV), which are also embedded in material and social surroundings and are now being refashioned and extended by cyberspace (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, pp. 182-183). The emergence and diversification of online communities is only a small portion of the multitudinous evidence of how the constant evolution and interaction of these elements continue to shape our society, culture, and personal experiences.

3. History and related contexts

a. Early forms and evolution of technologies

Howard Rheingold is a foremost scholar in the study of communities on the Internet. His book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, first published in 1993, is considered an authoritative reference for information on the nature, origins, and future of online communities.

Rheingold (2000) attributes the pervasiveness and anarchy of today's Internet to years of separate and seemingly unrelated development, involving different technologies and populations of participants converging in the 1980s. He specifically identified three main streams of development that shaped socialization on the Internet and contributed to the evolution of Internet communities (Rheingold, 2000): ARPANET spinoffs, grassroots movements through computerized bulletin board systems (BBSs), and group conversation systems (e.g. Usenet).

In the 1960s and 1970s, with funding from the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) under the US Department of Defense, a small group of computer programmers and engineers invented the first interactive computers (as opposed to those that made use of punched cards and printouts). With their computers' new capabilities, members of the team were then able to find ways for their computers to act as communication devices, resulting in the formation of ARPANET. The personal computer revolution of the late 1970s led to the creation of new industry and new subculture; as more and more people who were influenced by the ARPA-funded pioneers experimented with the technology, innovations towards improved usefulness and easier accessibility of computers increased. However, the ability to communicate on the Internet was still largely concentrated among researchers, who formed small, insular communities with technical orientations to communicate with one another (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003).

The 1980s saw considerable increase in the number of personal (and powerful) computers, and as more people purchased personal computers for their homes, a method of connecting PCs into telephones was soon discovered, resulting in the growth of personal telecommunications and new forms of collectivities.

Around this time, bulletin board systems, through which people posted messages on various topics, came into existence (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). The technology functioned by plugging a personal computer, running inexpensive yet appropriate software, into a telephone line through a modem. BBSs became a way for people to post public content or leave private messages to other BBS users (Rheingold, 2000). According to Rheingold (2000), BBSs were where subcultures originated,

describing these as self-promulgating and providing tools for creating different subcultures that could be utilized to organize movements, run businesses, implement campaigns, discuss matters of mutual interest with others, and basically post a variety of content for countless purposes. The structural attributes of the BBS also allowed users to either create a place collaboratively, or moderate their own BBS individually. Rheingold (2000) likened BBS culture to *zines*, which were derived from science fiction *fanzines* and characterized as homemade, enjoying small circulation, and popular on the grassroots level. Zines were known for being unedited and at times transgressive. Similar to zines, BBSs acquired a quality that Rheingold (2000) described as a rough-hewn and unmediated alternative to culture propagated by mass media. Moreover, the BBS culture's similarity to fan culture and conduciveness to form grassroots movements enabled BBS to become a political instrument. Rheingold (2000) wrote about a certain Colonel Dave Hughes from Colorado Springs who utilized his BBS to protest against city policies, a Mayor Kichiro Tomino from Zushi, Japan, who used to lobby against his local city government and went on to run his office through BBS, and how BBSs were used as a political tool in the former Soviet Union.

As graphical user interfaces improved, moderated newsgroups also became popular in the 1980s, particularly as the Internet came to succeed ARPANET. The most prominent newsgroup community at the time (and arguably until now) was Usenet. Started in 1980, Usenet is a computer-conferencing system spanning several networks (not limited to the Internet) in which people participated in public conversations about certain topics.

Not long after, in 1985, the first widely recognized non-technical online community, called the WELL or Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link was established (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). Synchronous communication also developed, with the advent of IRC (Internet Relay Chat) in 1988, and a decade later, instant messaging software such as ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger.

The late 1980s saw an explosive diversification in the populations using their computers to communicate with others located far and wide. The 1990s were a time when highly sophisticated gaming worlds (e.g. Doom, Quake, and Everquest) that integrated sound, messaging, and video, emerged. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was no longer limited to a small elite of researchers and technical practitioners and went on to be used by the general public for various political, social, cultural, economic, and personal motivations.

The technologies that grew from ARPANET, the BBSs, and conferencing systems, from their separate origins, have since become integrated with each other and progressed into a multidimensional, multifunctional system. This was facilitated largely by packet-switching, a way of sending computer information—text, sound, color graphics, programs video, and data—over a network of telecommunication lines that does not require a central controller (Rheingold, 2000). The fate of the Internet as the all-powerful medium it is today was sealed in 1991 with the invention of the World Wide Web (WWW) (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003).

In summary, the Internet began with interactive computing technology, further developments in the usability, price, and accessibility of which enabled the proliferation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies such as ARPANET, BBSs,

newsgroups, and those derived from or related to these. These technologies have since evolved into the Internet, or simply, the Net, where online collectivities of different forms and persuasions flourish to this day.

4. Motivations for joining a community

Ridings and Gefen (2004) identified four motivational aspects for joining online communities: information exchange, social support exchange, friendship, and recreation. They also cited common interest and technical features of the community as additional motivational aspects that are important to a lesser extent.

Information exchange is the most frequently cited reason for joining online communities in the literature (Furlong, 1989; Jones, 1995; Wellman et al., 1996, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). People join communities in order to attain and convey information about certain topics and learn new things (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). The content in virtual communities, unlike some run by CMC site providers, are member-generated, thus rendering the community as self-sustaining (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Virtual communities, compared to traditional communities, are also unique in the sense that weak ties prevail in people's participation in the exchange of information. Research has found that relationships among members in an online community, usually relative strangers, are largely intended for information exchange about specific topics (Baym, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999a, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Content in virtual communities tends to involve self-expression as well as requesting or providing information (Herring, 1996, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004) as supported by the results of the Pew Internet and The American Life Project Survey of members in groups

about entertainment, professional, and sports groups (Horrigan, et al. 2001, in Ridings &

Gefen, 2004).

Obtaining and giving emotional support is also a common reason for people to

join online communities. Social support is defined by House (1981, in Ridings & Geffen,

2004) as the giving of emotional concern, aid, knowledge, and/or information relevant to

self-evaluation. Several studies suggest that people visit virtual communities seeking a

sense of belonging, companionship, and encouragement in addition to instrumental aid

related to certain tasks (Furlong, 1989; Hiltz, 1984; Hilts & Wellman, 1997; Korenman &

Wyatt, 1996; Smith, 1999; Sproull & Faraj, 1997; Wellman, 1996; and Wellman et al.,

1996, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Wellman and Gulia (1999, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004)

wrote that some structural functions of the Internet, such as search options and

community forums aid in finding others in similar situations. The existence of virtual

communities offering support for recovering alcohol and drug addicts and people

suffering from diseases provides evidence for this (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Participation in online communities is also motivated by pro-social behaviors,

particularly making friends (Wasko & Faraj, 2000, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). In the

context of virtual communities, it is important to note that friendship differs from social

support in that friendship implies the importance of company, unlike social support

which involves the giving and receiving of emotional help (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). As

with seeking social support, the structure of the Internet makes it useful for finding others

in similar situations or shared interests, especially if the interest is uncommon (Igbaria,

1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999a, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). The interactive quality of

some community features such as chat rooms and bulletin boards promote the establishment and continuation of friendships (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Recreation, or entertainment, is the last main motivational factor identified by Ridings and Gefen (2004). The entertainment value of the Internet has been applied to virtual communities as scholarly research and the popular press has recognized participation in online communities as a comparatively new form of recreation akin to watching television (Jackson, 1999, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). In addition to opportunities for exchanging information, social support, and making new friends, fun and enjoyment are popular reasons for people to join online communities.

5. Community attributes and typology

a. Common attributes

Some scholarly definitions of online community explicitly mention attributes of such communities, though these tend to vary in particularity. Ridings and Gefen (2004) narrowed these attributes down to three: connection or communication with others, electronic or technologically enabled primary interaction, and frequent and regular participation. Though the frequency with which active members visit a virtual community is unspecified, it is assumed that a virtual community consists of members who persistently interact with one another (A.D. Smith, 1999, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Porter (2004) elaborates on these three attributes by offering what she calls the 5 P's of virtual communities: Purpose, Place, Platform, Population, and Profit Model.

Purpose refers to the content of interaction in the community, and has been described by Gusfield (1978, in Porter, 2004) as a fundamental element in the functioning of a virtual community, due to communities being defined by a common purpose among

members. The community purpose or subject of discourse forms the basis of interaction in a virtual community (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000, in Porter, 2004).

Place, which points to the extent of technology mediation of interaction (Porter, 2004), has both structural and socio-psychological implications. Place in this sense may refer to both a location marked by boundaries as well as a notion of common values developed through members' interaction (Porter, 2004). When taken in terms of physical location, Porter (2004) conceptualizes the place attribute on two levels: (1) hybrid, or existing in both physical and virtual (i.e. technologically mediated) space; and (2) virtual, or existing purely in a virtual space and not in any physical space.

Platform, which Porter (2004) refers to as the technical design for interaction, is largely determined by one primary factor: synchronicity. Synchronicity, or the degree to which real-time interaction is supported by a medium (Hoffman & Novak, 1996, in Porter, 2004) is described dichotomously: either as synchronous (in real time) or asynchronous (at the convenience of participants). The interactivity of a virtual community is greatly influenced by the synchronicity of its platform. Features that promote synchronicity may lead to highly interactive communities, wherein members have a better sense of presence, co-presence, and place (Blanchard, 2004, in Porter, 2004). Synchronicity, and by extension interactivity, may also facilitate the construction of social reality for members (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997, in Porter, 2004). The three levels of the platform attribute proposed by Porter are: (1) synchronous; (2) asynchronous; and (3) hybrid (i.e. a community has both asynchronous and synchronous communication elements).

The population attribute, which refers to the structure or patterns of interaction, is conceptualized by Porter (2004) on three primary levels: (1) small group, wherein strong ties prevail; (2) network, in which weak ties and stressful ties (relations characterized by hostility and anti-social behavior) are likely; and (3) publics, wherein variability of interaction is high and strong, weak, and stressful ties are all probable.

Profit model refers to a community's ability to generate revenue. Porter (2004) wrote that an online community is either revenue-generating (as a host, facilitator, or content owner) or non-revenue generating. Krishnamurthy (2003, in Porter, 2004) outlined three common business models used by online communities: community enablers (host), trading/sharing communities (facilitator), and communities as a website feature of corporations (owner).

According to Krishnamurthy (2003, in Porter, 2004), community enablers host different types of communities of various interests and generate income through advertising and/or the charging of subscription fees. Trading/sharing communities earn revenue by charging transaction fees while assisting in the exchange of products or services among community members. Communities are often featured on websites of corporations who own the community content and use websites as tools for stimulating interaction, which results in revenue-generating transactions.

b. Contemporary typology

Porter (2004) proposes a typology of online communities consisting of two levels: the establishment level and the relationship orientation level.

Figure 1. *Porter's typology of online communities (2004)*
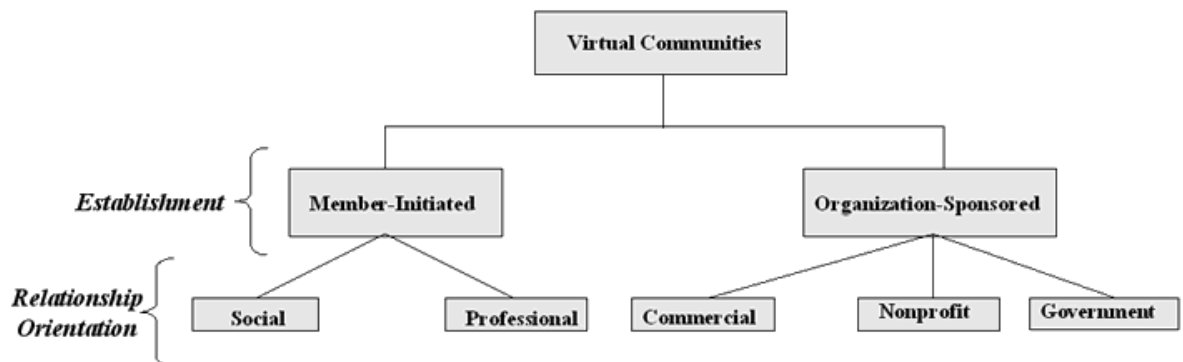
On the establishment level, online communities may be either member-initiated or organization-sponsored. On the relationship orientation level, in the member-initiated category, social and professional online communities can be found. On the same level, commercial, nonprofit, and government communities are classified as organization-sponsored communities.

Sproull and Arriaga (2007) provide a typology based on member interest and sponsor interest. The six types of communities identified and described by Sproull and Arriaga (2007) according to member interest are as follows:

1) Consumer communities – These communities consist of fans or people with common interest in or loyalty to a certain brand of product, service, team, entertainer, or media property. These communities enable members to organize fan club activities or exchange information about the brand they are passionate about.

2) (A)vocation communities – Experts and enthusiasts participate in these communities out of pleasure and also to improve their competence in certain

hobbies or work. The sharing of expert knowledge and how-to information is prevalent.

3) Place-based communities – People who belong to a specific geographic locale form these communities. Place-based communities were formed in the early 1980s with a political agenda, i.e. for the representation and expression of residents in the local political process (Schuler, 1996; Schuler & Day, 2004, in Sproull & Arriaga, 2007). These communities usually strive to build social capital by boosting electronic social connections among residents of physical communities (Hampton & Wellman, 1999; Kavanaugh, 2003; and Sproull & Patterson, 2004, in Sproull & Arriaga, 2007). Others are intended to help members find people with shared interests within their geographic location in order to arrange face-to-face meetings (Sproull & Arriaga, 2007).

4) Common condition communities – These communities consist of people who experience or have an interest in a common condition (Sproull & Arriaga, 2007). The range of conditions includes demographic characteristics, medical conditions, or membership/alumnus status in an organization. People join primarily to share their experiences, information, and advice as well as to give reassurance to others that they are not alone.

5) Concern communities – Sproull and Arriaga (2007) defined these as communities in which members have a common interest in a certain political, social, or ideological concern and often intend to influence conditions in the physical world. Thus, announcements and comments on current events and campaigns, rallies, fundraisers, etc. are common activities in such communities.

6) Collaborative work communities – These communities are oriented towards producing actual products, such as software and literary works, as opposed to talk and self-expression. Many collaborative work communities have produced open source software and much of their business activities are mediated by technology. Another example of such community are online newspapers to which "citizen journalists" contribute stories.

Meanwhile, the two distinct classifications of communities in terms of sponsor interest are: (1) those that generate revenue through sales (advertising, membership lists, products, etc.) called *sales-based revenue models*; and (2) corporations that opt to build market share or boost customer satisfaction and loyalty by maintaining online communities, particularly (a)vocation communities.

c. Influences on variability and community success

Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, and Abras (2003) cite various influences on the variability of communities, particularly, purpose, software design/environment, size, age and stage in the community life cycle, members' culture, and whether or not the community has a corresponding physical presence.

Preece (2000) organized these factors into two aspects: usability and sociability, writing that these also have an effect on community success or the fulfillment of community objectives. Sociability pertains to the social interactions of community members as well as the purposes, policies, and protocols that guide them. Community features that support sociability are concerned with developing software, policies, and practices to enhance social interaction online (Preece, 2000).

On the other hand, usability relates to the ease with which software can be used, and depends on how well the community's user interface supports human-computer interaction (HCI) (Preece, 2000; Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003).

B. INTERNET-MEDIATED SOCIAL ACTION

1. Effects and implications on different social collectivities

The Internet's decentralized communication structures have worked in favor of established mobilizing agencies and have also led to the establishment of new organizational forms and actors (Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

The explosion of social media and increasing usability and accessibility of online community platforms has made the web a powerful tool for a variety of communities—whether these are physical, virtual, or a combination of both—to carry out their activities and pursue their interests, as well as for grassroots movements to advance their causes. Among those that have taken advantage of the political power afforded by the Internet are online petition groups, social media-based protest groups, do-it-yourself (DIY) communities, political lobbyist groups, and physical protest groups (Maeby, 2010). Organized lobbying by internet advocacy groups and online pressure groups promoting activism on a wide range of policy issues have become increasingly common and visible in political landscapes across the globe. These groups engage in online activism by finding technical solutions to facilitate the mobilization of collective social action (Chadwick, 2011, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

A 2012 study by Rohlinger, Bunnage, and Klein that examined social activist group MoveOn and the Tea Party activist movement showed that social movements have reaped numerous benefits from using the Internet, namely: overcoming obstacles to

participation like time constraints, lack of skills, and low income; quick and easy dissemination of instructions and tools for action; and facilitation of group decision-making processes through the hosting of forums. Owing to simplified processes and new media capabilities, movements now have the means to operate independently from political parties, and may also use advertising, earned media, and viral campaigns to build support for their advocacies.

The online environment makes it easier for community facilitators to prevent divisiveness among supporters because they have the ability to manage message content. For example, Internet feedback mechanisms provide MoveOn with information on what topics are most important to supporters as well as those that curb enthusiasm. Likewise, Tea Party groups avoid mentioning gay marriage and abortion when crafting messages because these are sensitive and controversial topics to their audiences (Rohlinger, Bunnage, & Klein, 2012).

Unfortunately, there is a severe shortage of published academic inquiry on Filipino online communities, politically inclined or otherwise, by Filipino and foreign authors. A rare work is Emily Ignacio's 2005 book entitled *Building Diaspora: Filipino Community Formation on the Internet*, which examines Filipino online newsgroups (in which Filipinos dispersed throughout the globe engage in discussions and debates on political and social issues relevant to Filipinos, including Filipino national identity) from a post-colonial perspective. Drawing heavily on historical and ethnic discourses, the book talks about the use of the Internet by Filipinos who have migrated to build and reinforce "a sense of national, ethnic, and racial identity" (p. 179) with their fellow dispersed Filipinos as well as those back in the Philippines and concludes that detachment from a

geographical location (i.e. the Philippines, the homeland) does not necessarily disenfranchise one from a sense of place thanks to the Internet's capability to enable communication among users across wide distances synchronously or asynchronously.

2. Criticisms of cyber activism and internet-based political activities

Breuer & Farooq (2012), among other scholars, argue that the effectiveness of online activism is debatable. The results of a meta-analysis by Boulianne (2009, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012) of 38 studies on the impact of Internet use on civic engagement from 1995 to 2005 show a positive but insubstantial impact on the Internet. Moreover, these small positive effects may have been moderated by factors that are considered standard predictors of political participation, such as social capital (Gibson, Howard et al. 2000, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012) and political interest (Xenos & Moy 2007, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

Breuer and Farooq (2012) further note arguments by Bimber, Stohl et al. (2008) that use of digital media generally does not necessarily lead to increased participation, but instead enriches the range of strategies for individuals who are already interested and involved in politics. There is little evidence to suggest that digital media use will make the politically apathetic more inclined to participate in politics; at most, there is only the possibility that they will become more involved in political activities that are exclusively internet based (Baumgartner & Morris 2010, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

Slacktivism is a term formed by combining the words slacker and activism and used in a derogatory sense to describe online political and civic activities. Examples of activities that may be counted as an act of slacktivism include signing an online petition or donating to a cause through the Internet, which mimic traditional forms of offline

participation, quick-sharing of content over one's networks, clicking "Like" or copy-pasting content as a social network status to raise awareness about a political or social issue—acts that are intrinsically linked to certain features of social media platforms (Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

Acts of slacktivism, and those that engage in it, are generally criticized as narcissistic acts of self-representation or a betrayal of what more traditionally inclined activists perceive as the activist's shallow commitment to the cause due to his/her more time- and cost-efficient approach.

Though some research in foreign policy and international relations issues suggests that massive online campaigns do affect foreign policy making (Hayes, Huntley et al. 1999; Hong 2005, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012), skepticism regarding the ability of online advocacy to induce substantial policy change or influence formal decision makers among scholars remains high. Some critical scholars even warn that slacktivism may lead to perverse incentives and undesirable online behaviors such as mass mailings, spam, and an increase of "low-quality, redundant, and generally insubstantial commenting by the public" (Shulman 2009, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

C. SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS

The concept of community has been intrinsic to the Internet ever since the beginning of the latter's evolution. Research has found that people join online communities out of the need to exchange information, obtain and give emotional support, be entertained or engage in recreation, as well as to make friends (Ridings & Geffen, 2004). Though a wide variety of online communities have formed based on these motivations, communities tend to share common attributes such as a purpose, a place (or

the degree to which a community is founded in real life and also technologically mediated), a technological platform, a population or the individuals who interact within the community, and a profit model (Porter, 2004). Of all these, the community's purpose has been described as being a central, defining influence on the functioning of the community (Gusfield, 1978, in Porter, 2004).

Among the different types of communities identified by Sproull and Arriaga (2007), which include consumer communities for consumers of a certain brand, (a)vocation communities for experts and enthusiasts of a certain hobby or subject, place-based communities for people belonging to a specific geographic location, common condition communities, and collaborative work communities, the online communities with which this study is concerned are categorized as concern communities, the members of which share common social, political, or ideological concerns and aim to influence worldly issues.

However, the success of concern communities in their endeavors, and of online communities in general, depends on certain factors, particularly the community's usability and sociability. Preece (2000) defined usability as relating to three main aspects: the community's purpose, its members and their relationships with one another, and the policies or practices that guide their interaction. On the other hand, usability refers to the ease with which software can be used by individuals for HCI and pertains to the technological features and design interface of the community's channels.

The Internet's ever-evolving technological and structural features, which facilitate more convenient communication across vast distances and the sending of messages to multiple networks and broad audiences, as well as its decentralized nature, are an

important reason for the proliferation of online collectivities. The Internet has particularly benefited organized social movements and advocacy groups by providing technical solutions for engaging and mobilizing large masses and easing administrative tasks (Breuer & Farooq, 2012; Rohlinger, Bunnage, & Klein, 2012), as well as stimulating discourse on a variety of topics by hosting multitudinous discussion venues.

However, socio-political activities primarily mediated by the Internet have earned the pejorative nickname *slacktivism*, which implies that the intent behind Internet-based efforts is less genuine than that of activism in offline settings. Moreover, the effectiveness of cyber activism is debated and also criticized for causing undesirable and redundant behavior such as insubstantial commenting (Shulman, 2009, in Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

In the Philippine setting, the role of online communities in building and reinforcing a sense of Filipino identity among Filipino migrants has been the subject of academic inquiry (see Ignacio's *Building Diaspora*), but scholarly literature on Filipino online collectives and movements remains to be severely deficient.

D. RESEARCH GAP

While the literature reviewed here has shed some light on the largely administrative and promotional benefits of Internet use among various politically oriented groups, social movements, and purpose-driven communities to further their interests, insight into the actual communicative activity that occur within the online group and the influence of the Internet as a high-traffic, participative medium on the group experience is still lacking, particularly with regard to the effects of communities' utilization of different online channels such as websites and social media.

In the Philippine context, conducting a study on the impact of socio-politically oriented online communities on individuals is made more challenging due to a lack of recent scholarly inquiry into Filipino social and political orientations, as well as a shortage of empirical academic research on Filipino online activism (through social media, content-generating websites, and communities) and Filipino online communities in general.

By undertaking this exploration of online communities oriented towards stimulating critical discourse on social issues, the researcher hopes to address this dearth and contribute new and deeper knowledge that elaborates on the motivations and behavior of community participants, the role of structural and functional attributes such as membership structures and features of selected online platforms, and how the activities of such communities affect individual participants and their interactions with others that have the potential to impact the greater Filipino society.

III. STUDY FRAMEWORK

The study was conducted within a framework involving the interaction of three key elements: individuals, online communities, and the formation of critical opinion and discourse (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Study framework*
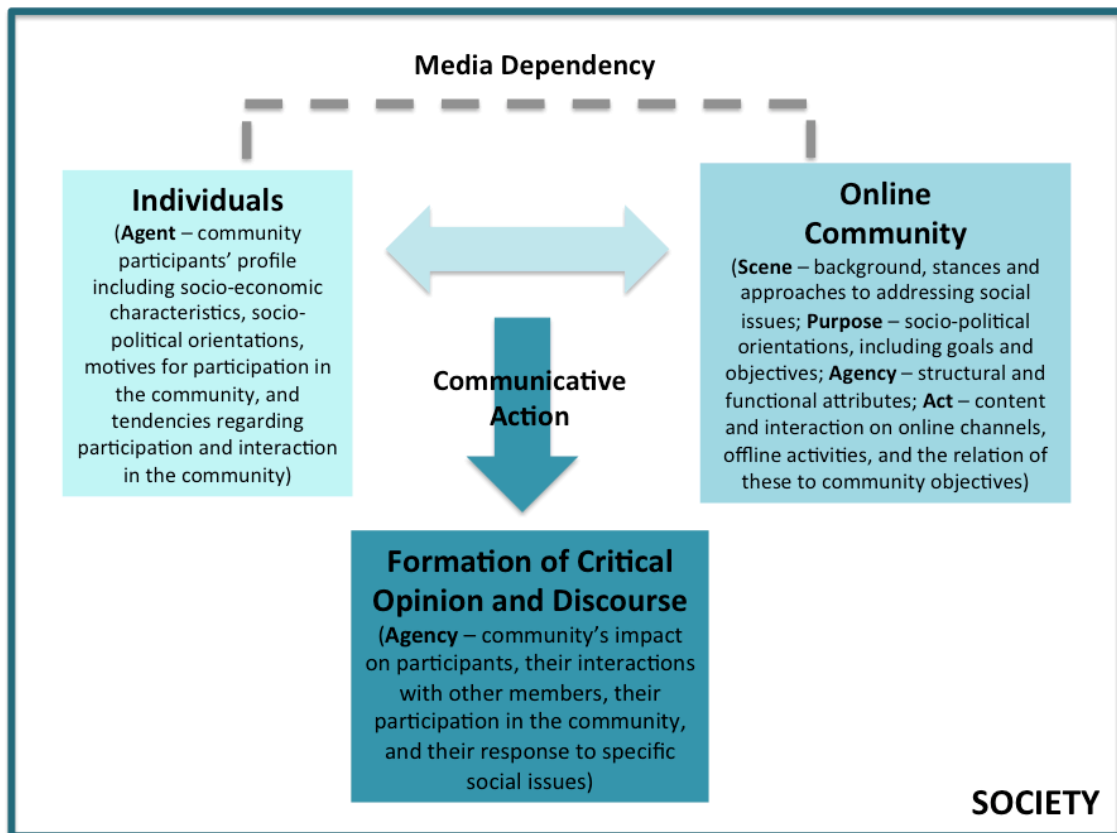
The study integrates aspects of individuals that may impact their role as participants in online communities, specifically their socio-economic background, socio-political leanings, role in information diffusion, motives for participation in the community, intensity of participation, and media dependency (media use that includes but is not limited to the online community). Data pertaining to this part of the framework address the second research objective.

The study views the online community as a communication medium existing and operating both online and offline, as well as a form of communication technology owing to its prevalence on the Internet. Components that were examined are the online communities' background, structure and functional attributes and how participants relate to these, communicative modes and content with regard to community objectives, and online and offline activities, all of which are possible influences on the community's function in promoting the formation of critical opinions and stimulating discourse. These data address the first and third research objectives.

The phenomenon of the formation of critical opinion and discourse, henceforth referred to as FCOD, was conceptualized as the process of stimulating exchange of ideas (dialogue), stirring dissent and critique of social issues, and effecting changes with regard to participants' socio-political leanings, values, and opinions as well as their approaches to addressing such issues. It is assumed to be both influenced by and influencing individuals and online communities, as well as a product of the interaction between both. The fourth, fifth, and sixth research objectives are tackled by this aspect in the study framework, which involves the collection and analysis of data relating to community participants' individual and collective approaches to addressing social issues, as well as shifts in their socio-political leanings, values, and opinions regarding such issues.

In the framework, concepts and indicators are categorized according to the five aspects of Burke's Pentad, which is a technique in dramatistic analysis that is typically used to examine action and was selected as an analytical approach of this study. These aspects are: *Scene*, the setting or background of the act; *Purpose*, the reason the act took

place; *Agent*, the actor(s) who committed the act; *Agency*, the means through which the act was committed; and *Act*, the action itself.

For this study, each aspect of the pentad can be located in the framework under the three elements of focus.

With regard to individuals in the community, the Agent aspect was examined, specifically data regarding members' socio-economic characteristics, socio-political orientations, length of time participating in the community, intensity of participation, motives for participation, as well as use of other media and other tendencies regarding participation and interaction in the community.

Most aspects of Burke's pentad fall under the element of online community. The Scene aspect, relates to the background and history of the community as well as its stances and approaches in addressing certain social issues that were selected as basis for further analysis of each community. Some principles from the Media Richness Model, which theorizes that effective media must match the ambiguity of the messages they carry while also considering effects of social information on users' perception and choice of media as well as the media's symbol- and data-carrying capacity (Miller, 2003), were used to elaborate on the communities' choice of online channels. In particular, it was used to explain how certain features of online platforms have rendered these platforms more suitable for community activity and interaction among members, and conversely, how users' own preferences affect the community's choice of online platforms.

The Purpose aspect refers to the community's purpose and socio-political orientation, as well as its specific goals and objectives.

The Agency aspect discusses features of the online community as a medium for communication and social action, particularly its structural and functional attributes, and its impact on participants such as possible shifts in participants' values and opinions. Activity theory, a sociocultural theory popularly applied in the study of human-computer interactions (HCIs) and knowledge-building communities for understanding the structure of online environments, was used to expound on the Agency aspect with regard to how activity in the online communities is mediated by technological features of the community as well as rules and members' roles in the community. The application of activity theory in this study focused on describing the structural and functional attributes (e.g. mechanisms for interaction, content creation processes, moderator roles and responsibilities) of online communities as a medium, as well as on analyzing the benefits and shortcomings of community platforms to participants and administrators with regard to the activity occurring on such platforms.

The Act aspect examines the actual content and interactions in the community's online channels as well as offline activities, as well as the relation of these to community objectives. Media system dependency theory was used to expound on the analysis of the Act aspect of the community. The main thesis of media system dependency theory is that individuals in a society "have developed a range of routine uses for various media" (Baran & Davis, 2011, p. 290) and that "those who have greater needs and thus greater dependency on media will be most influenced" (Baran & Davis, 2011, p. 289).

For the present study, the theory was used to examine how individuals participate in the community in order to satisfy certain needs. It was also applied in the analysis of

the impact of community participation on individuals' interactions with each other and their responses (opinion, approaches, etc.) to social issues.

Some concepts from participatory communication models were also used to expound on the analysis of the Act aspect. Participatory communication models give preference to horizontal approaches and encourage dialogue (Srampickal, 2006), emphasizing multiplicity, cultural identity, and participation of individuals (Servaes & Malikhao, n.d.) and are oriented towards empowerment through knowledge (Boeren & Empskamp, 1992, in Srampickal, 2006). Though the online communities analyzed in the study are not considered community media following the traditional definition, they possess the aspect of empowerment through knowledge as well as some community-sustaining attributes that may be related to participatory models. These attributes of the participatory communication models were considered in analyzing the online content and communicative strategies as well as the offline activities (particularly meet-ups) of the communities being studied.

Finally, with regard to the element of FCOD, data under the Agency aspect pertaining to the community's impact on participants, particularly their interactions with other members, participation in the community, and response to specific social issues (such as shifts in their values and opinions) were analyzed.

Habermas' theory of communicative action was used to elucidate the process that could potentially lead to FCOD, particularly the involvement of holding online and offline discussions (a practice that is common to both communities). Communicative action is defined by Habermas (1984) as the process by which "actors seek to reach an understanding about the situation and their plans of action to coordinate their actions by

way of agreement" (p. 86) on common definitions. Applied to the present study, the theory focuses on the communicative exchange and explication of ideas, opinions, and principles with regard to specific social issues among members of the online communities.

A. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Some basic definitions are supplied to aid in the understanding and appreciation of the study:

1) Online community member – A member of an online community is an individual who participates in community activity by reading and posting messages online and contributing to the community's offline events and projects by attending or helping in the organization of these. Borrowing from Ridings and Gefen's (2004) definition, this study's concept of membership also extends in its application to those who take part in community activities silently or invisibly, and exchange messages with other community members regardless of frequency.

2) Mobile technology – This refers to communication platforms that exist and function primarily through mobile devices such as cellphones and tablets. Examples of mobile technologies and platforms are SMS, phone calls, and mobile phone chat applications such as Viber, WeChat, BBM (Blackberry Messenger), and the like.

3) Traditional media – Traditional media refers to radio, television, film, and physical print media, and excludes media primarily facilitated by computer and mobile technology as well as devices that were derived from and share similar purposes with these (such as tablets).

4) Social media – Social media pertains to social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, supported by computer, mobile, and similar technologies, in which individuals as well as groups, organizations, and businesses engage in profile building, content publication, and interaction.

5) Offline activity – In this study, offline activity refers to projects and events of the organization that may be partially organized through technologically mediated interaction but are conducted in physical settings, such as meet-ups, lectures, rallies, etc. In short, offline activities are primarily carried out through face-to-face interaction.

B. CONCEPTS AND INDICATORS

The concepts specifically used in the analysis are stated in the research objectives. Several of these concepts pertain to the community members alone, particularly socio-economic characteristics, social and political orientation or leanings, length of time participating in the online community, intensity of participation in the online community, and use of other media. Others, such as structural and functional attributes, modes of communication, community purposes and objectives, online and offline community activities, pertain to the online community.

1. Socio-economic characteristics

Socio-economic characteristics basically refer to an informant's demographic characteristics. For this study, the following indicators were used: age, sex, area of residence, nationality (due to the possibility that some community participants are expatriates or visitors to the country), occupation, level of educational attainment, monthly income level, sexual orientation, and religion (if any). These were selected on

the basis of having a presumed influence on the individual's participation in the community and also on the impact of community interaction on the individual.

2. Social and political orientation

Orientation pertains to the set of attitudes or beliefs maintained by an informant and the ideologies that inform his/her thinking and opinions. When expanded to the societal level, socio-political orientation may constitute the worldview of a particular social class or even a nation. This study differentiates between social orientation and political orientation by characterizing social orientation as pertaining to one's views on individual behavior (both his/her own and those of others) and ways of relating with other members of society, excluding the government. On the other hand, political orientation is conceptualized as relating to one's views on the political environment (including economic influences) as well as processes and matters involved in the country's government, particularly on a regional or national scale.

Political orientations are traditionally described using the concepts of economic freedom and personal or civil freedom. According to Fritz (1987), the former pertains to human action as producers and consumers and can be described in terms of cash flow (such as earning wages), while the latter is concerned with personal principles, relationships, and self-expression. Using these as bases for analysis, Fritz (1987) provided the following descriptions for the most common categories of political orientations: Liberals, who value personal choice in civil matters and diversity in social behavior, but favor equality and central decision-making with regard to economics; Conservatives, who prefer diversity in economics, but favor central decision-making and similarity of behavior in civil matters; Socialists and Populists, who are characterized as

totalitarian, and advocate equality and central decision-making in both civil and economic affairs; Classical Liberals and Libertarians, who promote personal choice and diversity in both civil and economic matters; and lastly, Centrists, who favor selective governmental intervention depending on its practicality as a solution to public problems.

Despite the development of these classifications, it is not always possible to pinpoint a person's orientation across any political spectrum model, as political orientation tends to be influenced by various factors affecting the individual that are too complicated for simple typologies to account for. In the Philippines, where ideologies are neither clearly distinguished nor explicitly promoted in politics and social action (with the exception of communism and anti-communism) and lack empirical observation, the task of formulating indicators by which political and social orientations can be observed is made even more challenging.

To address this, the researcher has deemed it more useful to assess informants' sociopolitical orientations with regard to particular issues in society. Van de Werfhorst and Dirk de Graaf (2004) suggested classifying socio-political orientations based on either cultural or economic relevance. For instance, they wrote that cultural liberalism generally pertains to issues such as abortion and attitudes towards gender roles, while cultural conservatism restricts freedom regarding these issues. On the other hand, they characterized economic liberalism (or progressivism) as being concerned with issues pertaining to the economy such as income distribution and the rights of the unemployed, while economic conservatism is marked by opposition to socio-economic equality and greater importance given to socio-economic position (Shceepers, Ester, & De Witte,

1999, in Van de Werfhorst & Dirk de Graaf, 2004; Van de Werfhorst & Dirk de Graaf, 2004).

For the purposes of this study, the indicators of social and political orientation of the individual member are: individuals' personal opinions regarding specific social issues and membership in groups, organizations, parties or partylists, and other collectives with an advocacy or defined stance on a particular social issue.

Similar to the concept of political and social orientation of the individual member, the socio-political orientation of the community pertains to the assumptions and attitudes upheld by the community that comprises the community worldview. This angles the community's perception, processing, and discussion of social issues and may even serve as a filter for selecting social issues that come to the community's attention, as well as an influence on the length of the community's preoccupation with certain issues. Orientation is indicated by declarations of the nature and biases of the communities in their respective mission or vision statements and also more implicitly in the approaches and strategies employed by the community in pursuing their objectives (e.g. scientific methods, rational argumentation, artistic collaboration, etc.).

Purpose here refers to the overarching goals that the community strives to continually achieve or an ultimate end that the community has envisioned arriving at. These are indicated in the community mission-vision statement and also by verbal expressions of the community members.

3. Community involvement/participation (in general)

Community involvement or participation refers to the activities through which members identify themselves as belonging to the community and engage with other

community members. This is indicated by: organizing and/or attending offline community events (such as meet-ups, lectures, seminars, rallies, etc.); posting, commenting on, and sharing of content on online channels used by the community; and joining online conversations, forums, and discussions by the community.

4. Intensity of participation in the online community

Intensity of participation in the online community is conceptualized as the enthusiasm with which a community member involves his/herself in community activities. This will be observed using the following indicators: members' inclination to post content on online community channels; members' inclination to share content from sources external to the community *on* online community channels, as well as content *from* online community channels (i.e. articles, posts, etc. that are originally published through the community website or social media pages and groups, and then shared by members on channels external to the community such as personal social media pages, other websites, etc.); members' willingness to attending offline community events; members' adoption of formal roles or positions in the community; and the length of members' posts, comments, and other published online content.

5. Media dependency

Media dependency pertains to a member's patterns of adopting other media such as television, radio, print media, film, online, mobile, and social media that impact his/her participation in the online community. For instance, this concept embraces an individual's use of newspapers for learning about current events, which supplies him/her with information and questions that cause him/her to start a discussion thread on the online community forum. This concept is observable through an individual's habits of

using the previously mentioned media for such purposes, and if the individual maintains some form of subscription to such media (e.g. newspaper, magazine, and newsletter subscriptions, email subscriptions or inclusion in mailing lists, RSS or website feeds, etc.).

6. Online community

A modification of Porter's (2004) definition of virtual communities was used to conceptualize online community. In this study, online community refers to a group of individuals who interact regularly with one another over a shared interest through the full or partial mediation of technology, namely the Internet. Additionally, their interaction is directed by certain protocols or norms (Porter, 2004). Regarding the technological platforms used, mobile technology supports community activity and online presence primarily by serving as a means to access websites or accounts of the community on the Internet. Thus, the virtual aspect of online community is more largely rooted in the Internet than in mobile and telecommunications technology, and the definition of online community excludes groups whose virtual interaction is mediated mainly by mobile technology features such as SMS, phone calls, and mobile phone chat applications such as Viber, WeChat, BBM (Blackberry Messenger), and the like.

Indicators of online community used in this study are member lists or databases of each community, the websites and supporting software that mediate and serve as a venue for interaction and communication among members, community norms and policies, and member hierarchy or roles.

7. Structural attributes

Structural attributes refer to social features of the online community, namely the rules, requirements, protocols, member roles, and norms—both formal and informal—that are meant to guide and facilitate community interaction and are expected to be observed by members. Membership size (which counts the number of registered or formal members, number of informal members, and number of active or inactive members) and the members themselves are also structural attributes of the online community.

8. Functional attributes

Functional attributes pertain to the technological features of online channels used by the community. Though these features may vary from community to community, some common indicators for functional attributes include the overall design of the main community platform (e.g. blog type, forum or message board type, etc.) and mechanisms for posting content and feedback or facilitating conversations between two or more members on such community platforms such as comment sections, private messaging features, and chat rooms. Data on social media channels will be gathered by examining the accounts and pages maintained by the communities on social media websites and their accompanying mechanisms as well as the applications that enable access to these through mobile devices.

9. Communicative content in communities

Communicative content in communities is conceptualized as messages and other communicative content found in the online community channels as well as offline community activities that may or may not be consistent with community goals but

influence the nature of the communities as communication media. For online content, these are indicated by content (articles, photos, videos, etc.) originally produced by community members, comments (on the public content of both the community website and social media accounts), and other messages (e.g. Tweets, "mentions" or tags, and content from external sources shared on social media and on the website) found on online channels used by the community. These are not limited to content produced by formal community members.

10. Modes of communication

Modes of communication refer to the particular technologies and functional or design features of the online media used for communicating with particular members or the general community (as indicated by group timeline posts, comment sections, feeds, group messaging platforms, website mobile applications, etc.), as well as occasions of physical communication (such as community assemblies, committee meetings, group discussions, and lectures) that are likewise oriented by the community objectives.

11. Community purposes and objectives

This concept refers to the agenda and collective goals set forth by members of the community. These were observed through the purposes and objectives specifically declared in the community mission/vision statement as well as verbally expressed by its members.

12. Online community activities

Online community activities pertain to all community activity mediated by the Internet and by extension, mobile technologies that enable access to online community channels. This concept encompasses a wide range of community actions that will serve as

the indicators for online activity in this study, namely, the posting of and commenting on content on community web pages as well as social media accounts, sharing of content through social media, and holding online discussions, chats, and other mechanisms for group conversation. Due to the deluge of content from online interaction, socio-politically oriented online activities and exchanges were given more weight in the data gathering, unless a need for clarification or contextualization dictated otherwise.

13. Offline community activities

On the other hand, the concept of offline community activities refers to community action that is primarily carried out face-to-face. These are indicated by projects and events of the organization that may be partially organized through technologically mediated interaction but are conducted in physical settings, such as meet-ups, lectures, rallies, etc.

Offline activities that are socio-politically oriented in nature were given priority in the data gathering for the study. However, activities intended purely for socialization were also considered given that no socio-politically oriented activities fell within the time frame allotted for data gathering.

14. Participants' response to social issues

A participant's response to social issues is conceptualized as an integration of various aspects, namely: the perspective(s) adopted by a participant on social issues, the opinions he/she forms, the evolution of his/her political orientation, and his/her approach to addressing such issues. Perspectives and opinions are observable through the explicit verbal messages expressed by the informants as well as the implicit meanings in their use of language, particularly choice of words. Changes in political orientation are indicated

by the ideologies or beliefs that he or she claims to subscribe to or has discarded, and cues also found in their use of language as well as chosen topics of focus or interest. Approaches are indicated by the online and offline activities that he/she engages in that are relevant to the social issues being referred to. For offline activities, indicators include but are not limited to joining rallies, protests, seminars, conferences, lectures, and other events both organized by the community that the informant belongs to as well as those by other organizers and political lobbying or contacting policy makers and other influential personalities.

15. Social issues

Finally, social issues are conceptualized as matters of public concern or interest that have caused controversy and provoked strong reactions from civil society. Social issues are also reflective of the state of society and its changing qualities. The social issues considered in the data analysis were indicated mainly by current events or developing stories receiving coverage across different media (including online media) for a period of six months or more, and were the subject of discussion common to both communities being studied, unless these were of unique interest to any of the particular communities due to community objectives or biases.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study followed a qualitative design and took a descriptive approach to tackle the research question. As few studies have been conducted specifically on the interaction among members of online communities, the study is largely descriptive in its methodology of gathering and analyzing data in order to develop in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Dollar and Merrigan (2002, in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) argued that qualitative methods could be useful in validating and broadening existing theory on group communication, as well as in studying the role of context in shaping increasingly global and mediated group communication practices (Frey, 2002, in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Examining the role of online communities in stimulating the formation of critical opinions and social discourse also necessitated a qualitative approach because it is more concerned with the description and explanation of online communities as a social medium—which entails detailed observation and analysis of group-level interaction—rather than the measurement or quantification of such activity. Neither does the study deal with numerical data. A qualitative approach yields richer and more nuanced data (such as data regarding a community member's process of changing political orientations through community interaction) that are not obtainable through quantitative methods, but are important in providing sufficient information needed to reach meaningful conclusions that address the research problem.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The main research method used is the multiple-case study. Because the purpose of the study is to describe a relatively new and developing phenomenon, an analysis of its

occurrence in the real-life setting was necessary. Merriam (1988, in Wimmer & Dominick, 2011) wrote that one essential characteristic of case study research is its particularistic quality that makes it useful for studying practical real-life problems. As both online communities comprising the cases for the study thrive through both Internet-mediated and face-to-face activities, the focus afforded by the case study method is key to gathering all relevant information from various data sources and producing detailed descriptions of each case to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon.

With the exception of Ignacio's *Building Diaspora*, this researcher has found no other academic studies that look into Philippine online communities and their activities. The case study method is appropriate not just in addressing the specific research question, but also in sharpening the research as a pilot study, as case studies are useful in producing new insights, interpretations, and perspectives (Merriam, 1988, in Wimmer & Dominick, 2011) that may lead to new ideas for future research on the subject (Simon, 1985, in Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Aside from being an aid to exploratory research, case study methods are also good for gathering both descriptive and explanatory data due to the wealth of information it can provide on a particular research topic (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

Finally, the case study method is known for being inductive, causing principles and generalizations to emerge from data analysis (Merriam, 1988, in Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). For this research, conducting two case studies will enable the researcher to use several data sources that will allow for data triangulation, which will improve the validity and reliability of the study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011) in order to contribute to theoretical discussions on the evolving subject of online communities.

This study utilized an embedded design for a multiple-case study (see Figure 3), namely the one suggested by the SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods (2008) due to variations in the online communities identified as units of analysis that may lead to different concepts and indicators. The online communities vary particularly in terms of the types of online channels used, the community objectives and purposes, and the social issues of their interest. In order to yield conclusions applicable to all cases, this design aimed for literal replication of theoretical assumptions in the study framework in order to highlight similar results among the cases.

Figure 3. *Embedded multiple-case study design for multiple units of analysis (SAGE, 2008)*
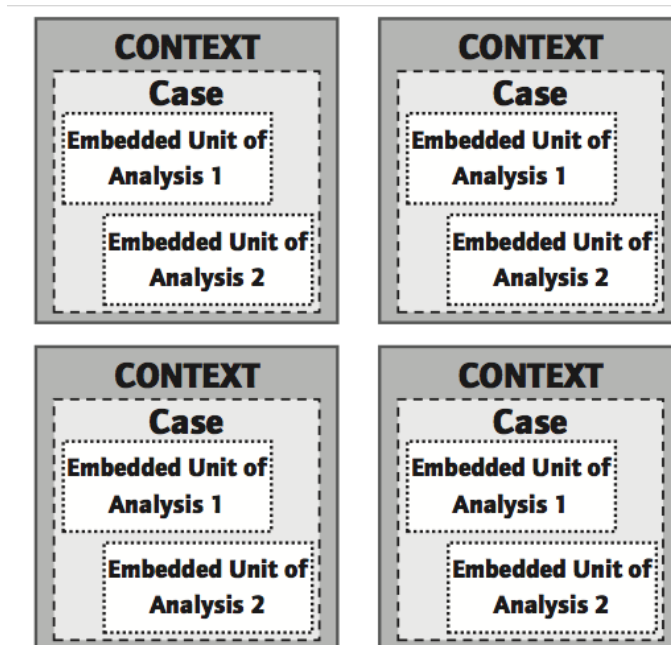
C. UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND INFORMANTS

The units of analysis of the study are Filipino online communities that are oriented towards critiquing and changing society, namely Filipino Freethinkers and the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS), and their members.

Founded in 2009 as an online mailing list, Filipino Freethinkers (FF; filipinofreethinkers.org) now claims to be "the largest and most active organization for freethought in the Philippines." The organization defines freethought as "a way of thinking unconstrained by dogma, authority, and tradition," and is committed to using critical rational inquiry and empirical evidence to debunk superstitions and fallacies. Apart from publishing or sharing content on its website and social media accounts, FF also holds meet-ups, lectures, protests, and other grounded events (usually in partnership with like-minded organizations) to share knowledge and push its advocacies. The group has official university chapters in UP Diliman, UP Los Baños, and UP Manila, provincial chapters in Cebu, Bacolod, Davao, and south of Metro Manila, and boasts of participants with diverse backgrounds, including foreigners.

The Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS; patas.co) calls itself "a trailblazer in critical thinking, free thought and scientific inquiry in the Philippines." Since its inception in 2011, the organization has been working both online and offline to promote equal rights and fight discrimination against the non-religious, improve public understanding of atheism and agnosticism through social action, and contribute rational and secular solutions to social problems. PATAS holds monthly activities and has chapters in Manila, Baguio and Northern Luzon, Cebu, Davao, Iloilo, and Bicol.

For both communities, content published on the main websites is edited and moderated by a core team with designated positions, though member and guest contributions in the form of articles and comments are highly encouraged. The core teams are also in charge of choosing the content from other sources to be shared on the social media pages of their respective community.

The online communities were selected on the basis of activeness (i.e. must publish content at least weekly and/or have operational social media accounts and/or mechanisms for posting messages and feedback on their web pages such as forums and comment sections within six months of the conduct of the study) in order to ensure the possibility of having an impact on society. Consistent with this, the websites and social media accounts of such communities are also units of analysis of this study, as well as the online and offline events organized or participated in by members of such communities. These various units for textual analysis were significant in supplementing data supplied through correspondence with informants in order to contextualize and deepen the analysis of the interactions among community members by picking up meanings that the informants themselves may not be conscious of.

The informants for the study were the community administrators (at least one per community and preferably a founding member or one of the most active administrators, in order to provide a sufficiently detailed background on the history and inner workings of the community), officers or members with special roles or tasks, and regular members. For each community, a minimum of three members (including administrators) was chosen as informants (see Matrices 1 and 2). Informants were selected on the basis of their intensity and length of time participating in the community; to ensure validity, it was ensured that informants chosen were consistently active (that is, contributing and sharing online content and attending offline events at least weekly or whenever held for a minimum period of six months during the conduct of the study) and also participating members (formally or informally) for at least six months.

Matrix 1. Filipino Freethinkers informants

	Red Tani	Garrick Bercero	Sophia Schmitz
Age	31	24	24
Nationality	Filipino	Filipino	American (US)
Position/role in the community	President; founder	Affiliations director; podcast producer; former Facebook group moderator	Member
Occupation	Consultant	"Mind Mover" (science education officer), The Mind Museum	Media and communications officer, Haribon
Area of residence	San Juan City	Quezon City	Taguig City
Education	BS Electronics and Communications Engineering, De La Salle University	BS Molecular Biology, University of the Philippines Diliman	BA Liberal Arts, Wheaton College, Boston; History and Literature, University of Edinburgh
Religion	Atheist	Atheist	Atheist
Sexual orientation	Straight	Straight	2 on a scale of 1 (straight) to 6 (gay)

Red Tani, founder and president of FF, is a 31-year-old consultant for management, design, and communications living in San Juan who graduated from De La Salle University with a degree in Electronics and Communications Engineering. He considers himself an atheist, and despite being heterosexual, is also a vocal supporter of LGBT equality rights.

Garrick Bercero, 24, serves as affiliations director of FF and also produces podcasts for the community. A resident of Quezon City, he graduated with a degree in Molecular Biology from the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman and now works as a "Mind Mover" or science education officer at the Mind Museum. Like Red, he is straight and also considers himself an atheist.

Sophia Schmitz is a 24-year-old media and communications officer for local non-government organization Haribon. Unlike Red and Garrick, she does not hold any position in FF. A citizen of the United States but currently residing in Taguig, she is educated in liberal arts, history, and literature. She also identifies as an atheist, and describes her sexual orientation as a "2" on a scale of 1 to 6, 1 being heterosexual and 6 being homosexual.

Matrix 2. PATAS informants

	Thomas Fleckner	Tess Termulo	Sunny Garcia
Age	43	33	In his "50s"
Nationality	German	Filipino	Filipino
Position/role in the community	Chief executive officer	President	Member, trustee
Occupation	Multilingual technical support officer for a call center	Internist	Artist
Area of residence	Pasig City	Mandaluyong City	Makati City and Parañaque City
Education	Bachelor in Fine Arts from university in Germany; formal training in tailoring	BS Biology, De La Salle University; medicine, University of Santo Tomas	BS Psychology, Siliman University
Religion	Atheist	Atheist	Atheist
Sexual orientation	Gay	Straight	Gay

Thomas Fleckner is currently the CEO of PATAS and a resident of Pasig City, though he is German by nationality. Having graduated with a fine arts degree in Germany, he is also a trained tailor who now works as a technical support officer for a local call center. At 43 years old, he is the oldest informant, and identifies as atheist and gay. Apart from his activities as PATAS CEO, he also maintains his own website where he publishes his own writings.

Tess Termulo, president of PATAS, is a 33-year-old atheist doctor practicing internal medicine who lives in Mandaluyong City. She graduated from De La Salle University with a degree in biology, and studied medicine at the University of Santo Tomas. Unlike Thomas and Sunny, the third informant from PATAS, she considers herself heterosexual. She has also maintained her own blog for many years.

Sunny Garcia is a gay artist who chose not to reveal his specific age but mentioned that he is somewhere in his 50s. A graduate of Siliman University in his hometown of Dumaguete, where he earned his degree in psychology, he currently divides his time between living in Makati and in Parañaque. A member of PATAS since its early days, he now serves as a member of the community's board of trustees.

For the purposes of this study, a "formal member" or "verified member" is defined as a member who has undergone the formal procedure for becoming a member of the community (such as providing personal details and being listed in the member database), while "member" is a more generic term that pertains to an individual who may be witnessing and participating in community activity but did not undergo any formal registration procedure (possibly because the community lacks one). A "content creator" is a member, usually someone who holds a specific position in the formal hierarchy of the organization, who produces content that is officially published in any of the community's online platforms. The term "follower" specifically refers to informal members who associate with the group to a certain extent, particularly by joining the community's Facebook group, and whose participation may vary greatly. At least two community members that were selected as informants have specific designated roles or positions in the online community in order to provide insights regarding the community structure.

D. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The study utilized three types of research instruments to gather and analyze data, namely: participant observation guide, interview guides, and textual analysis guides.

The participant observation guide (see Appendix A) was used to aid the researcher in recording observational data during offline events and activities of the communities. The guide was divided into sections for grouping data, particularly data pertaining to: the setting, the context, the nature of the event, the actors involved, and the communication or interaction taking place throughout the activity.

For the interviews, two types of interview guides were used: the first type for interviewing community administrators and the second for interviewing a regular community member. The interview guide for administrators (see Appendix B) was semi-structured and used open-ended questions and allowed for follow-up questions. The guide was intended to collect data on two main topics according to which the questions were ordered: the online community, and the informant profile and his/her experience as a community administrator. Questions in the section about the community fell under the following subsections: socio-political orientation of the community and its current purposes and objectives, history and evolution (details about the establishment of the community, turning points and notable occurrences in the progress of the community), structural features of the community (policies, norms, roles, etc.) and functional features (technological platforms and features), community endeavors and projects, profiling and characterization of members, community affiliates and collaborators, and forecasting future directions for community progress.

The section that focuses on the profile of the informant and his/her experience as a community administrator included questions regarding: personal background (including relevant occupations and other background experience that influence his/her role as an administrator), past and current socio-political orientation, perceptions of and opinions on specific social issues, involvement in political and social action, finding out about and joining the community, descriptive narrative of experience as a community administrator (including motives, challenges, and notable occurrences), evaluation of the self as a community administrator (including learnings), and evaluation of the online community (with regard to the community purposes and objectives).

The interview guide for the regular community member (see Appendix C) was used to gather information supplied by the informant about his/herself and his/her experience as a member of the online community. It was also semi-structured and composed of open-ended questions, which were customized based on the informant's answers. To allow for follow-up questions, the questions were grouped into the following sections similar to those regarding the community administrators: socio-demographic information and profiling, past and current socio-political orientation, perceptions of and opinions on certain social issues, involvement in political and social action, finding out about and joining the community, relevant occupations and experiences that influence his/her experience as a member, descriptive narrative of experience as a community member (including motives for participation, special roles, and notable occurrences), and evaluation of the self as a community member (including learnings), and evaluation of the online community.

Interviews were administered face-to-face. Both interview guides featured space for recording data about the subject's nonverbal responses.

Textual analysis guides were used to facilitate the collection of textual data from the online channels used by the communities. Two types of guides, one for websites and another for social media, were used in order to capture the nuances in content and participation made possible by each type of channel as well as their implications. The guide for web pages (see Appendix D) encapsulated the functional and design features of the main website(s) and how community members made use of these as well as their role in shaping community interaction. Likewise, the guides for social media and YouTube (see Appendix E) were used for the same purposes but were tailored to the characteristics of the specific social networking sites used, namely Twitter, Facebook, and others (if emergent), as well as their supporting mobile applications.

E. ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Bea Astudillo is a fourth-year undergraduate student taking up BA Communication Research in the University of the Philippines Diliman. Her main orientation in conducting research is qualitative, and she is primarily interested in research topics concerning communication in an interpersonal, group, or organizational level. Last year, she conducted a qualitative study on compliance gaining between heterosexual couples enrolled in college. She is most familiar with data collection methods of interviews and focus group discussions, having conducted these for academic requirements and also during her internship at Universal McCann, a leading advertising agency, in the summer of 2013. Her interest in the role of online communities in effecting social action was sparked when she encountered some articles shared from the Filipino

Freethinkers website on her social media feed; the articles featured arguments on issues such as the RH Bill which she found to be stimulating and credible, unlike many so-called social critics who appear in Philippine mass media. However, she admits to not being vocal with her own opinions regarding politics and social issues, and is still more inclined to be an observer of these online communities. She hopes to one day become knowledgeable enough to become an active participant.

<div align="center">F. DATA COLLECTION</div>

The researcher employed the following data collection techniques for this study: participant observation, key informant focus interviews, and textual analysis.

The interviews gathered in-depth knowledge about individual members of the community and their perspective on community interaction. Interviewing is a flexible data collection technique which Lindlof and Taylor (2011) have noted for its ability to yield detailed individual accounts that elaborate on highly subjective data such as perceptions and justifications. Moreover, interviews allow the researcher to examine language forms used by social actors, probe informants' explanations, and have informants validate or comment on information from other sources (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These methical attributes are significant in relation to the study's objectives of examining the nature of the online communities, the dynamics of interaction and communication within the community context, and their potential for impact on the participants (and by extension, larger society)—lensed by the individual perspectives of community members.

Textual analysis was used for collecting data regarding the online community as a medium for interaction and social action. By referring to design and functional attributes

of the online community as well as the communicative content and strategies used by participants, the researcher aims to collect enough textual data to construct a multi-dimensional analysis of community interaction.

Finally, to supplement the data from the interviews and textual analysis, the researcher employed participant observation during offline community activities. According to the SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods (2008), this technique allows the researcher to witness behavior as it happens and to integrate observed behavior into physical settings, thus providing a wealth of detail regarding the context of interaction, specifically contextual implications on community activity. Observation also supports the richness and validity of the data by identifying behaviors that may potentially go unreported and avoid suspect or biased self-reported data (SAGE, 2008). As in this study, the method is also useful in research that is somewhat exploratory in nature by helping the researcher rethink and reconstruct points of inquiry (if necessary) as the study is conducted.

To get in touch with informants, the researcher first contacted administrators of the online communities through their details posted on the Internet. Through correspondence with the administrators and after meeting members at the offline activities (during which the researcher conducted participant observation), the researcher gathered preliminary information on the administrators themselves and key members of the community to determine who will be selected as informants. The researcher then contacted the chosen informants personally and coordinated with them individually regarding meetings for FGDs and interviews as well as for validation of data throughout analysis and interpretation.

In situations involving community members other than the key informants, such as community meet-ups or rallies wherein the researcher is an observer, the researcher disclosed her purpose for conducting the study in order to obtain full consent and trust, which is essential to building a rapport between the researcher and the informants and persons being observed. Establishing a rapport cleared the researcher of suspicion, facilitated negotiations on confidentiality, and encouraged openness on the part of the informants.

The entire study was conducted for a time period of about three months (November 2013 – February 2014), with data collection from November 2013 to January 2014. In order to identify specific issues by which data on community interaction were analyzed, initial monitoring of content was conducted for three months prior to November using previously posted or archived content for the months of August, September, and October 2013. Textual data was collected within a period of December 20, 2013 to January 20, 2014.

G. DATA ANALYSIS

For data analysis, case study analysis methods, particularly within-case and cross-case analysis of data, were utilized.

For within-case analysis, aside from supplying descriptions and identifying patterns (if any) among community members and relevant aspects of community interaction and activity (see Study Framework), a dramatistic analytical technique called pentadic analysis was employed to examine the community in a detailed manner for each case. Pentadic analysis is used to investigate rhetorical activity through an emphasis on the analysis of motive (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990). It is a dramatistic analysis

technique that Cohrs (2002) has claimed can be used to "explain and analyze almost any thing that happens in the world" (para. 8) whether these are actions or thoughts. As detailed earlier in the explanation of the conceptual framework, the technique involves analyzing data pertaining to five aspects: Scene, Act, Agent, Agency, and Purpose.

After drawing conclusions from each case, cross-case analysis was done to provide the answer to the main research question, which was used to describe how online communities affect the formation of critical opinions and stimulate discourse on Philippine social issues. This involved the drafting of an initial theoretical statement about the process (i.e. that participating in online communities is a form of communicative action) that is generalized to all cases, which was then elaborated after comparing the findings from each case.

Data analysis and writing was done in January to February 2014.

H. ORGANIZATION OF DATA

Following the embedded multiple case study design, collected data were organized for analysis by case prior to writing the discussion. Analysis matrices were created for each data gathering method (interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis). In each matrix, data pertaining to the embedded units of analysis were grouped accordingly under each case; both cases were arranged side by side for easier comparison of data per unit of analysis. Findings from each case were compared based on specific aspects emphasized by the study (as stated in the objectives) as well as their relation to the social issues selected for analysis.

In order to present data and findings of the study more efficiently, the discussion of results is structured according to each aspect of Burke's Pentad. Under each aspect,

emergent themes from the cross-case analysis are listed and discussed. Themes are supported by textual, verbal, and observational data drawn from the within-case analyses in order to highlight similarities and differences between the two communities.

I. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study attempts to provide a thick description of the online and offline activities of online communities by integrating verbal, textual, and observational data. However, the study may be found to be lacking in observational data due to the unfeasibility of conducting focus group discussions in addition to participant observation.

Of the three informants interviewed per community, two officers were chosen in order to access their firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of the community and gain more valuable answers.

Data collection and analysis is largely focused on gathering information and gaining insights about activity on the community level rather than the individual and societal levels.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After creating analysis matrices to aid in the organization and processing of data collected through all three methods of the study, the results of the analysis, particularly emergent themes or patterns and supporting data, are now presented and discussed according to the five aspects of Burke's Pentad (Scene, Purpose, Agent, Agency, and Act) in order to satisfy the specific research objectives and arrive at conclusions that address the research problem. The bulk of data used in the analysis was derived from one-on-one interviews with selected members of the communities. Data from the interviews are supplemented by data gathered through textual analysis of the communities' online platforms (official website, Facebook page, Facebook group, Twitter, and YouTube), and observation of one offline event per community.

A. EMERGENT THEMES

1. Scene

a. The role of usability and sociability of online media on the establishment of community online presence and popularity of online channels

Both Filipino Freethinkers (FF) and the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) can trace their roots to atheism-oriented groups that existed in the form of mailing lists, particularly Yahoo! Groups, which were then a popular online platform for group interaction. *"That was the main form of communication,"* said FF founder Red Tani of that period in 2009.

The demise of his start-up software company, which granted him plenty of free time to entertain long, philosophical discussions with friends on weekends, and some years spent *"searching"* in other religions and philosophies led Red, who identified as an

atheist in 2005, to spend his leisure time looking for online atheist groups that he could join. He discovered a few on Yahoo! Groups, and in 2009, joined a particular group called Philippine Atheists that was founded by John Paraiso. He found out that the members of these groups would only meet in person once a year, with only about 6 attendees out of the hundreds registered online. With much effort, Red persuaded members of Philippine Atheists as well as those of similar online atheist groups, namely Atheistang Pinoy and the Center for Inquiry Philippines (in spite of having members in common, Red recalled that the groups generally did not get along with each other for various reasons), to attend a "meet-up" that he planned in order to fix the rifts among the three communities. During that meet-up, which took place on February 1, 2009 and attracted 26 attendees (a *"good"* number according to Red), Filipino Freethinkers was born.

A mailing list was set up immediately as FF's first official online platform, but was quickly discontinued due to the tendency of the mailing list structure to send multiple and at times redundant emails to all subscribers, deeming it a less than ideal community channel. Soon after, the official website became the main community online platform, initially for the sole purpose of promoting community meet-ups, but quickly went on to host a variety of other content related to the community's principles and goals.

According to president Tess Termulo, PATAS was started on February 14, 2011 as a Facebook group with about 20-30 members, many of whom also came from Pinoy Atheists. Other members came from similar atheist groups existing on the Yahoo! Groups platform. Having attended the meet-up organized by Red Tani in 2009, several members of these groups joined the Filipino Freethinkers, including Pinoy Atheists founder John

Paraiso and member Marissa Torres-Langseth, who later came up with the idea of a new group dedicated specifically to atheism and agnosticism. This group went on to be PATAS. Being familiar with the undesirable implications of the mailing list format such as excessive emails and disorganized discussion threads, the founding members of PATAS recognized the platform as too inconvenient for communication among members and opted to create a Facebook group as the community's initial online channel. The group was intended to serve as a forum for participants to share content to the group and converse with one another; today, it is still referred to as the PATAS General Forum. The official community website was eventually created in order to give the community a more formal impression to outsiders and potential supporters.

The inconvenient tendency of the once-preferred mailing list medium to generate redundant content as well as the disordered arrangement of discussions created on the platform rendered it lacking in the aspect of usability, which, along with sociability, is an important factor in determining an online community's success in attaining its objectives. As mentioned in the literature review, usability refers to the ease with which software can be used, and depends on how well the community's user interface supports human-computer interaction (Preece, 2000; Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003), while sociability pertains to features concerned with the community's purpose, people, and policies (Preece, 2000). Having realized the need to use online platforms with improved usability, the founders and early members of both FF and PATAS turned to more conducive online channels in order to establish the communities' online presence, namely the community Facebook group and the official community website. These findings reveal the importance of selecting the proper channels in the launching and beginning

stages of an online community, as these are the means through which the community will first engage and grow its following. In the cases of FF and PATAS, the success of utilizing an official website and a Facebook group paved the way for the creation of future platforms, particularly on social media, to strengthen their presence, publish a variety of content to promote their advocacies, and provide more avenues for interaction and discourse.

The appropriateness of the platforms chosen by PATAS and FF can be further analyzed using the Media Richness Model, which theorizes that effective media must match the ambiguity of the messages they carry. The model also assesses the effects of social information on users' perception and choice of media as well as its symbol- and data-carrying capacity (Miller, 2003), which may affect individuals' choice of joining and participating in a particular community. The model suggests that these factors pertaining to the utility of the channels used by communities reinforce (or weaken) individuals' choice to participate.

Today, the online platforms maintained by FF and PATAS are similar. Aside from more efficient management, these few platforms are maintained because administrators of the community have deemed these to be sufficiently rich in order to facilitate community activity and interaction. Each platform of the community tends to have its own following, or contributes to audience traffic in other platforms, perhaps due to the content and activity that the unique attributes of each platform make possible.

Both communities have an official website, though Red claimed that FF's website was created even prior to the meet-up in which the community was founded (as per his plans to promote the first meet-up he organized, as well as subsequent events aimed at

facilitating offline interaction among members of the original atheist online communities). PATAS' website was set up after the community's first channel, the Facebook group, experienced some growth in its number of members.

The websites, which are usually updated everyday with new official content or feedback from people in the community's audiences, were followed by the creation of more social media platforms that are generally richer in content and more active than the official websites in engaging audience members, publishing content, and facilitating interaction among members and followers of the community. As of January 2014, FF's Facebook page has since garnered over 25,000 likes, while that of PATAS has gained more than 4,000 likes. The populations of members in the Facebook groups of both communities continue to grow, with at least 12,000 members having joined FF's group and more than 8,000 members in the PATAS group. More than 8,400 Twitter users follow FF's Twitter account, while PATAS has over 280 followers.

Both communities also maintain YouTube pages, which for the purposes of this research were also analyzed as social media. The FF YouTube page is increasingly active, with over 120 videos and 840 subscribers thus far as of January 2014. The community has been producing regular podcasts as well as a series of interviews with prominent foreign freethinkers and intellectuals called *Conversations for a Cause*, which is dedicated to raising funds for victims of Typhoon Haiyan. The PATAS YouTube page is considerably less active, hosting a total of 27 videos (which also include the audio podcasts that the community has been producing since the summer of 2013, though new uploads are scarce) and having attracted over 360 subscribers.

These platforms can be accessed through online browsers and through the platforms' respective online applications for mobile devices. However, no dedicated mobile applications have been created for community purposes in both cases; though Garrick Bercero, FF's affiliations director, podcast producer, and former moderator of the FF Facebook group, remarked that the community may look into creating a mobile version of the FF website in the future.

Of the two communities, FF appears to be more technologically advanced, as evidenced by its progress into creating podcasts with video (which they have nicknamed the *vodcast*, or "video-that-is-also-a-podcast") that are uploaded on their YouTube and posted on their website (links to which are shared through social media) as both audio and video files. On the other hand, PATAS has yet to produce podcasts that include video in addition to their current, purely audio form.

It can be speculated that the characteristics of the initial platform of a community may specifically determine community growth in terms of members and audience reach. In the case of PATAS, the Facebook group is the longest running community platform and as well as the most active today, with up to 50 or more posts created by members everyday. According to Tess, it is also through the Facebook group rather than its other channels that many outsiders first encounter and start to participate in PATAS. Of all the online platforms that PATAS utilizes, Tess said that the Facebook group best facilitates interaction, as evidenced by the sheer number of members who have joined and the large amount of posts and discussions they create on a regular basis.

In FF's case, though its initial active channel was the official community website, this has also been surpassed by the Facebook group as the most preferred channel for

interaction. All administrators of PATAS and FF who were interviewed for this study agree that the Facebook group is the best channel for facilitating interaction among members in terms of the number of participants and volume of conversations. Thus, the success that both communities have experienced so far in engaging audiences may be due to the nature of Facebook groups that is optimal in terms of usability and sociability. Pertaining to usability, the conducive characteristics of Facebook groups include the ease with which one can join the group. To join, one must simply have and be logged into a Facebook account—something that countless Filipinos already have and are constantly logged into—and access the group on Facebook. This is extremely convenient compared to other channels such as the website, which requires users to either log in using a social media account (Facebook or Google+) or input personal details before commenting on published content, which Red of FF and Thomas Fleckner, President of PATAS, both agree may deter people. Additionally, the official community websites are accessed much less frequently by individuals compared to ubiquitous and popular social media like Facebook. According to Red and Thomas, the social media channels, particularly Facebook, experience the most activity and receive the most feedback because people, who by virtue of conveniently being already logged in, do not need to seek these out, unlike the website.

Another characteristic that contributes to the usability of the community Facebook groups and also the Facebook pages aside from ease of access is the freedom with which any person can make posts and start conversations with others. This is true to a lesser extent for the Facebook pages, as content published by the page is controlled by page administrators, though non-administrators are sometimes allowed to post on the page

(depending on the page settings) and also comment on published content. On the other hand, any member of the Facebook group is allowed to make a post in the group.

Such features pertaining to the usability of these channels also boost their sociability, particularly by encouraging more people to join and participate. However, sociability is also maintained through the implementation of certain guidelines for interaction and minimal moderation of content in both communities that aim to ensure order and the wellbeing of participants in the highly interactive venues of the Facebook groups. These characteristics of usability and sociability influence the richness of the platforms used by the community as media for activity and interaction, and are the underlying reasons for the popularity of these channels among participants in the community.

b. The influence of atheism on community orientation, objectives, and advocacies

Analysis of the purposes and objectives as well as the socio-political orientations of PATAS and FF reveals that the goals and activities of both communities are driven by a strong secular orientation that is due to a number of active and influential members, including those involved from the beginning of the community, being atheist.

The three pillars of PATAS are reason, humanism, and secularism. According to PATAS CEO Thomas Fleckner, a German national who has been living in the Philippines since 2010, the community applies these three principles in working for its main goal, which is to educate and enlighten people about atheism and show them that *"there are alternatives to religion."* Tess clarified that the community's goal is not to convert people into atheists, but to make them understand what atheism is in order to promote its acceptance in society. One approach of PATAS to achieve this is through

humanitarian work, such as providing aid to victims of calamities such as Typhoon Haiyan, as well as advocating for the rights of the poor.

Specifically, Tess mentioned that though PATAS is most active in addressing the issues of reproductive health and LGBT equality, they are also involved in addressing other humanist issues. The community is a signatory in a petition calling for anti-discrimination for persons with HIV to oppose a bill demanding mandatory HIV testing for contacts of a person found to be HIV-positive, which Tess, who is a doctor, and other officers of PATAS believe to be discriminatory to HIV-positive patients and their potentially infected partners.

PATAS also champions freethought, especially among the youth. According to Tess, the community tries to promote its advocacies to people from all socio-economic backgrounds in order to dispel perceptions of atheism that intimidate people from lower classes, such as the notion that atheism is a Western ideal and something that only the well-educated can understand and subscribe to.

Similar to PATAS, FF is guided by three main principles: reason, science, and secularism, which, according to Garrick, are *"things that you hardly ever see especially in the Philippine scene, so we're trying to advocate for those things."*

Garrick called FF a community that caters to those who belong to the *"Catholic diaspora,"* Filipinos who have left their religious communities and tend to feel isolated because atheism and freethinking is not widespread in the Philippines, and are thus looking for like-minded people. However, Red clarified that despite the community's strong propensity towards atheism, they do not promote it as one of their advocacies.

"We're more focused on a certain way of thinking rather than the specific conclusions people arrive at."

To clarify FF's general orientation, Red explained that FF simply considers reason and rational thinking as more important than faith when it comes to arguing about social issues, as well as the importance of supporting claims with scientific evidence. The community operates on the notion that this way of thinking is important when the debate is about an issue that concerns the larger society. *"The more people are affected,"* said Red, *"the more important it is to be rational."*

With this as FF's initial manifesto, the community initially eschewed taking any political stances in order to be as inclusive of people with *"any kind of philosophy"* as possible. Red explained that people who felt like they could not fit in for whatever reason would eventually stop leave of their own accord; hence, the core group members do not take steps to filter members *or "keep people out of the gate."*

Though FF was originally not intended to be political, its core group members eventually decided to take on the community's first political stance by championing secularism, which they deemed crucial in the promotion of science and rationality. According to both Red and Garrick, one of FF's objectives is to criticize the government whenever officials violate the secularism clauses in the Constitution, and to advocate secularism in policymaking, particularly on a national level. In line with its ideals of reason and science, FF is also firmly against the use of irrational and unscientific (usually religious) arguments during legislative debates.

Other political stances followed: support for the Reproductive Health or RH Bill (now Law), which Red described as *"the secular issue of the time"* and the issue on which FF started becoming active in political activities, as well as LGBT rights.

With regard to social orientation, the community's only unified stance is its advocacy for free speech. Despite the Philippines being a democratic country, Red explained that many hidden social restrictions still exist that limit the progress of various discourses, particularly those that involve the opinions of religious leaders, such as the controversy sparked in 2011 by artist Mideo Cruz's exhibit *Kulo*. When the gallery housing the exhibit was closed down by the CCP after drawing the ire of Church leaders and Catholics, FF formed an alliance with other concerned groups to promote freedom of expression in the arts called the Palayain Ang Sining group. To campaign against the Cybercrime Law, FF also formed the Philippine Internet Freedom Alliance with other concerned groups such as SANLAKAS.

Red explained that freedom of speech is compromised not just on the level of public discourse but also in the day-to-day interactions among people. *"People take [freedom of speech] for granted…but there are still walls,"* he said. *"You can't still say certain things about sex, about religion, and we want to empower people to be able to do that."*

With regard to sex, Garrick argued that social problems like the rising number of unplanned pregnancies, the adoption of unsafe practices, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases are rooted in the current educational system that promotes a sex taboo (owing to predominant religious influences that forbid pre-marital sex). To address this, he said a more *"sex-positive"* attitude is needed in society that will allow people to

speak about sex more openly, and to eliminate the taboo (along with the stigma and guilt that it engenders) in order to boost awareness and enable better measures for sexual health issues.

In terms of the orientations of its members, it is important to note that among the earliest members of FF who came from online Filipino atheist groups, not all completely denied the existence of a god. According to Red, there were also theists (people who believe in a god or gods); agnostics, who were described by philosopher Bertrand Russell (1953) as neither believing nor disbelieving in a god due to the impossibility of proving its existence; pantheists, who view God as one with the cosmos (Mander, 2013); deists, who according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2014) believe in a god or a creator but deny its interference with life and the universe; and those who chose to label themselves simply as skeptics. This diversity still persists in the current members of FF. On the other hand, both Tess and Thomas reported that majority of people who consider themselves members of PATAS are atheist (either openly or in the closet), and a lesser number would identify as agnostic. Tess added that religious individuals who are *"open-minded,"* whom she refers to as progressive theists, can also be counted as part of PATAS' audience.

Owing to the considerable influence of atheism on the community through the active participation of atheist members, secularism has emerged as a major theme that underscores the advocacies of PATAS and FF and orients the communities' focus towards certain social issues. Though the role of atheism is less pronounced in FF, which, unlike PATAS, does not count promoting the understanding and acceptance of atheism as one of its advocacies, both communities are inclined to take up causes that are essentially

secular, such as reproductive health and LGBT rights. Likewise, in defending and supporting their stances about issues, both FF and PATAS favor approaches to argumentation that are independent of faith and religion.

2. Purpose

As communities aimed at inciting social change through criticism and discourse, both FF and PATAS have taken steps to promote their communities and engage audiences in order to further their causes, such as publishing content through various online platforms, attending solidarity events and demonstrations, and organizing forums and gatherings. With these efforts, both FF and PATAS have attracted a huge and diverse following in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, social and political orientations, and motives for participation. As a result, interactions within the community tend elicit a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Participants of the communities tend to be between the ages of 18 to 40 years old, with the most active members being 18-25 years old for PATAS and 25-35 years old for FF. They are geographically concentrated in Metro Manila. FF has a Southern Metro Manila chapter for those who are unable to participate in offline activities, which are mostly held in the Northern Metro Manila area; outside Manila, the most active chapters are those in Los Baños and in Davao. Outside Manila, PATAS' most active chapters are located in Cebu, Davao, and Bicol.

Majority of members belong to the middle class, and are either students or professionals in various fields. Many have obtained at least high school and college degrees. Members of both communities are mostly are heterosexual, though the number

of individuals who identify as cisgender in FF is increasing. Majority of PATAS members are male, though participants of both sexes are active.

Such diverse member attributes are a product of PATAS and FF's purpose of serving as venues for discussion and self-expression. At the same time, the different backgrounds and viewpoints of their members also serve to reinforce both communities' purpose of surfacing a multitude of perspectives and orientations.

Administrators of both communities admit that there are no dominant social and political orientations or ideologies in either community, though Thomas reported that members of PATAS tend to be more liberal rather than conservative in their orientations, with some leaning specifically towards democratic socialism. FF members, according to Garrick, include anarchists, right-anarchists, communists, and capitalists, though majority simply value free speech and free thought.

The inclusivity and tolerance that characterizes both communities as media for individuals to voice their varied opinions and exchange ideas encourages the expression of multiple viewpoints on any topic, often spurring debates among members on online channels as well as during offline activities such as meet-ups. Debates and arguments, when applying logic and rationality, are perceived to be a beneficial effect by the community administrators because it promotes tolerance. Specifically, Red mentioned that even if the community has had varying degrees of success when it comes to convincing individuals to support their advocacies, he believes that FF influences the way people form and defend their opinions in accordance to the community's ideals of reason, secularism, and acceptance of different perspectives. He reported that on a face-to-face level, particularly during meet-ups, participants become better at arguing without

resorting to shouting at each other, and that they've become more open-minded and less hostile towards people who don't agree with their opinions and ideas.

Sophia Schmitz, a member of FF who does not hold any directorial position in the community, praised the community's approach to holding meet-ups as a venue for discussing topics because of its ability to present a *"really nice cross-section"* of different perspectives coming from various backgrounds, namely those of: *"transplants from other countries"* like herself (part-Filipino, she was born and raised in the United States and has lived in France, Scotland, and Singapore), artists, writers, documentary filmmakers, scientists, *"techies,"* and sailors, among others. However, she criticized the tendency of discussions to become *"too much of an echo chamber sometimes,"* with participants ultimately adopting the same views as one another after discussing or arguing about certain topics. According to Sophia, this issue may be addressed by further increasing the diversity of members.

3. Agent

a. Maintaining diversity

Red has stressed that though FF advocates the use of reason and scientific methods in making arguments, the community still aims to be inclusive of people who hold different perspectives and beliefs. As previously discussed, he emphasized that generally, FF strives to influence people's approaches to arguing and responding to social issues more than their actual opinions or positions.

However, Garrick reported that when interacting online, some participants exhibit behavior that is *"anti-freethinker-y"* in the sense that these participants become less inclined towards being critical and discerning in forming their own opinions. Instead,

they tend to adopt stances on topics similar to those of other people without examining evidence or employing logical argumentation, but rather on the basis of their feelings and other subjectivities. For instance, he mentioned that there are times when people end up *"riding on the zeitgeist"* and bashing a controversial Twitter personality that they all somehow perceive as *"wrong."*

Perhaps such instances can be attributed to the strong culture of acceptance that FF tries to promote. Because many members are drawn to FF as a haven amidst conservative Philippine society for meeting like-minded people who share unconventional views, individuals' sense of belonging become so enhanced that interaction tends to lead to groupthink or bandwagon effect on certain issues. In this sense, FF's objectives of promoting reason and logic are threatened by the inclusivity that the community also safeguards.

Ironically, the supposedly inclusive nature of the community does not seem to address an issue of diversity that Sophia has noticed. According to her, many active members of FF share similar hobbies and interests, namely: science fiction, video games, and comics. To people like Sophia who do not count these among their interests, FF tends to feel like a *"niche"* community from which one may feel left out. Sophia said that she personally wishes that more people in FF were familiar with history and art. *"I haven't been able to speak to anyone about that,"* she said. She also mentioned that some meet-ups are devoted purely to sci-fi issues, news, and TV shows. However, she added that she understands some members' fixation with sci-fi, calling it *"an alternative"* to life in the Philippines.

While groupthink and bandwagon effect can be addressed by members' consciously attempting to apply reason and logic and separating thoughts from emotions, the solution to diversity problems may not be as simple as increasing participants in online channels, due to majority of these being silent and invisible, or inviting more people to attend meet-ups. Solving the issue of diversity that only members like Sophia who are able to take a detached perspective notice entails a deliberate effort in expanding the range of subjects and issues addressed by official community content as well as online and offline discussions.

b. A middle-class preoccupation

In terms of socio-economic characteristics, both Red and Garrick observed that majority of FF members and followers are middle-class and either university students or professionals. To wit, Red, who now runs a software design business with his wife, estimated his monthly income to be around 40,000 pesos. Garrick, who works as a *"Mind Mover"* or science education officer at the Mind Museum, reported his to be about 25,000 pesos. Sophia said that she earns *"25,000 or less"* per month for her job at an NGO. Red also reported that some members would consider themselves poor, while others are certainly rich, though both types of cases are uncommon.

According to Red, FF's audience is also educated, most having obtained at least high school and college degrees. This observation is accompanied by emphasis on the fact that the community does not exclude people regardless of what they studied, where they studied, and what levels they finished. The three respondents themselves were students of varying disciplines: Red graduated with a degree in Electronics and Computer Engineering from De La Salle University, Garrick with a degree in Molecular Biology

from UP Diliman, and Sophia with a Liberal Arts degree from Wheaton College in Boston.

Interestingly, Red and Garrick both mentioned that FF has been criticized for being elitist due to the fact that members generally speak and write in English, and also because meet-ups are held in restaurants and cafés instead of public parks. Of this perception, Garrick remarked:

> Just by our English-speaking nature, that already skews us as middle-class, but I hope that's not the case. We have people who are better in Tagalog, who do engage in Tagalog, I hope they would write more. (G. Bercero, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Garrick also added that the FF audience is *"middle class by convenience"* due to Internet access in the Philippines being limited largely to the middle classes or higher. Thus, by the online nature of the group, people with no access to the Internet (usually those belonging to lower classes) tend to be excluded.

Apart from the community's effectiveness in reaching and engaging individuals from different social backgrounds, socio-economic characteristics also impact one's ability to participate in the community online and especially offline. Garrick explained that his socio-economic background largely contributes to his involvement in FF. He attributes his ability to participate actively in FF to his having a *"nice rung in the ladder of life"* despite the *"iniquity"* pervading in Philippine society. For instance, he mentioned that some members find it difficult to attend events because of transportation difficulties. Garrick said that he feels lucky that his parents are able to lend him their car to go to these events. He also added that because FF members receive no monetary compensation

for their efforts, having a job to help fund his financial and logistical expenditures for FF helps.

Similar to FF, most active PATAS members belong to the middle class. In terms of their occupations, many PATAS participants are in college. A large number are also professionals and experts who come from a variety of backgrounds, while other members are unemployed. Thomas, Tess, and Sunny Garcia all illustrate the diversity of PATAS members' occupations: Thomas is a multilingual tech support director at a call center who earned his degree in Fine Arts in his home country of Germany as well as formal training in tailoring; Tess is a doctor specializing in internal medicine who earned her undergraduate degree in Biology in De La Salle University before taking up medicine at the University of Santo Tomas; and Sunny, who obtained his bachelor's degree in psychology from Siliman University in his home province of Negros Oriental, left his job of many years at Philippine Airlines to pursue his current career as an artist.

According to Tess's observations, there are rich members as well as those who consider themselves poor, but majority are middle class. Thomas himself earns roughly 60,000-100,000 pesos a month, while Tess declared her monthly income to be 50,000-60,000. Sunny humorously stated that he earns *"above minimum wage,"* but enough to donate payments for some of the community's expenses, particularly logistical costs and purchases.

Because majority of PATAS active members participate online, it is no surprise that both Thomas and Tess reported that majority of participants, themselves included, refer to Internet-based media for information on issues as well as a source for sharing content on social media. Sunny admitted to also relying mostly on the Internet for

information on current affairs, but also sometimes watches local and foreign television news channels. Considering Garrick's notion that Internet access in the Philippines is largely a privilege enjoyed by the middle and upper classes, this data is consistent with Tess' and Thomas' reports that majority of active PATAS members come from middle-class backgrounds.

Still, Thomas emphasized that content is aimed at attracting a broad audience by writing about topics that most people, even those who are less affluent and less educated, can relate to. He explained:

> We have people with no college education, we have people with college education. That's why it's so important that we talk to everybody so that articles are not only scientific. That's why humanism is very important. That will cater to the taxi driver, to the security guard, to the tricycle driver. They will feel like, 'I can be a part of this.' Because they don't really know about those things. (T. Fleckner, personal communication, December 14, 2013)

Despite writing about different subjects, PATAS' writing team still tries to adhere to the community's primary purpose, which is to engage a diverse audience in critical thinking and educating people about atheism to promote it as a viable alternative to religion.

Such attributes of the most involved members of these communities, namely, constant access to the Internet, educational attainment of the undergraduate level, and the ability to attend or contribute to offline events, imply a certain degree of financial stability or comfort that help sustain members' active participation in the community. In

general, it can be inferred that active members share these characteristics usually owing to their middle-class background. In addition to the ability to participate in community activities online and offline, certain qualities of the community's content and activities themselves, particularly the use of English (during meet-ups and for articles and videos published online) and selecting venues perceived to cater to affluent persons such as coffee shops and restaurants for meet-ups, have led to impressions of the communities, especially FF, as predominantly middle-class and even elitist to some people.

More than mere signs of the shared background characteristics of the communities' most active members, these findings imply that participating in online discussions about social issues, producing and consuming content such as articles and podcasts on a variety of topics and advocacies, and attending events that propel discourse such as organized meet-ups and forums as well as rallies and demonstrations, is still commonly a preoccupation of members of the middle class who enjoy relative wealth and comfortable lifestyles.

While administrators of both PATAS and FF agree that their purposes would be better served and their advocacies more successfully promoted if the communities are able to engage individuals of all social standings, there are marked differences between the approaches of both communities in addressing this.

For FF, both Garrick and Red expressed a desire to organize offline activities specifically aimed at members of lower socio-economic classes, but admit that FF lacks the manpower to visit different communities to promote their advocacies. Due to the volunteer nature of the group and the typically small number of available volunteers (most of whom also prefer communicating in English), Red said that instead of targeting

all demographics, the community must content itself with reaching for the *"low-hanging fruit,"* people who come from similar backgrounds as themselves, as this is what their current resources and structure will allow. Until more people are willing to help out with offline activities or producing Tagalog content (both of which are in the plans for the coming year), Red explained that the community can only expend its resources in aiming for realistic goals, namely to engage people who are similar to the core group of members in terms of socio-economic characteristics, by continuing to produce content and conduct activities following their present standards and based on their current abilities.

On the other hand, Thomas said that PATAS plans to expand the reach of the community, which he believes to be limited by an over-reliance on Facebook to communicate information and also the poor reach of the website, which is due in part to the popularity of social media as well as inherent inaccessibility to people with no Internet access. He and other PATAS officers recognized a need for more offline activities which will enable *"deeper access"* to people coming from less privileged backgrounds who would appreciate the knowledge that PATAS can impart to them. However, he added that pursuing these plans *"will be a stony path"* not only due to logistical and financial costs but also because few members are inclined to visit poor or less developed areas in the country to promote the community's advocacies.

c. Propensity for participation and advocacy: Personal inclination vs. Community influence

Analyzing the data from all interviews reveals a common characteristic of all the informants: all were already inclined towards some of the ideals of their community prior to their joining the community. With the exception of Sophia, who grew up exposed to

many different religions, all informants evolved from being baptized Catholics or Christians to atheists. Thomas, Sunny, and Tess reported being critical of Catholicism from an early age, a characteristic that was enhanced in the case of Thomas by experiences of traveling and discrimination for being gay, and in Sunny's case by an incident of sexual abuse that affected his entire conservative Catholic family.

Both Red and Sunny reported exploring various faiths and philosophies before eventually identifying themselves as atheists, while Tess solidified her stance as an atheist by referring to media and literature about the topic when she was a student.

Garrick and Sophia cite intellectual influences, particularly their science-oriented backgrounds, as forces that motivated them to become part of FF.

For most of the informants, who have been members of their communities since the initial stages (with the exception of Sophia in FF), personal inclination may prove to be stronger than community influence in fueling their propensity for community participation. Prior to the existence of PATAS and FF, they had to rely mostly on personal experience and other sources of information to shape their beliefs. However, for members who joined much later, specifically at a time when the communities started to gain significant followers and publicity from media coverage, the latter is likely. As Tess and Thomas have attested, many members who join PATAS are still confused about their personal opinions on atheism and other topics, and are drawn towards the community as a means to clarification and enlightenment. Such members are particularly impressionable and prone to being influenced by community interaction.

These findings raise the question of whether the informants, as well as other members of the communities, participate out of a personal inclination arising from conditions independent of the community, or out of the influence of the community itself.

As mentioned earlier in the review of literature, in defining online communities, Van Dijk (2006) refuted earlier claims that online communities were separate from the physical world by arguing that the content of communication in virtual communities is largely determined by the reality of the organic or offline communities. In the cases of both FF and PATAS, it can be said that most individuals come from Roman Catholic communities or social backgrounds dominated by organized religion and traditional Filipino values and beliefs. While it is difficult to tell whether they begin participating in communities such as FF or PATAS due to being convinced by the members or the content of these communities, openness, if not inclination, is needed in audience members in order for them to be engaged by PATAS or FF in the first place.

Thomas expounded on this when he discussed his vision for PATAS. He cited the decline in the popularity of organized religion in many Western countries as a sign that people need an alternative to these declining belief systems. *"Atheism is not just a thought pattern. It's a lifestyle."* With this belief, he envisions PATAS to be a means for establishing a strong cultural presence for atheism in Asia as it has in the West. *"I would like to see people develop in Asia that can have the same stand as those people that are idolized in the West. Why can't the Philippines have their own Richard Dawkins one day?"* he said, explaining that globalization, by facilitating the exchange of new ideas and forcing people to renegotiate Filipino identity, adds to the potential of such ideals to take root in the Philippines.

More importantly, Thomas perceives the Philippines to be *"the most liberal country in Asia,"* which is also a strong motivation. *"In fact, this is the most immoral country that I've ever seen,"* he exclaimed, citing his observations that many Filipinos who claim to be religious do not even follow the principles of their religion in their day-to-day activities. Generally speaking, Thomas said that he strongly believes in the potential of an atheist movement in the Philippines because he finds Filipino social norms to be relatively more liberal compared to those of other Asian countries. Given conditions such as women being given relatively equal opportunities as men compared to other Asian countries and homosexuality not being illegal, Thomas said that the Philippines already provides a foundation for the movement that he envisions, which he hopes will grow to span different countries.

His impression of Filipinos is that they are also open-minded to unconventional ideas such as atheism despite the prevalence of Catholicism in the country. This is important on the community level, particularly in orienting discussions among members, and propelling community efforts to reach a wider audience. *"People are willing to absorb those information, to think about it,"* he said of Filipinos. Another advantage he cited is that most Filipino members were formerly religious, and understand how religion works. As a result, they are able to argue in favor of atheism more articulately and more thoroughly, so they are more convincingly able to urge religious people to rethink or perhaps abandon their religious affiliations.

While it cannot be concluded whether personal inclination (or at least, open-mindedness) or community influence can take full credit for an individual's participation in communities, the two attributes certainly influence each other. It is possible that open-

minded Filipinos or those who have realized their inclination towards atheism or freethought are drawn to communities like FF and PATAS, but there is also the possibility that those who are less inclined can be influenced by chance contact with FF and PATAS, and as an effect of their encounters with these communities, be convinced to change their positions. Certainly, the goal of these communities is: to reach out to those who are open-minded enough or willing to examine the alternative perspectives offered by these communities; and also, to add to their ranks those who already share in the principles and advocacies.

4. Agency

a. Defining "membership"

An individual's membership status is influenced by his or her involvement in the community. However, the concept of "involvement" by itself already requires reviewing several practical considerations and potential gray areas.

In principle, Thomas described PATAS' hierarchy of members (see Figure 4) as having three levels.

Figure 4. *Levels of membership in PATAS*
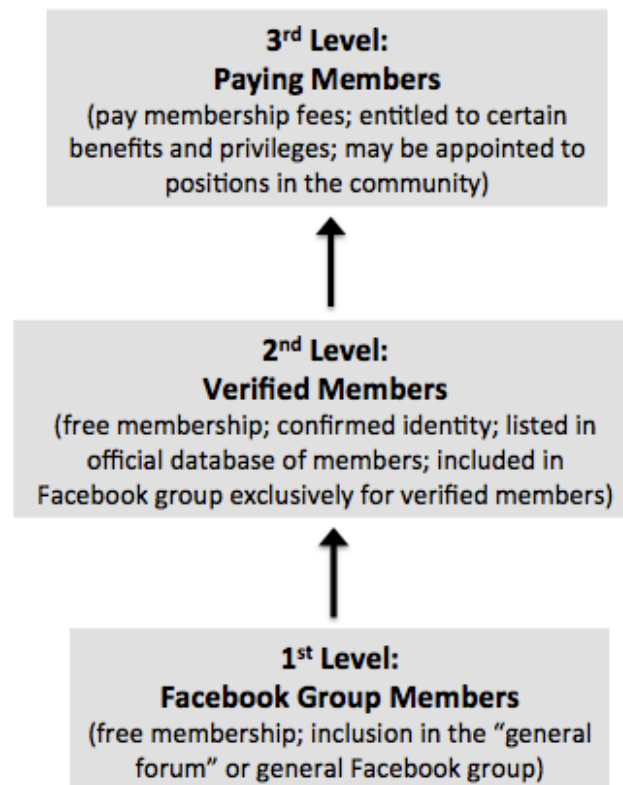
The first level consists of individuals who join the Facebook group (general forum). Being part of the Facebook group is the defining factor, as these individuals may or may not actually participate in any activity in the group.

Both Tess and Thomas recalled having phases in which they were both silent members and mere observers of the Facebook group, not involving themselves in online and offline activities. In reality, the Facebook group is largely composed of such members who do not contribute to the discussions occurring therein or attend offline events. These people may have joined the PATAS Facebook group for indeterminate reasons but may not necessarily consider themselves as members of the community in any strict or real sense, possibly due to a lack of consistent or substantial participation.

The second level is that of the "verified members," people who send a scanned image of their ID to community administrators to confirm their identity and are added to the community's official list of members. They also become part of the Facebook group exclusively for verified members, which has a smaller population than that of the general forum (the Facebook group) that is also more closely knit because members are recognized and tend to be familiar with one another. All officers of PATAS are at least verified members.

Paying members belong to the third and highest level. Individuals on this level are entitled to more privileges, such as the right to borrow books from the community library, offers of discounts on PATAS merchandise, and free entrance to certain offline events.

Officers of the community all belong to the level of paying members. Tess described the hierarchy of officers in the community as follows: The head of the entire organization is the chairman. The board of trustees is composed of the most important officers, the highest of which is the CEO, followed by the president and then the vice president. Below them are the corporate secretary, chief finance officer, and property custodian.

Thomas also mentioned the existence of different teams with specific roles and responsibilities to the community. Separate administrative teams are responsible for publishing social media content, publishing website content, monitoring the website forum and monitoring the Facebook forum, though these some members serve in two or more teams. All team members are verified members.

At the time of data gathering, there was an LGBT arm called BATAS with its own separate CEO, president, and vice president. However, both Tess and Thomas mentioned

plans of converting BATAS into a committee with a different structure that falls under the larger hierarchy of the community.

The community has been restructuring in order to qualify for registration with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which requires having a formal line-up of officers. Tess shared that PATAS officers want the community to be recognized and to function as a legal business entity in order to sell merchandise and better facilitate transactions and partnerships with other organizations, especially international ones.

The classifications in the PATAS hierarchy of members are clear in principle; however, due to some deviations such as supposedly paying members' inability to pay membership fees (as well as special considerations to have these waived for some active members), the structure is implemented with significantly less strictness, resulting in informal adjustments to the original scheme. For instance, Sunny, who despite his status as a paying member and officer, no longer pays the membership fee but contributes to the community in other ways such as covering other financial and logistical expenses.

According to Thomas, the system of payment of membership fees is currently no longer enforced as originally planned and is up for revision as the community continues to restructure.

In contrast, FF lacks such a strict membership structure. *"There's really no formal membership,"* explained Red. *"We use 'membership' loosely."* There is no registration process to become a member and no database of members, except for the list of those who have assumed specific positions and responsibilities in the community. The term "member" is problematic, leading to questions about whether the thousands who have joined the Facebook group, majority of whom contribute nothing to the official content

published on the community website and have not participated in any offline activity or even any online activity such as posting or commenting, can be considered members, whether those who consume the content published on the website and YouTube channel and/or join offline activities such as meet-ups and demonstrations but are not part of the FF Facebook group can be considered members, and what terms can these individuals be most appropriately labeled.

There are no identified parameters for exactly *who* the Filipino Freethinkers are, but this is not something that bothers Red and other members of the core group. When it comes to people calling themselves "freethinkers" or "members of the Filipino Freethinkers," Red explained that the core group allows people to *"say whatever they want."* However, they are careful to make sure that people do not claim to represent them when they in fact don't. *"We're very sensitive about representing the entire organization."* Because FF is to many people a vehicle for communicating personal views, disclaimers for articles posted on the website, though mostly written by members of the FF editorial team, have become necessary to clarify that the views being expressed are not the unified stance of FF on a particular issue.

FF also functions on a volunteer basis, which may justify the lack of formal membership. As mentioned earlier, Red and other core members of FF know very well that placing too many structured demands on volunteers is impractical because of their lack of any true commitment to the organization. Distribution of work is also largely uneven due to volunteers' varying capacities for participation. Volunteers' different preoccupations also prevent many of them from even meeting in person, despite having

similar responsibilities or being on the same team. For instance, Garrick revealed that he has never met some of his co-moderators of the Facebook group in real life.

The loose structure of the organization has been addressed to some extent by creating a line-up of officers and committees comprised of regularly active members, in order to fulfill requirements for registration as a non-government organization with the SEC, which FF is currently pursuing. However, while it is not yet a formal NGO, FF continues to de-emphasize hierarchies because, as Red observed in the three atheist groups he joined before starting FF, *"people became so hung up on roles and positions"* that power struggles ensued. From the start, he intended for FF to focus on the causes they were championing instead of allowing *"big personalities to jockey for celebrity"* or credit.

According to Red and Garrick, the norm has come to be that people *"grow"* into their positions. Before they are given a title, they should have been doing work for that position already for some time. In terms of delegation of tasks, people volunteer for or are assigned to what they are known to be able to deliver. *"We've been together for such a long time that we know each other's competencies,"* explained Garrick.

This familiarity with each other's capacities has caused an informal structure to emerge, and paved the way for some formal positions. At present, the community's formal positions include the president, Red, and directly below him, the Board of Directors for various functions, such as the advocacy directors (e.g. RH advocacy director and LGBT advocacy director), the affiliations director (for coordinating the different FF chapters), the editorial director (to oversee the editorial team that writes and edits content for the main website), and the social media director who is responsible for

the team that moderates the community's various social media accounts. There is also the Think Tank, a small group of a dozen or so active members who brainstorm for strategies and projects; the Coordinating Council, a larger group who accomplish different tasks associated with the community's projects and consist of 60 Chapter Directors and officers in the different chapters, as well as volunteers who regularly help out; the Editorial Exchange (the editorial team); the online moderation teams (admins of the different online channels); and lastly, the advisory board, which Red described as a group of experts or people they consult *"who are older than usual."*

Garrick explained that the structure emerges from people having their own *"niche"* or a role that they choose to regularly fulfill, such as making art, writing content, or helping with transportation and logistics. However, FF has no formal policies in place to enforce people's fulfillment of the responsibilities that they sign up for. *"In terms of accountability, if you don't volunteer, we don't really blame you for not volunteering,"* Garrick added, saying that members *"don't owe [the community] anything."* He further explained that any discontinuation in the activity of any online channel of FF is most likely due to the volunteer responsible for it no longer being able to fulfill his or her tasks.

As implied by the preceding information, defining membership is an uncertainty that pertains more to FF than to PATAS, due to the former's lack of a typology of its members other than distinguishing between individuals who belong to the core group or list of officers and those who do not. This forced the researcher to consider other aspects of membership, particularly community participation, in order to outline criteria for defining membership and types of members.

The first aspect of community participation that may be considered is *production*, which refers to the content that members produce. This includes the following content: social media posts on community social media channels, particularly the Facebook groups or pages, as well as comments on such posts and on other content in these channels; posts that are published as official content on the website, and also comments on such posts; posts made on public venues for interaction on any channel such as the website forum, as well as comments on such posts; videos produced for the community YouTube channel and other multimedia produced by the community and published on any of their other channels, and the comments and other feedback that these content receive; official tweets on the community Twitter page, as well as tweets, retweets, and other feedback activity addressed to the Twitter page. In short, production includes any content contributed by members that is published on any of the community channels and is visible to the audience of the community, whether these are official posts, non-official posts, or feedback to posts. However, production excludes the posts created by individuals on their personal channels or channels external to the community channels, though they may use content from community channels as sources, as such posts do not necessarily contribute to activity happening within the community and being experienced by other members, such as discussions and conversations.

Consumption is another aspect of community participation that is worth considering in clarifying membership. Unlike production, which relates to content that is visible on community channels, consumption pertains to the content that members encounter and/or pay attention to, and may have no visible behavioral indicators if members do not engage in communicating feedback to the community, creating posts on community channels, or

sharing content from community channels through their personal channels. Moreover, even if members do, such activity gives no guarantee that they have actually consumed content on the community channels. Thus, a member's consumption of community content is more difficult to observe, unless he or she gives a personal account or evaluation of the content that he or she encounters and is attentive to.

The third aspect to consider is *presence*, which pertains to where, how, and how often a member participates in community activity. Members may participate purely online through the community's Internet-based channels, offline by attending community events, or both. It is also important to note *what* members contribute through their participation, which defines their role in the community. For instance, the role of an advocacy director in FF is to engage in activity that promotes the particular advocacy he or she was appointed to, such as producing content related to the advocacy and attending relevant events. Lastly, presence also involves the frequency with which a member fulfills his or her role or participates in any way in the community. These three components—the channels through which members participate, their responsibilities or contributions, and the frequency of their participation—help to define a member's involvement or presence in the community.

Analyzing these aspects may provide a basis for criteria that may be applied in creating formal types or classifications of members. However, FF and PATAS vary in their need to characterize, categorize, or even recognize their members. While having different levels of membership, in addition to specific bodies of officers, suggests that PATAS places a certain value on a structured albeit laxly implemented system, FF seems

content with defining and categorizing only the different members who have assumed regular responsibilities to the community.

Both communities also recognize that establishing and maintaining a structured membership base is unfeasible due to the communities' lack of a remuneration system for the efforts that members put into participating in the community, especially when contributing entails gas and transportation expenses as well as time. As long as no substantial system of compensation is in place, the participation of majority of members will always vary. Leaving membership undefined may also be a strategic choice for the community. As Red said, *"We attempt to be as inclusive as we can."* Not imposing any particular terms or conditions for membership is possibly a conscious effort on FF's part to align with this objective.

For now, the communities are content with loose terms to characterize individuals' relations to the community. However, integrating findings from the analysis, this researcher volunteers the following classifications, some of which are terms that are already used by FF or PATAS:

Administrators usually have technical, Internet-bound responsibilities to the online community, such as maintaining the structure, design, and proper functioning of an online channel (for example, by writing code, designing new features, etc.); producing official content when necessary, usually with regard to the community such as announcements or notices; and moderating communicative activity and interaction on community channels by enforcing rules.

Directors, or *officers*, are less technical in their duties and may have functions beyond the online activity of the community. They may be responsible for performing a

particular task or body of tasks that is essential to the functioning of the community as an organization, such as public relations, finance, or managing affiliations. Their role may also be defined by a particular advocacy or issue on which the community has chosen to present a unified stance, such as reproductive health and LGBT rights (hence the RH Advocacy Director and LGBT Advocacy Director positions in FF).

Content creators are those who directly contribute to the official content posted on any of the community channels. They may be part of designated teams with the specific responsibility of producing, reviewing, editing, and publishing various forms of content, such as articles and videos. In FF, the Editorial Exchange produces content for the community website, while its counterpart for the PATAS website is the VP Team. In some cases, these teams also accept material created and submitted by external individuals that are subject to critique and revision before being approved for publishing as official content on all community channels.

The term *member* may be defined as an individual who is officially recognized as a member of the community, usually by confirming his or her identity and being documented on the community database. Members do not necessarily hold any responsibilities to the community. The defining factor is simply that they identify themselves as members of the community, and are considered by community authorities, using certain standards, as members as well.

Followers refer to the general mass of individuals who encounter community content, give feedback to and/or participate in discussions in community online channels but do not necessarily identify themselves as belonging to the community. Followers' involvement in the community lacks a sense of commitment that is present in certain

degrees in the previously mentioned categories. Because of this, characteristics of production, consumption, and presence vary from follower to follower, and may not even be observable in the cases of those who access community channels but choose to be silent and invisible (commonly called lurkers).

b. Volunteer culture: Limited productivity, meaningful contributions

Both FF and PATAS function on a volunteer basis. Particularly in the case of FF, this justifies the absence of a formal system of membership. FF officers know that demanding consistent delivery from volunteers is impractical due to their varying capacities for participation and lack of firm commitment to the community, which results in uneven distribution of work and stoppage in certain projects and activities. Though FF is in the process of registering as a non-government organization with the SEC, which requires the community to submit documentation of a formal structure, the officers continue to de-emphasize hierarchies to prevent power struggles as well as non-performers who are only after titles of positions in the community. Roles also remain fluid, with most people volunteering time and resources whenever they can regardless of the position they hold.

Red and Garrick emphasized that people grow into their positions in FF; in most cases, individuals only officially assume a certain position after they have been accomplishing tasks for it for some time, usually because they consistently volunteer for it and have proven to deliver well on it. Similarly, Tess of PATAS reported that she was already fulfilling secretarial duties despite not yet officially holding the position, to which she was eventually appointed.

However, many FF members do not progress into holding formal positions, and are forced to discontinue their participation due to the interference of other priorities. As a result of these participants' withdrawal from the community, some plans remain unrealized.

Despite its adverse effects on the community's productivity, this emphasis on performance and delivery over titles can be perceived as an advantage with regard to gauging individuals' sincerity in volunteering for FF. Though other motivations may be at play here, such as contributions by members may be seen as more meaningful if they volunteer despite not being credited with official titles in the community. As evidenced by the cases of Tess who is now president of PATAS and Garrick who admits that he was assigned to his current position of affiliations director simply for starting the first university chapter of FF, but is now also active as a podcast producer, this may indicate that individuals who participate in this manner will continue to deliver even after being formally appointed to positions.

c. The supremacy of social media

Of all the online platforms currently maintained by both FF and PATAS, social media, particularly Facebook, is the most active. This is evidenced by three aspects: the number of conversations and posts made by members, the number of official posts (which sometimes mirror content on the website and YouTube channel), and the number of responses by members to official posts (usually on social media, where people prefer to give feedback).

The quantity of posts, which often generate threads of comments, that are created by members in the Facebook groups of both communities is staggering. As mentioned

earlier, Tess and Thomas of PATAS both agreed that the Facebook group is the best platform for facilitating interaction among members in terms of the number of participants and volume of discussions. Textual analysis of the PATAS Facebook group reveals that up to 50 or more new posts are made by group members per day, while analysis of the FF group shows it to be less active, with roughly 10-20 posts created each day.

However, the benefits of Facebook are obvious when compared to the official website. As Red sees it, content is easy to generate by both channel administrators and members or followers because it need not be original. Unlike the website, which is strictly for content originally created by FF contributors, any user of social media can easily and quickly share content from another source and include their own commentary on it as well. Likewise, in contrast with the community website, the PATAS Facebook group attracts a constantly increasing number of participants and hosts an active pool of discussions.

The greater number of official posts—in other words, posts created by channel administrators—published on social media can also be attributed to Red's observation that content is easily generated because it may come from external sources. This is mostly true for the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of the communities, which do not necessarily contain posts that are originally created by the community. Though some administrator-created posts mirror all-original content published on the website, many are also linked from sources outside of the community, such as news sites, websites and social media pages of other communities, and advocacy blogs. This characteristic of social media that allows easy republishing of content from other sources has led to

administrator-controlled social media pages like the Facebook group and Twitter page to be less strict with regard to publishing original content. More rigorously enforced standards for publishing are reserved for the website, which is considered by administrators of both communities to be the channel that mainly represents the communities and their endeavors. This allows administrators to easily publish content from various sources, resulting in more posts, as opposed to just content produced by authorized content creators of the community.

Furthermore, responses to posts published by authorized content creators and participants in the Facebook group and audience members of the Facebook and Twitter pages are higher in number than responses to content on the official websites and YouTube channels (though in FF's case, this may be due to comments on their YouTube channel being disabled).

However, Red noted that this is accompanied by one limitation, which is that interactions on social media tend to be shallow. People are not inclined to elaborate on their opinions on social media as much as they might in the comments section of a website post. This may be due to character limits (such as on Twitter) as well as common Facebook practices that have become the norm, such as sharing content with brief commentaries rather than blocks of text.

Another downside noted by Tess particularly about the Facebook group is that large quantities of posts and feedback comes at the expense of constant monitoring and filtering of content needed due to the higher likelihood of undesirable posts, such as those made by people who join the PATAS group just to badmouth atheists. Moreover, the quality of interaction is compromised by the larger population, of which only a small

percentage actually contributes to discussions. Among that small percentage of active members, some contribute negatively by trolling, posting irrelevant content, or behaving unpleasantly towards other members.

Analyzing the benefits and shortcomings of community social media channels invites more comparison to the communities' official websites and the application of some assumptions of activity theory.

Activity theory analyzes activity occurring in an activity system (for the purposes of the study, the online communities) where subjects engage in motivated activities that are mediated by artifacts (tools used) as well as rules and roles in the organization or community involved, in order to produce a desired outcome (Engestrom, 1978, in Baran & Cagiltay, 2010). The theory provides an analytical perspective for understanding the structure of online environments (Engeström, 1999; Barab, Evans, & Baek, 2003; in Baran & Cagiltay, 2010) with regard to fulfillment of objectives by also enabling researchers to view the interaction and progress of individuals acting within them.

Applying activity theory, the activeness of the community social media platforms can be seen as many individuals engaging in various motivated communicative acts that the rules and roles in the community have allowed to proliferate, leading to high volume of communicative activity as well as increase in participants on social media, particularly in the communities' Facebook groups. In contrast, certain attributes of the website, particularly less venues for interaction as well as stricter standards for the publishing of content and moderation of feedback mechanisms (in order to preserve the website's integrity as the official channel for representing the communities online) helps to ensure

that quality of content and interactions is better on the website than it is on social media. However, such attributes also severely limit the quantity of interactions on the website.

The FF website has facilitated deep discussions on the content published on it in the past. However, with the growth of social media's popularity, Red has observed that people are more impatient in viewing content. They are also deterred by what Garrick called the website's *"pull mechanism"* nature, which refers to the previously discussed quality of the website having to be sought out by users, in contrast with social media, which pushes content towards the user through notifications and a constant stream of activity. Likewise, because less people access and interact on the website, Tess and Thomas both agree that the community website is not the ideal channel for engaging the majority of PATAS participants.

Moreover, if people bother to access the website at all, they can easily switch to a different tab if they are bored by the content. This makes the production of engaging and constantly updated content for the website a necessity in capturing and holding people's attention.

Another downside of the website mentioned by Red is the length of the articles. Because articles are typically 800 or more words, people who are increasingly accustomed to the short and mostly visual messages sent over social media will find the articles too long to read and will not be engaged. On the other hand, posts on social media tend to be short (if text) or visual in nature, allowing for quick and easy comprehension. Thus, directing traffic to the main website is a challenge because of people's engrossment with social media. However, an important advantage of Facebook and social media in general that Red identified is its capacity to drive traffic to the

website because content from the website can be shared through it. Red approximates that 30-40 percent of website visits actually come from social media. However, Garrick pointed out that this benefit is tempered by the constant activity on Facebook resulting in posts on the FF page and group having to compete for visibility with numerous and various content, such as posts of friends and advertisements. For instance, out of the more than 25,000 people following the Facebook page, he said that only about 3,000 would see the posts show up on their Facebook feeds *"if we're lucky."*

Tess shared a similar opinion, saying that the PATAS website would benefit from better integration with Facebook in order to receive more traffic from social media. Ideally, she said, there should also be a way for comments on the website to also appear on Facebook so that participants on the Facebook channels will be aware of the interactions occurring on the website.

Tess and Thomas reported that though PATAS officers are also concerned about driving traffic from the FB group to the website, they have not reached an agreement regarding how to feasibly transfer activity from the Facebook group to the website forum. Though they contemplated closing the group and redirecting all activity to the website, this proved unfeasible due to the mass of activity that already exists in the group. It was decided that the Facebook group would be retained because of its popularity among the general audience of PATAS.

These findings affirm that the supremacy of social media over other online platforms is insurmountable. Because social media heavily influences people's use and participation in online channels, online communities are forced to adjust in order to build

and maintain engagement with their audience, specifically by tailoring content to specific platforms.

5. Act

a. Discussions: Towards an understanding of personal and social issues

For FF and PATAS, discussions are an important means for pursuing community objectives. Both communities hold meet-ups, as well as forums and other events aimed at stimulating discussions and exchange of ideas, to promote the exercise of reason in understanding, crafting, and responding to arguments. FF's meet-ups generate conversations and debates on topics such as social issues to encourage freethought and rationality, while PATAS' meet-ups, forums, and conventions strive to apply reason during discussions in their approach to educate people about atheism and agnosticism.

As mentioned earlier, Garrick said that FF caters to the *"Catholic diaspora,"* Filipinos who have abandoned religion (or are unsure how or if they will) and crave the company of open-minded people who would accept them. Such individuals sometimes participate in FF's online channels by posing questions to help them clarify their positions about atheism or share content and urge people to give their opinions.

Likewise, in the PATAS Facebook group, Tess mentioned that students often bring up their problems about coming out to their parents and family members as atheists and are keen to receive advice from others. She also reported that others simply pose their personal questions or musings about how atheism works and ask for feedback (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Question about atheism posted on PATAS Facebook group to solicit opinions*

Such activities, according to Thomas, are motivated by a desire to acquire knowledge that will help individuals to better understand their own stance on atheism.

Media system dependency theory may be applied to this level of individuals in order to analyze their relation to the online community. In particular, media system dependency theory helps in determining the purpose of the online community to individuals by looking at the needs of individuals (information, expression of opinion, affirmation of perceptions, etc.) that are satisfied through community participation. It is also used to describe the impact of community participation on individuals' interactions with each other and their responses (opinion, approaches, etc.) to social issues.

Common motives for members' participation in the two online communities that were reported by the administrators interviewed include: seeking acceptance and the company of like-minded people; exchanging knowledge and exploring different perspectives; gathering opinions and gaining insights in order to clarify personal stances or issues; self-expression; making friends with common interests; satisfying curiosity about the novelty of these online communities; and lastly, working for larger social causes as a means to self-actualization.

Aside from needing the company of like-minded people to feel accepted, many PATAS participants seek the input of others to clarify, affirm, and/or validate their own thoughts and feelings regarding atheism. In other words, participants have a need to develop a better understanding of themselves in relation to atheism, as well as other philosophies, such as pantheism and deism, and also social and political ideologies.

This motive can be linked to three motivational aspects for joining online communities identified by Ridings and Gefen (2004): information exchange, social support exchange, and friendship. Obtaining and transferring information is essential to individuals' understanding about personal and social issues, and is possible despite the weak ties (referring to the fact that participants are usually relative strangers to each other) that predominate in large virtual communities (Baym, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999a, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Regardless of how strong relationships are among members of online communities, content in such communities involves self-expression as well as requesting or providing information (Herring, 1996, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

However, some interactions can go deeper and involve members providing social support to one another. Several studies suggest that individuals join online communities

to find a sense of belonging, companionship, and encouragement, as well as instrumental aid related to certain tasks (Furlong, 1989; Hiltz, 1984; Hilts & Wellman, 1997; Korenman & Wyatt, 1996; M.A. Smith, 1999; Sproull & Faraj, 1997; Wellman, 1996; and Wellman et al., 1996, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

In the cases of PATAS and FF, the matters for which some members seek support sometimes are not clearly related to the advocacies or issues tackled by the community. For instance, a member makes a post in the group asking other members for advice on how to cure his paranoia, causing members to discuss the nature of his concern and possible approaches to dealing with it. As both communities are lax in their moderation of online content and also aim to form positive relationships among members through both online and offline interaction, such instances are allowed, possibly feeding members' dependency on the communities as media for addressing their needs to express themselves and to receive information and expressions of support.

The exchange of information and opinions online and offline can sometimes lead to friendships and other personal relationships, which data from observation of one FF meet-up supports.

The meet-up, which was held on December 1, 2013, Sunday, at Moshi Moshi restaurant in Katipunan Avenue, Quezon City, drew nearly 30 attendees, roughly as expected. The location, a fast casual dining restaurant with bright lighting and ample chairs and tables, is the usual venue for recent meet-ups, and at the time of the event was populated with diners engaged in light conversation that added to the restaurant's laidback atmosphere. The community was allowed to hold meet-ups here because Red is a friend of the owner of the restaurant.

The participants were generally friendly, casual, and relaxed. Some were already acquainted or friends with each other, having met during past community activities. Everyone was asked to wear a nametag, even if it was not his or her first time attending a meet-up. During the discussion, participants appeared to be mostly attentive. Some initially seemed reserved but eventually became relaxed, frank, and outspoken. Still, others did not speak at all. Topics on the agenda were: "The Boundaries of Feminism," "Self and Selfies," "ShallowShaming" (which was explained in the event details posted online as "shaming people who go through plastic surgery, use whitening products, take selfies, don't read, watch shallow shows, etc."), "Shaming Selfishness," "Shaming Pseudoscientists," and the Raunchy Topic of the Week (a staple part of FF meet-ups).

Throughout the discussion, participants exhibited amusement at the ideas and opinions being shared, amicability towards their fellow participants, and confusion about certain ideas and arguments. When arguing or making a point, others delivered their statements with conviction, and some expressed their frustration or exasperation when arguing or feeling misunderstood.

When voicing their opinions, actors often emphasized their own subjectivity by saying disclaimers such as "*The way I see it…*" Attempts to agree on definitions tended to take time; one participant even dismissed efforts to define feminism by saying, *"Let's not define. Let's be post-modern."* Such quips were often met with laughter.

Certain gestures, such as participants' placing their arms over the backrests of others' chairs, implied a certain level of friendship and comfort with one another. This researcher found out that many have known each other for more than a year, having met in previous meet-ups and events.

Affirmative and friendly behavior appeared to help people open up and contribute more to the conversation. Participants who joined in the discussion seemed to make a mutual effort to be tactful, clarify their standpoints, or admit that they are not very knowledgeable on a subject or may be misinformed. When a participant presented his or her stand or opinion on a subject, another participant usually provided a different angle or argued against it. Red's facilitation, which involved his constantly asking for more thoughts and opinions, as well as the casual, and tolerant atmosphere, was very encouraging of the expression of a variety of opinions.

However, some topics on the agenda were no longer discussed due to lack of time caused by people's digressions. Also, debates arose, which were resolved by the actors agreeing to disagree.

These discussions, which aside from being venues for socialization and making friends, are venues for arguments and debates among members regarding social issues and personal principles. One theory incorporated in the study framework, Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984), can be used to further describe this process as more than mere exchange, but rather as communicative action. The theory presumes language as a medium for communication that facilitates interpretation or negotiating definitions of the situation, which Habermas (1984) described as "a mechanism for coordinating action" (p. 101). Interpretation is needed to achieve understanding, which involves actors' reciprocally raising validity claims that can be accepted or challenged, taking into consideration actors' relations to the world and prior interpretations of it. This is essential in arriving at a consensus, so that actors may pursue courses of action aimed at particular goals.

Applying this theory, it can be said that by initiating or participating in discussions, community members are essentially raising validity claims and negotiating definitions during these communicative exchanges in order to aid their understanding of their own internal issues as well as of external issues present in their environment. Discussions in these online communities are therefore oriented towards individuals' development of their understanding regarding issues of a personal nature that they may have, as well as issues of a broader, sociocultural nature.

b. Content: Conversation over composition

In the cases of both FF and PATAS, the Facebook groups being the most active channel for interaction among members in terms of volume of posts and number of participants implies that an overwhelming number of followers of both communities prefer to participate by starting conversations with others. Though their participation is limited by rules allowing only channel administrators and official content creators to publish content in the name of the communities on their online channels, a handful of participants manage to actively contribute to group activity by posting content to engage other participants in discussions on various topics. The practice of holding meet-ups, in which individuals come together in an offline setting to hold discussions (as well as to socialize, and often, to argue with one another) about different subjects, also reflects the important role of conversations in community activity.

This inclination towards conversations and discussions as characteristic of communicative content in these online communities is also highlighted by forms of content that the communities began pursuing relatively recently. Garrick mentioned that FF's most regular outputs at present are the podcasts, which are intended to be released

weekly. He described podcasts as a means to producing content that is "easy, regular, and not too hard to commit to" compared to writing articles.

Producing podcasts addresses two concerns for FF. First, by requiring only watching or listening, Garrick claimed that podcasts are better at engaging an audience that has grown used to the short and spontaneous expressions endemic in social media, and are no longer accustomed to reading long blocks of text. In this sense, podcasts are not just FF's way of expanding the forms of their content, but also adapting to how technology shapes people's preferences and behavior.

More importantly, however, it compensates for an ongoing lull in writing official content—particularly articles—for the website. Garrick argued that recording videos of people who have gathered to discuss certain issues is much easier than organizing one's thoughts and composing essays on the part of content creators, as production involves less than 10 regular participants and does not require much structure or intellectual preparation.

"I think it's harder to sit down and compose yourself," Garrick explained. *"It's easier to just shoot the breeze, get together, talk, and there happens to be a camera there."*

This approach, as opposed to writing essays and articles containing one's thoughts and arguments may be seen as a less didactic and more collaborative approach to building knowledge. By encouraging dialogue among participants online and offline, PATAS and FF allow meanings to be negotiated and conclusions arrived at with more equitable exchange of information.

These qualities are characteristic of participatory communication models that were incorporated into the study framework to explain communicative content and strategies in the online communities being examined. As mentioned earlier, participatory communication models give preference to horizontal approaches (Srampickal, 2006) and emphasize multiplicity, cultural identity, and participation of different individuals (Servaes & Malikhao, n.d.), which reduce social distance among communicators. Such approaches are best used in dealing with contemporary issues, such as ongoing economic, social, ideological, moral, ethnic, and political crises (Servaes & Malikhao, n.d.) that require dialogue among individuals and groups of varying backgrounds and interests.

Most importantly, participatory communication models, especially those used by group or community media in a developmental context, are oriented towards empowerment through knowledge (Boeren & Empskamp, 1992, in Srampickal, 2006). Despite PATAS and FF not qualifying as community media, both communities are aimed at empowering individuals to participate in public discourses and contribute to social change, through education about their advocacies and raising awareness about certain socio-political issues.

<u>c. Undesirable online behaviors: Qualms about moderation</u>

The posts and conversations started by participants in the Facebook groups of the communities, as well as in the comments section of website posts (particularly in FF's case), tend to be, in Red's words, "*a mixed bag.*"

With regard to Facebook groups, this can be ascribed largely to the sheer size of the population of members in those of both communities. As a result of these growing populations, coupled with group members' freedom to make posts about nearly anything,

the quality of content and discussions is prone to some inconsistency. Red remarked that some members *"post good stuff"* which result in *"good discussions;"* however, many more tend to post *"really mundane stuff and sometimes even bad content."*

He likened the Facebook group to a warehouse or a large venue:

> I guess you could compare that bigger forum—let's say we rented a warehouse. We said it's a Freethinkers' free-for-all and that's the analogy that I'd like to make. Let's say we get SMX Convention Center, and we get a thousand people to go there. There would be pockets of people who you'd disagree with, and you move away from them; you go look for the people who are discussing the things that you are interested in, and that's where you go. But to expect that 1,000 people would be people that you agree with, I think that's an unrealistic expectation. So the smaller you make the group, the more focused the discussions become. The bigger you make the group, the more chances of getting these less-than-stellar discussions. (R. Tani, personal communication, December 9, 2013)

Because much of the activity regarding the community occurs online, more structured and rigidly enforced rules were formulated to regulate activity (see Figure 6). Despite being more rigidly enforced, the nature of these rules was generalized by Red as being similar to Facebook's guidelines for conduct. (*"If Facebook disallows it, just follow those things."*) The greatest sanction for violating any of FF's guidelines for online interaction is to be banned from the Facebook group; offenses that would merit such action includes hate speech, threats of violence, sexual harassment, spam, and

blocking of moderators. Red added that other discouraged behaviors include trolling,

posting the personal information of others without consent, and *"proselytizing."*

Figure 6. *Filipino Freethinkers Community Guidelines*

Community Posting Guidelines

✎ Edit

By Jessica Balaquit on Monday, August 22, 2011 at 11:39am

Section 1. Overview

We want our online communities to be a venue for freethinkers to exchange ideas, challenge their beliefs, and foster a sense of community. As freethinkers, we highly value the freedom of expression but we're also working towards building a community where reasoned discourse is the norm. We'll try to keep moderation on our online communities to a minimum but keep in mind: there are limits.

These guidelines are not absolute; the moderators reserve the right to arbitrate on a case by case basis. As we face new challenges to the community, we reserve the right to modify these guidelines and also welcome discussion about the community guidelines. But this is our promise: we'll always aim to keep the guidelines to a minimum.

Section 2. Posting Guidelines

You're free to take any position on any subject when you post in the community. We trust you will post in good faith and assume the same good faith of others who comment in response. Know your logical fallacies [http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/] and check if you're falling into sloppy thinking when you take your position. Being critical of your own thoughts is part of being a freethinker.

You're free to defend your position; we don't expect you to be cool-headed about it all the time, but we trust you to stick to the issue instead of attacking the people who contradict your position. Be open to the idea that you might be wrong. It's okay, no one expects perfection. Being able to change your position when presented with a better argument and data is the mark of a mature intellect.

The following is a simple flowchart that outlines an ideal discussion: [http://filipinofreethinkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/discussion.jpg]

This community is only as valuable as YOUR contributions make it. Posts with unique insights – yes, even those that are NOT held by a majority of freethinkers – are welcome, provided they are argued in good faith and with supporting data if possible.

We trust you to not troll the community. Just in case we're not clear on the concept of trolling, read this [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troll_(Internet)]. Habitual trolls will be shown the door. Posts that are ostensibly consistent with a freethought perspective but are trollish, do not add to the discussion and are full of personal attacks, are unwelcome on this page, and may be dealt with accordingly.

The community moderators look at everything on a case by case basis. We may be more lenient with comments than with wall posts. We try to exercise maximum tolerance, but such tolerance is not unlimited.

Section 3. Minor Violations - In posting, keep in mind that the following are strongly discouraged and are to be avoided at all times:

1. Personal attacks
2. Irrelevant/excessively frequent posting (spam)

The above violations will warrant a warning. Excessive/repeated violation will lead to a ban.

Section 4. Major Violations - The following are strictly prohibited and will automatically result in a ban:

1. Unrelated advertising
2. Posting another's personal information (e.g., address, phone number, etc.)
3. Proselytizing
4. Habitual trolling*
5. Threats of violence and bodily harm**

*Trolling is defined as "posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic comments with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion."

**Veiled or ambiguous threats shall be presumed to be actual threats, and a moderator may ask the poster to categorically state that the post is not a threat and give a clear and convincing explanation why it is not a threat. If the explanation fails to overcome the presumption of threat, the post will be considered as a threat and will be dealt with accordingly.

Section 5. Reporting of Violations

If you think that a certain individual has made a violation, bring the post in question to any site/group/forum moderator.

Section 6. Facebook Specific

1. Please don't use the group document function. If you'd like to discuss a document, create a document on your own profile and post the link on the wall.
2. Please avoid using the Facebook group invite function to bring people into the group. We're uncomfortable with it since it brings people to the group without their permission. Rationale discussed further here: https://www.facebook.com/groups/ffreethinkers/10150507029262188/
3. Please do not post illegal download links (torrents, streams, direct downloads, etc.) on the group/in the comments. This is against Facebook's terms of service and will get you warned, and then possibly banned if you do it again.

Violations of the above guidelines will warrant a warning and a deletion of the post for Nos. 1 and 3. Excessive/repeated violation will lead to a ban.

Section 7. Blocking of Mods

Blocking of mods, while not an offense per se, is highly discouraged, as mods need to see every post in order to moderate the group.

1. If any member is found to have blocked 2 or more mods from seeing their posts, they will be asked to provide justification. (A mod may have deserved being blocked by being a total ass outside of the FF group.)
2. If a member is found to have blocked 5 or more mods, they may be warned for attempting to evade moderation or banned outright.
3. Blocking non-mod members of the group is generally frowned upon, especially if it is used to stifle disagreement, effectively cutting off the free exchange of ideas.

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ➡ Share

98 people like this.
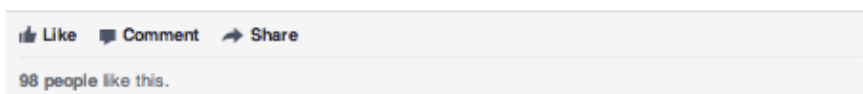
Similarly, in the case of PATAS, Thomas reported that the rules enforced in the Facebook group and website forum (see Figure 7) are similar to basic Facebook interaction guidelines, the most important of which restricts spamming and unsolicited advertising or marketing, posting of pornography, as well as any form of harassment, discrimination, bad-mouthing, and threatening other participants—what Tess calls "*the usual netiquette for groups online.*"

Figure 7. *PATAS General Forum Guidelines*

PATAS General Forum

📅 May 11, 2011   👤 By Admin   📷

Members who wish to participate in our online forums must bear in mind the following rules and guidelines on forum conduct:

- Do not register more than one account.
- Do not spam Â (consecutive posting that lead to flooding)
- Aid fellow members in fair and unbiased understanding of atheism and agnosticism, as well as other related topics. Promote information-seeking dialogues and settling of conflicts.
- When participating in discussions, be relevant.
- When giving information, provide the most comprehensive accurate information available. Cite sources if necessary.
- Respect the rights of authors, editors, and other members.
- Promote a harmonious and enjoyable environment when interacting with others.
- When submitting a post, take responsibility of your thread and the comments you allow. If you see someone behaving badly, tell them so.
- Label your tolerance level for abusive comments.
- Posts must not contain commercial promotion (multi-level marketing, except with proper permission from the group) orÂ advertisingÂ of goods or services unrelated to group's advocacy.
- Do not post discriminatory, offensive, degrading, or illegal materials.
- Do not say online what you wouldn't say in person.

The above rules are intended to protect fruitful exchange in an environment of mutual respect. Our forums are moderated *a posteriori*, i.e. the messages are read by the moderators after their publication. Failure to respect these rules may involve edition, removal or suppression of your messages, or even temporary or complete banishment from the forums. Offenders will be notified by the administrators.

Our forums are meant to be collaborative sites; if you are an amateur about some facts, an "eternal beginner", or an intellectual expert, you will find friendly and enthusiastic assistance and interactions, and a wide range of resources on these forums.

DISCLAIMER: Not all views that you see in these forums represent the intrinsic ideas of PATAS. Some members, particularly administrators and executive officers, would just rant almost about everything if left unattended by forum moderators. But like any other forums in the internet, everyone should take responsibility of themselves. These forum pages are just created to provide people around PATAS to socialize with each other and work out to create better rapport – outside the Internet!
Thank You =)

Facebook and PATAS-FORUM specific rules:

THE RULES:
1. A demonstration of circular reasoning repeated and without any change in the premise of oneâ€™s argument will result in a warning.

2. Hostility not grounded in a conversational context, as well as any hate speech, violent threats, or xenophobia will result in an instant ban.

3. Consistently NOT responding, within reason, to the posts and arguments others direct at you, -especially within oneâ€™s own thread and when just spamming or proselytizing repeatedly. (trolling)

*Also make sure to post only 2 posts per hour. This will make sure that you can follow up on any questions and keep the wall free of spam and easy to manage.

4. Going out of your way to say you are going to leave the group. This is trolling and a lame cry for attention. If you have criticisms, please make them and provide evidence in, what we would prefe , a constructive manner. An Auto-Ban will be in effect for any â€œnewbâ€ who has never posted or contributed but then throws a little hissy fit to state how superior they are to the others in the group and they will leave the group and go elsewhere. WE WILL HELP YOU GET ELSEWHERE MUCH FASTER AND GOOD RIDDANCE.

5. This group is for you to talk, discuss, debunk, share and debate about any subjects, articles or news as long as it is done with respect, good intention and understanding. Occasional swearing is overlooked, but excessive swearing, as in F??k every other word, will gain you a warning.
6. Any hostile comment posted to deliberately undermine the integrity of this group will qualify for instant removal.

7. Blocking of the Admin/s will get you an instant ban.

8. If you banned your name will be added to the list of usual suspects in the Admin group for other admins to be aware.

09. Any post in this group is open for anyone to comment, we make no bias based on gender or seniority of members.

10. CAPS LOCK. Please refrain using it in this group.

11. Page Sharing: If you plug your page or post your group here, you are expected to share our group link on your page/group you are promoting, if we discover you are not doing this we will remove you from the group, YES we do check.

12. Anyone found to be copy pasting from websites WITHOUT citing the original and trying to pass it off as their own will have their post or comment deleted, and issued a warning. A 2nd such offence and the post/comment will be deleted and the user removed from the group. You can, however, quote from said website, as long as a citation is given.

Example: "In some parts of the world the sky may appear golden," Joe Bloggs, whateversite.com." This is a debate group so use your own words, not someone else's.

Causes for deleted posts:

1. The Post is already on the wall.
If you just spam links repeatedly without comment, point or effort on your part, unless they are purely for entertainment purpose/s, a good chance exists they will be deleted. Organizing or glorifying the trolling of other groups, may be removed.

2. The poster might have deleted his/her post

3. The admins have decided it is "not in the best interest of this group".

4. The admins reserve the right to delete a comment that is deliberately insulting or distasteful.

5. The post is copy pasted from another website and the poster has tried to pass it off as his/her own work. (This includes comments as well.)

*Caps Lock – The Upper-case Offensive
Once in a while it seems that forum members may use all upper-case letters to try and bring attention to their question or post. However, this approach actually causes the opposite. All upper-case on the internet is like yelling in real life. Many members will avoid opening a thread where the subject is all upper-case, and they will breeze over an all upper-case reply without reading it. Also keep in mind that all upper-case is more difficult to read. So please, use correct case if you'd like the best attention to your question/reply.

*Troll and Trolling
A troll is a person who posts outrageous message to bait people to answer. A "Troll" delights in sowing discord on the forums. A troll is someone who inspires flaming rhetoric, someone who is purposely provoking and pulling people into flaming discussion. Flaming discussions usually end with name calling and a flame war.
A classic troll is trying to make us believe that he is a genuine sceptic with no hidden agenda. He is divisive and argumentative with need-to-be-right attitude, "searching for the truth", flaming discussion, and sometimes insulting people or provoking people to insult him. Troll is usually an expert in reusing the same words of its opponents and in turning it against them.
While sometimes, he may sound like a stupid, uninformed, ignorant poster, do not be deceived! Most trolls are highly intelligent people trying to hide behind a mask of stupidity and/or ignorance! They usually have an agenda.

The Admin/s decision is final.

Please note:
In order to avoid getting notifications on all posts from this group, please click on the – "Edit settings" – button on the top right corner of this page and change your preferences accordingly in the â€" "Notify me" â€" field.

Banning
We will ban people for at least 24 hours as a warning. They are always free to come back after the allotted time and ask to join the group again. Â Refusal to acknowledge an admin's decision on any issue concerning forum management will also merit a temporary ban (and a permanent ban, if done repeatedly).

Permanent Banning is only enforced through mutual admin decision for grave offenses.

Grave offense include the breaking of Facebook rules and terms of service, Philippine laws and rules, and the deliberate action of maligning the reputation of the officers of PATAS.

Tess said that all comments on articles on the website are subject to approval before posting in order to prevent spam and posting of irrelevant messages such as sales offers. In her opinion, the website is easier to manage because its security settings can be tweaked and IP addresses can be banned, restricting offenders' access in the future.

However, because Facebook groups lack these mechanisms, administrators of PATAS' Facebook platforms need to be stricter. Tess also ascribed this to the Facebook group's having the largest number of members and therefore an increased tendency to be *"chaotic."*

The nuisance behaviors plaguing the PATAS and FF online channels, most particularly their Facebook groups, are the same.

Garrick named spamming as one of the common punishable practices on the online channels, especially on Facebook. He defined spam as unrelated content posted in rapid succession, usually in the form of unsolicited advertising by multilevel marketing companies like the Supreme Wealth Alliance. Tess mentioned that such spammers are also present on the PATAS Facebook group, but added that administrators of the website are also wary of spam posted by spambots, automated programs that create spam posts.

Aside from spammers, people who become antagonistic are also liable to be sanctioned and even banned. In the case of PATAS, Thomas mentioned that forum members understand that personally bashing and threatening other members is against the rules. The rules for the forum are posted on the website, with one guideline urging participants to "label [their] tolerance for abusive comments" to help gauge the gravity of offenses, as well as to not "say online what you wouldn't say in person" (PATAS, 2011). However, if a member becomes a victim of such offenses, Thomas explained that he or

she may file a complaint for administrators to take action against the violator, though this option is not specified in the Facebook forum and website forum rules. Members can file complaints by taking screenshots and sending these to the administrator of the group as evidence of the incident. Administrators would then deliberate on what action to be taken against the violator. Thomas stressed the importance of reporting violations or complaints to group administrators so that appropriate action can be taken. *"If there's no complaint, then nobody will know,"* he said.

PATAS also takes a strong stance against the practice of trolling, which is defined in its guidelines as refusing to respond to posts and arguments as well as spamming and repeated proselytizing. To prevent trolling, members are only allowed to make a maximum of two posts per hour. Members are also urged to provide give constructive criticism supported by evidence.

Regulation of the subject matter discussed in the content is an issue, according to Tess, because it concerns the alignment of content with the original objectives of the community. Though people are free to make posts about any topic, the posting of memes (see Figure 8) is discouraged if these end up derailing discussions or flooding comment threads. Administrators exercise minimal moderation, but intervene when they notice any inappropriate behavior. Some administrators also actively try to redirect conversations and improve the quality of discussions, especially if the topic has strayed from relevance, by commenting on the posts themselves, though members are already urged to do this. For people whose behavior violates the guidelines, administrators give a warning for the first offense and may ban the person for 24 hours if they commit a second offense.

Figure 8. *A meme published as a comment in response to a post on the PATAS Facebook*

group

Though moderators at times exercise their authority to remove inappropriate and irrelevant content and ban offending users, both Red and Tess would prefer to keep regulation of participants' activity and interactions to a minimum to preserve the spirit of the communities as venues for freethought and self-expression. Instead, Red said that FF simply urges its members to argue in good faith and act *"charitably."* Both communities rely on their members' knowledge of and willingness to follow standards of good conduct on the Internet.

Red also believes that individuals, acting out of their own innate self-interest, will gravitate towards other participants with whom they get along, and avoid interacting with those whose behaviors or opinions conflict with theirs. With this belief in a sense of order coming from an assumed degree of accountability on the part of the participants, the rules for interaction in both communities act more as shields for victims once offenses have been committed and guidelines for deciding on proper action to be taken regarding violations.

d. The importance of extending community presence beyond online channels

Place is one attribute of online communities identified by Porter (2004) which points to the extent of technology mediation of interaction in online communities. The term has both structural and socio-psychological implications. Place may refer to a bounded physical location as well as a sense of shared values resulting from interaction among members (Porter, 2004). With regard to physical location, Porter (2004) conceptualizes the place attribute on two levels: (1) hybrid, or existing in both physical and virtual (i.e. technologically mediated) space; and (2) virtual, never existing in physical space but only in virtual space.

As clearly shown by the analysis, both FF and PATAS are hybrid communities. The Internet has served the communities well as a medium for facilitating their reach across vast geographical territories, allowing them to engage persons living outside of the Philippines as part of their audience as well as to contact foreign groups and personalities for a variety of purposes. For FF, these purposes include the promotion of community events such as film festivals and the Excommunication Party. They have also benefitted in the donation of material such as texts and videos from international media owners like Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, who in turn, sometimes share FF's material, like footage of UPLB students handing out bibles on campus, on their own online channels. *"We had them share that to their communities and we got some traction from that,"* added Garrick. FF also appeals to the international community for donations during calamities in various ways, such as through their *Conversations for a Cause* video series, which he said is not only aimed at Filipino audiences but also at foreign viewers.

Similarly, PATAS has managed to engage international organizations and communities for support largely through online means. The community is officially affiliated with international organizations, namely the Atheist Alliance International (AAI), International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), the Institute for Science and Human Values (ISHV), and American Atheists, among others. The community is also loosely affiliated with American groups with specific geographic or racial attributes such as the New York Atheists and the Black Non-Believers. According to Tess, these relations with American organizations are primarily the result of the efforts of PATAS founder and former chairperson Marissa Langseth. In Europe, PATAS has ties with the German Humanists. Thomas is also working on establishing relations with the Belgian Humanists.

Within the Philippines, the communities' use of the Internet as a medium for engaging audiences across immense physical distances has led to the existence of different regional chapters for both FF and PATAS. According to Tess and Thomas, PATAS' active chapters outside of Manila are located in Cebu, Davao, and Bicol; meanwhile, those of FF are in Los Baños and in Davao.

Though chapters of PATAS and FF have flourished in these areas, the analysis revealed that physical distance still affects overall community cohesion, especially when communication between chapters of the community to the Metro Manila chapter becomes strained. Thomas reported that the Cebu chapter of PATAS has split off from the PATAS community and created a new group, which he attributed to a lack of coordination with the main PATAS body in Manila. Garrick, as affiliations director of FF, said that he strives to avoid the different chapters of FF from becoming inactive or separating from

the community by keeping tabs on their activities and constantly communicating with them online, particularly giving suggestions and ideas on projects and urging chapter officers to increase efforts for chapters to be more active both online and offline.

When provincial chapters outside of Metro Manila fail to keep in touch with the main Metro Manila chapter through the Internet, chapters' separation from the main body of the community is likely, as in the case of the Cebu chapter of PATAS. Perhaps contact through the Internet does not suffice on the community level to sustain relations between provincial chapters and the main Metro Manila chapters. The lack of physical contact in offline settings with Metro Manila-based members may have contributed to the weakness of inter-chapter ties.

These conditions also make cessation of chapter activity likely, though these may be due to other influences such as how chapters are managed by their own officers and personal factors affecting the participation of chapter members.

On an interpersonal level, having offline activities has significant advantages for fostering a sense of community that restricting activity to online channels do not. According to Red, this is due to the increased respect that people tend to give each other when interacting face-to-face, which he attributes to *mirror neurons*, features of the human nervous system that make individuals capable of feeling sympathy or empathy towards people they see. *"It makes people pro-social instead of anti-social, which is something that online interactions promote because you're talking with a keyboard to a monitor, and you become someone you're not,"* he explained, convinced that offline activities result in more meaningful interactions and community achievements.

This is consistent with findings in the related literature, which suggests that participation in online communities is also motivated by pro-social behaviors, particularly making friends (Wasko & Faraj, 2000, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). In the context of online communities, it is important to note that friendship differs from social support in that friendship is characterized by valuing each other's company, unlike social support which deals with seeking and giving emotional help (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). As with seeking social support, the structure of the Internet makes it a useful medium for finding others in similar situations or shared interests, especially if the interest is uncommon (Igbaria, 1999, Wellman & Gulia, 1999a, in Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Likewise, the interactive features of community channels (namely forums and comment sections, in the cases of FF and PATAS), according to Ridings and Gefen (2004), promote the establishment and continuation of friendships.

In the case of FF, Red mentioned that because offline activities entail personal interaction and coordination among members, friendships would form and be reinforced over tasks such as making props for a demonstration. Friendships (as well as romantic and sexual relationships) also resulted from being in each other's company for meet-ups, rallies, forums, and other events.

Meanwhile, Thomas said that PATAS' offline activities, particularly the regular meet-ups, are educational or advocacy-oriented as well as social in nature. Meet-ups consist of members' introductions, presentations on chosen topics, some entertainment, community announcements, and then drinks afterwards. FF's meet-ups are also composed of similar activities, namely group discussions and sometimes lectures by selected speakers, followed by post-meet-up dinner and drinks.

PATAS has also held purely social gatherings such as the Grand PATAS Meet-up and the annual Cheers To Reason Year-Ender Party, which they have been celebrating for the past two years. For this study, the researcher observed the most recent Cheers To Reason Year-Ender Party, which was held on the evening of Saturday, December 14, 2013 at GENRE Bar and Restaurant in Cubao Expo, Quezon City. This location was chosen because PATAS officers regularly hold meetings in this area.

As the last community offline activity for 2013, the event was held to mark the end of another year by celebrating reason, secularism, and camaraderie instead of Christmas. An entrance fee of 150 pesos was charged and entitled attendees to one free alcoholic drink each; proceeds of the event were donated to aid the victims of Typhoon Yolanda. Attended by over 100 members and non-members of PATAS, the party was casual and lively. The atmosphere of the venue featured loud music, dimmed lighting except for colored lights, and a stage with a band setup though there was no band to perform. Smoking was allowed. Loud chatter, boisterous laughter, or speech, and cheerful exclamations and shouting characterized the attendees. People mingled and had conversations over food and drinks, some even greeting each other by kissing each other on the cheek. There was no structured program or line-up of activities, though there were games, particularly a Bring Me game and a trivia game about PATAS and pop culture, with plane tickets as the prize, a speech delivered by Thomas, announcements, jokes, and impromptu performances of disco songs by PRO Regie Pasion for the entertainment of the crowd.

Such events clearly have a positive effect on relations among members of the community by providing an opportunity for members to get to know each other not just

as co-workers or comrades in advocacy, but to gain a better understanding of one another as all-around individuals that may lead to friendships.

Friendships, in turn, compel members to contribute more to the work of the community. According to Garrick, most regular members participate not just out of sheer belief in the ideals of the community, but also because they have become friends with each other through online or offline interactions. Emotional investment and the sense of kinship or *"feeling [that] they owe it to each other because they're friends"* are an important motivation of these members for doing tasks for the community.

This overall mix of socialization and education that orients the offline activities of both PATAS and FF generally aids in the communities' productivity. Socializing results in personal relationships that boost members' morale in working for the communities' advocacies. The emotional implications of personal relationships, such as friendships and even romances that form between members increase members' propensity for cooperation. Red noted that cooperation has a positive effect on members' productivity, particularly by helping to prevent burnout and fatigue as tasks and responsibilities are distributed. Those who choose to participate in the activist efforts of the group end up being *"more than just friends,"* but can also consider themselves *"comrades in advocacy and activism."*

e. Online communities: A symptom or a cause?

A question which informants from both PATAS and FF cannot certainly answer regarding the impact of their online communities on individuals and society is whether or not PATAS and FF are influencers of social change, or indicators of it. Other questions raised are about whether these communities have persuaded people to adopt certain ideas

or simply convinced them to show acceptance or tolerance for such ideas, and also whether the community has succeeded in actually converting people or just encouraged those with pre-dispositions.

Both Thomas and Tess are unsure of the degree to which the community has successfully influenced opinion and promoted its advocacies, but Tess claimed that thanks to PATAS' efforts, *"people no longer flinch at the word atheism."* She said that this is evident in interactions both offline and online that she herself has experienced or witnessed.

Speaking specifically about RH and LGBT advocacies, Sunny said that certain groups have a greater impact in convincing people to support the RH law because RH is their main advocacy. However, he argued that PATAS could be considered a forerunner in advocating LGBT rights because, aside from leading in the use of attention-getting theatrics during the pride marches, he claimed that PATAS was among the first to emphasize the potential of heterosexual support to counter homophobia and convince more people to support LGBT rights. He said that by assigning a heterosexual representative to give media interviews during pro-LGBT events, the community has succeeded in gaining the acceptance and support of straight people for the advocacy.

Aside from his impression of the Philippines as a conducive setting for the start of an Asian atheist movement, Thomas also said that the format of PATAS as a discussion group is effective because it provides a much-needed sense of community for Filipino atheists and individuals who are doubting their religious beliefs, as they tend to feel alone or lost in the midst of family, friends, and work contacts who remain religious.

"Community is very important here in the Philippines," he explained. *"Everything is community here."*

Meanwhile, through FF's online content and various offline activities, Red considers secularism to be the issue that the community has most successfully brought to people's attention. Sophia confirmed this, referring to the fact that FF owns *"like 5 bishop hats"* and regularly succeed in attracting media coverage (and the curiosity of bystanders) due to efforts such as wearing costumes and creating props for rallies. She also added that the community has effectively leveraged its online channels in promoting secularism. According to Red, this is reflected in the way people have come to discuss issues through the comments section on the website and Facebook page, discussions on the Facebook group, as well as during meet-ups.

> What we can observe is we have changed the way that people talk. People are more aware of secularism now. We've observed people making more arguments based on secularism. Even if they're not on board with this whole secularism project, they attack it. Even the virtue of people attacking secularism is a good thing because it's in the discussion. (R. Tani, personal communication, December 9, 2013)

Garrick added that people recognize how a strong advocacy for secularism contributes to the community's *"particular unique framework"* in communicating about certain issues, which is foreign to some. *"You can see that in the comments section. They find some of our ideas bizarre and laughable, but some also find it enlightening and informative at the very least,"* he said.

With regard to the community's effectiveness in influencing opinion, Red cited mostly anecdotal evidence:

> Some religious people join FF quite religious or bigoted in their views and then change their minds. Some people join us as homophobes and then change. Some people join us without any regard for political correctness in terms of speaking about gay people or women, and then they are. Several of those have happened. (R. Tani, personal communication, December 9, 2013)

Red explained that even if the community has had varying degrees of success when it comes to convincing individuals to adopt a particular stance on an issue, he believes that FF influences the way people form and defend their opinions in accordance with the community's ideals of rationality, freethought, and acceptance of different perspectives. He reported that on a face-to-face level, particularly during meet-ups, participants become better at arguing without resorting to shouting at each other, and that they've become more open-minded and less hostile towards people who don't share their opinions and ideas.

Regarding society in general, Red believes that FF's efforts contribute to the progress of public discourse on several issues. He said that many people, when viewing the range of opinions in Philippine society, subscribe to the fallacy of the false middle, in which there are two extremes and the middle is seen as correct or normal. *"Just by existing, I think we already push the boundaries a bit,"* he explained. *"By pushing the boundaries of the progressive dialogue, you move the middle towards the progressive as well, so you help the discourse."*

Garrick is less sure of FF's impact in promoting secularism as an influence on people's opinions, calling it *"a chicken and egg thing."* He questioned FF's role as an influencer or an indicator in what he observed to be an improving awareness of secularism in Philippine society. Instances when news outlets such as GMA News or the Inquirer publish articles criticizing encroachments of secularism without any apparent influence from FF seem to reinforce the notion that the public is indeed becoming more conscious of secularism independent of FF's efforts. Despite the uncertainty, Garrick said that he likes to believe that if FF *"didn't get the ball rolling,"* the community is at least *"nudging it."*

Garrick said that he also has reservations about saying whether the community has actually changed people's minds regarding unconventional ideas, or simply *"given the impression that it's okay to have these ideas."* For members of the FF core group, it's difficult to determine the extent to which the community has convinced people to support non-traditional views, such as there being no god, or helped to promote tolerance for such notions rather than belief in them. There is also the question of whether FF has actually converted people to adopt certain stances, or simply encouraged those who were already predisposed, though both Garrick and Red reported witnessing people declaring online that they've changed their minds about certain issues. However, Garrick said that the community is more concerned with influencing the way people think about issues, and, as Red mentioned earlier, not necessarily the conclusions they arrive at. *"People changing their minds isn't the goal, but it's a nice goal,"* Garrick explained. *"If we can get them to agree with us, I like that."*

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A. SUMMARY

FF and PATAS were both established out of the need of certain people who had parted from prevailing traditional Filipino beliefs to meet people of similar orientations and discuss shared advocacies—initially, freethought for FF and atheism for PATAS—as well as related issues such as RH and LGBT rights. PATAS grew out of FF, adopting the specific advocacy of promoting the acceptance and understanding of atheism. Both communities are heavily influenced by a propensity towards atheism and consequentially, secularism.

Participants of the communities tend to be between the ages of 18 and 40 years old, with the most active members being 18-25 years old for PATAS and 25-35 years old for FF. They are geographically concentrated in Metro Manila. Outside Manila, the most active chapters of FF are in Los Baños and Davao, while those of PATAS are located in Cebu, Davao, and Bicol.

Majority of members belong to the middle class, and are either students or professionals in various fields. Many have obtained at least high school and college degrees. These characteristics, along with the nature of these communities as being online (implying the need for constant Internet access, which is still a privilege of the middle and upper classes in the country) as well as the tendency to conduct community activities in English, have led to impressions of participation in FF and PATAS as being a largely middle-class preoccupation. However, both communities have plans to address these in the future through more specific activities aimed at engaging less privileged members of society.

FF and PATAS originated from online communities using the mailing list format that was popular at the time but inconvenient for users. Communities must exist on multiple platforms that serve differing purposes in order to be considered rich media for social action and for attaining the social influence that they intend to exert.

At present, both FF and PATAS make use of similar online platforms. Websites are generally for controlled content published by designated officers of the community, to which people can publicly react through comments (though for PATAS, comments are subject to approval). The websites exist to give outsiders the impression of a formal and credible organization and have mechanisms for accepting donations related to the communities' causes.

The community Facebook pages serve as a welcome banner and also a fan page for users who encounter the community on social media, as implied by the feature that displays the number of likes that a community has garnered. Like the website, it publishes controlled content, but people can give feedback through comments, sharing posts (which they may do with or without adding their own commentary), or sending a private message to the page moderator.

The Facebook groups act as a general forum for both communities and host the most interactions among the largest number of participants, compared to other online platforms of the communities. The diverse forms of content (text, images, video, audio) can be generated by any member of the group from any source and is loosely moderated by a group of administrators according to set rules and guidelines.

The Twitter pages are usually for mirroring posts on the community websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube pages, though content from sources external to the

website may also shared by Twitter administrators as links. Content that originates from the Twitter page, such as quotes or images, are also published. Individuals can participate in community activity through Twitter by tweeting responses to content from the communities' Twitter pages or retweeting these on their personal Twitter accounts.

The YouTube channels are for a specific type of content: video or audio podcasts and other content in video form such as documentation of past events, short informative videos, advocacy videos, etc. For PATAS, individuals are free to interact or give feedback to the community through the comments section. However, this feature is disabled on the FF channel; a link to a mirrored post on the website is sometimes provided in order to direct responses to that post instead.

Functional attributes of the platforms, as well as structural features that govern these platforms, influence the form and subject matter of content posted. Functions that enable easy joining and the ability to publish nearly any form of content (a power that is not limited to community administrators), coupled with lenient rules for interaction and few limits on the subject matter allowed for posting, unsurprisingly leads to a variety of content and communicative behaviors by a large number of participants. Content, both officially and unofficially published, determines whether or not audiences will be engaged to consume content and participate in discussions. Many remain silent spectators, while others exhibit undesirable behaviors that are subject to moderation. However, in line with community ideals of freedom of speech and acceptance, participants are still free to post about any topic.

Popularity of channels for interaction is influenced by usability and sociability. Facebook is the most preferred online channel for interaction owing to its high degree of

usability, which in turn results in a favorable degree of sociability. The sociability aspect of such channels is characterized by participants' ability to engage each other on a wide variety of topics and concerns, some of which pertain to social issues or concepts and others being personal in nature. However, the quantity of content and number of participants and interactions, particularly in the Facebook group, compromises the quality of online content, specifically when participants exhibit undesirable behaviors or make irrelevant or mundane posts.

In short, the choice of community platforms used and the activeness of these are key in shaping community activity and interactions among participants.

The popularity of Facebook poses a challenge to directing traffic to other online channels, despite Facebook features that enable linking of posts from other community channels. However, PATAS and FF directors are exploring the possibilities of maximizing their communities' use of Facebook to boost traffic to other channels, particularly the website.

Discussions are a popular activity for community participants online because social media, particularly Facebook, are conducive to these. The prevalence of quickly composed and brief messages on Facebook has also resulted in an audience that is less inclined to read lengthy compositions such as essays. In order to keep up with such preferences of members, FF has taken steps to tailor its online content to a more discussion-based format, particularly with the podcasts.

The communities' socio-political orientations also influence community content and activity, particularly by promoting open-mindedness among members and encouraging different perspectives. Among members of the community, there are no

dominant social and political orientations or ideologies, though many tend to be liberal in their beliefs. The inclusivity that characterizes both communities as media for individuals to convey varied opinions and exchange ideas encourages the expression of multiple viewpoints on any topic, often spurring debates among members on online channels as well as during offline activities such as meet-ups. However, marked similarities in the hobbies and interests of the most active members poses an issue of diversity regarding participants in the communities, particularly FF, which may result in other members' inability to relate. Groupthink may also become an issue, leading to behaviors such as collective bashing that seem to undermine the very principles of open-mindedness and rationality that both FF and PATAS claim to champion.

Offline activities are more difficult to engage in because doing so requires more resources than participating online. Community functions, projects, and activities are propelled by people contributing what they can, which, in addition to the lack of a formal financial system and in FF's case a formal membership structure, has led to an informal volunteer structure to emerge in both communities. Attempts to implement more formal policies, such as membership fees in the case of PATAS, are generally unsuccessful and up for revision. It can be speculated that this volunteer culture, while limiting the productivity of the communities, implies that contributions made are more meaningful and sincere on the part of volunteers.

Extending the online activity of such communities by creating opportunities for offline interaction among participants is also important for fostering pro-social behaviors and relationships that strengthen members' motivation to contribute to the communities' advocacy work.

Online content and offline activities of these communities are a mix of socialization (camaraderie), education (applying critical thinking and promoting certain advocacies), and discussion (discourse involving tolerance of viewpoints). It is difficult to gauge the impact of the community's activities on society in general, but effects on individuals and on the community are apparent through observation of interaction (both online and offline) as well as anecdotal evidence. However, questions that are difficult to answer arise, such as whether the community has indeed succeeded in dramatically influencing individuals or only encouraged those who are already predisposed, and whether online communities like FF and PATAS are major causes of social change perceived today, or symptoms of it. The analysis shows that both options for answering each of these two questions are likely true to varying degrees and contribute to each other.

B. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the two case studies, online communities oriented towards critiquing and effecting social change are able to promote the formation of critical opinion and stimulate discourse on current issues in Philippine society through a varied mix of online and offline activities. Online interaction occurs on several platforms, which yields and is also influenced by a diversity of content in the forms of images, text, audio, and video. Meanwhile, offline activities serve to create and reinforce social and personal bonds among participants that cannot be achieved online. Communication among members in these online and offline settings constitute a form of social action that involves influencing individuals' interpretations, opinions, and ways of thinking about social issues according to the ideals of these communities. Such activity also motivates

members to continue contributing to the efforts of the community not just out of shared ideals but also through emotional investment in personal relationships that have been forged with other members as a result of prior interaction. Apart from participating online, members are also encouraged to join offline activities aligned with general community objectives as well as those in response to particular social issues.

VII. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. THEORETICAL ISSUES

Several results from the analysis confirm findings and conclusions reported in the review of related literature, such as Ridings and Geffen's (2004) motivational aspects for participating in online communities and Porter's (2004) five attributes of online communities, particularly with regard to the population attribute which describes patterns of interaction that depend on the size of the population.

With regard to the original framework of the study, the proposed influence of media dependency on the relationship between individuals and the online community were reinforced by the results of the analysis. However, the study may be lacking substantial illustrations of how the interaction between individuals and online community leads to the FCOD, which could not be obtained sufficiently through textual data, observation, and interview responses. This is due to a lack of methods or practices on the part of the community for tracking persons' individual activity on their personal social media pages (which is important for gaining insight in instances when individuals do not participate on the online platforms of the community but share content from these platforms on their personal pages), measuring and documenting changes in participants' opinion and values, as well as determining the degrees to which members' are inclined to specific orientations in the first place.

The three theoretical approaches applied in the analysis of the online community, namely media richness model, participatory communication models, and activity theory, were able to yield insights on various specific aspects of the online community. However, such insights present only a clearly limited view of phenomena pertaining to these

aspects. Deeper inquiry, using a larger number of related theories that may be drawn from sociocultural and technology-led theory clusters and perspectives, is recommended in order to probe these insights for a more thorough understanding of each specific aspect.

B. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The choice of key informant interviews as the research method from which the bulk of data for analysis may have contributed to the theoretical issue of the study's weakness in explicating how the interaction between individual involvement and online community leads to FCOD. Though the interviews provided a wealth of data regarding the inner workings of the online community from the perspective of a community authority, the impact of online community participation on FCOD may instead be examined with greater detail by conducting a formal survey of members to support the qualitative insights supplied by key informant interviews with standardized and quantifiable data.

The methodological limitations of this study render it more appropriate as a pilot study that highlights certain aspects and issues in the subject of socio-politically oriented Filipino online communities, and Filipino online communities in general, which may be the focus of future research endeavors. Future case studies that may be conducted on particular online communities with the objective of describing or explaining the social impact of such communities may benefit from approaches that combine qualitative aspects with quantitative components in order to arrive at conclusions that are more detailed as well as more objective to enable easier comparison of results between cases and consolidation of findings from each case into conclusions that may be applied to more than one case.

C. PRACTICAL ISSUES

The findings of the study may be applied to identify ways through which the effectiveness of online communities can be improved as media for social activism. For instance, the categories of individuals' relations to the online community suggested by the researcher may be used by directors of online communities interested in functioning more as an organization (like PATAS and FF) to create a system of membership that involves a remuneration scheme based on members' contributions, as well as more feasible rules and regulations for participation and performance.

Meanwhile, the findings that emphasize the stronger appeal of conversations as opposed to compositions as a result of preferences and behaviors acquired from the use of certain technologies (namely, social media) may be considered in future studies for any of the following possible purposes: predicting new forms of content by online communities; exploring people's changing patterns in consuming content by online communities; and analyzing the dynamics of interaction among individuals collaborating on the production of official community content. This knowledge may also be applied by directors of online communities who wish to come up with viable new approaches and methods to creating and presenting content both online and offline in order to influence public opinion and advance their advocacies, as well as discovering new opportunities for further integrating online communities to traditional communities and life in physical settings where discussions and conversations on social issues are also urgently needed.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. *Participant observation guide*

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION GUIDE

ONLINE COMMUNITY:			
NAME OF EVENT/ ACTIVITY:			
VENUE:			
DATE:		START TIME:	
		END TIME:	

A. SETTING
(1) Describe in detail the place in which the event/activity is being held.
  - **Where is it located?**
  - **What type of venue is it?**
  - **Describe artifacts in the venue.**
  - **How many people can the venue accommodate?**
  - **Is the venue of historical, social, or political significance?**
  - **Has it been used by the community before? For what activity?**
  - **Why was this place chosen for this activity?**
(2) Describe the day(s) in which the event/activity is being held.
  - **Weekend/weekday?**
  - **Why was this day selected?**
  - **Is the chosen day for the activity of historical, social, or political significance?**
(3) Describe the time during which the event/activity is being held.
  - **What time is the event supposed to start and end?**
  - **Why was the activity scheduled at this time?**
  - **Was the original time schedule followed? If not, why?**
(4) If needed, did the community secure a permit for the activity to be held in this time and place? Explain.
(5) Describe the atmosphere of the event.

B. CONTEXT
(1) Is the activity regularly conducted by the community?
  - **If yes, what are the reasons for this?**
  - **If the activity is not conducted regularly but has been done before, why?**
(2) What past events, circumstances, or current issues necessitated the activity?
  - **External to the community**
  - **Internal to the community**
(3) What current issues or circumstances have an impact on the conduct of the activity?

- **External to the community**
- **Internal to the community**

C. NATURE OF THE EVENT – Note the following:
(1) Rationale and objectives
(2) Number of attendees
- **Expected turnout**
- **Actual turnout**
(3) Program/agenda/line-up of activities
- **Planned**
- **Actual**
(4) Theme of the event (if any)
(5) Formalities, protocols, rules to be followed during the activities (including prescribed attire, if any)
- **Why are these in place?**
(6) Alignment of the activity to community purposes and objectives

D. ACTORS
- **How many attendees (including organizers) are there?**
- **Who are the organizers of the event/activity?**
  - **Who appears to be the leader?**
  - **How is his/her leadership manifested?**
  - **How were the tasks assigned?**
- **Who are the facilitators of the event/activity?**
  - **What were their tasks/roles?**
- **Who are the participants/attendees?**
  - **Describe their relationships to the community.**
    - **Members**
    - **Non-members (media, students, etc.)**
  - **What are their relationships to the rationale of the event?**
- **Who else was present at the event but not necessarily participating or intended to be part of the audience?**
- **What were the actors doing?**
- **What are the actors wearing?**
- **Describe the actors' demeanor.**
- **Who initiates discussions/interaction?**
- **What emotions are the actors showing?**

E. COMMUNICATION/INTERACTION
- **What topics are being brought up during the activity?**
- **Describe the actors' behaviors and expressions with regard to these topics?**
  - **Verbal**
  - **Non-verbal**
- **What are the actors' relationships to these topics?**
- **What language are the actors using?**

- **For what purposes are the actors communicating? (To inform, to persuade, to coordinate activity, to negotiate meaning, etc.)**
- **Describe how the actors' behaviors cause them to affect:**
  - o **Fellow actors**
  - o **Themselves (as a consequence of interacting with other actors)**
  - o **The progress of the activity**

Appendix B. *Interview guide for community administrators*

FOCUS INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE 1: COMMUNITY ADMINISTRATOR

Name of Informant:			
Online Community:		Date of Interview:	

Instructions: Have informant accomplish personal information sheet before proceeding to the interview.

PART I: THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

A. Background Information
(1) How would you describe the nature of your online community?

(2) How would you describe the social and political orientation of the community?

(3) At present, what are the purposes and objectives of the community?

(4) Tell me about how the community was established. (Persons involved, social and technological context, initial issues and breakthroughs, etc.)

(5) What were the turning points or any notable occurrences in the community's history? (E.g. changes in technological platforms, expansion of membership base, shifts in administration, historical events that your community participated in, etc.)

B. Structural and Functional Attributes
(1) Structural - What rules set by the administration are members expected to comply with regarding community interaction?

(2) Structural - Besides the formal rules you just mentioned, have any informal rules or norms emerged? What are they?

(3) Structural - Is there a hierarchy or division of tasks among members within the community? (Other administrators, officers, etc.) **If yes, please describe.**

(4) Structural - How have these rules, norms, and roles shaped the community?

(5) Functional – What online platforms (websites, social media) does the community make use of?

a. Are any of these supported by mobile apps specifically designed for your community? How does having a supporting mobile app affect the online activities of the community?

(5) Functional - Among these platforms, which publishes the most content from your members or contributors? Why?

(6) Functional - Among these platforms, which receives the most feedback? (Feedback = comments, link-backs or social media shares, "Likes," "Retweets," "Favorites," etc.) **Why?**

b. What mechanisms contribute to feedback and interaction among members and visitors?

a. Who are the sources of feedback?

(7) Functional - Among these platforms, which best facilitates interaction among members? Why?

(8) Functional – What are the benefits and shortcomings of the community's current technological platforms?

<u>C. Online Content</u>
(1) Describe the content on the main community website.

a. Content published by community administrators, regular contributors, and members

b. Response to such content from members and non-members (Where/how do people respond?)

(2) Describe the content on the community's social media pages.

a. Content published by community administrators, regular contributors, and members
1. Author
2. Subject matter (issues, concepts, ideologies, etc.)
3. Forms (articles, videos, infographics, etc.)
4. Intended audience
5. Purposes/intention
6. Approach or style of communication (critical, humorous, persuasive, etc.)

b. Response to such content from members and non-members (Where/how do people respond?)

c. Content published in external sources but shared on community social media
1. Author
2. Subject matter (issues, concepts, ideologies, etc.)
3. Reasons for sharing

4. Relevance to community purposes and objectives

d. Response to such content from members and non-members (Where/how do people respond?)

(3) How aligned are the content on community online channels to community purposes and objectives?

D. Offline Activities
(1) What kinds of offline activities or events does your community initiate or participate in? Why?

(2) What specific offline projects and activities has the community pursued or is pursuing at present? Why?

a. What specific community objectives do these address?

b. What social issues do these address?

(3) Among the community members, who decides what projects to pursue and how activities are organized?

(4) How have these activities affected the nature of the community and interaction among its members?

(5) How aligned are these offline activities and endeavors to community purposes and objectives?

E. Members
(1) How would you describe the different members of the community in terms of the following:

a. Socio-economic characteristics (age, occupation, socio-economic class, educational attainment, geographical location, sex, sexual orientation/gender)

b. Social and political orientations

c. Length of time participating in the online community

d. Intensity of participation in the online community

(2) What are members' motives for participating in the community?

(3) What other media do the different members of the community use to get information about and respond to social issues?

F. Social Issues
(1) In general, describe the community's stand on the ff. social issues:
a. For Filipino Freethinkers – [*Religion and Secularism*] **The Catholic Church's involvement in political affairs,** [*Sex*] **the struggle for sexual freedom (LGBT) and reproductive health rights,** [*Politics*] **corrupt practices in the government**

b. For PATAS – [*Politics*] **The Church's involvement in political affairs,** [*Religion and Secularism*] **morality in terms of being religious and atheist/agnostic,** [*Sex*] **the struggle for sexual freedom (LGBT) and reproductive health rights**

G. Affiliates and Collaborators
(1) What groups or individuals are you affiliated with? Why?

(2) What specific social issues or causes do you aim to address or have tried to address through partnerships and collaborations?

a. What are the outcomes of these joint efforts?

(3) How do partnerships and collaborations with external groups and individuals affect interaction within the community?

H. Predictions
(1) How do you see the community in the next 3-5 years? In 6-10 years?

(2) How do you think the community will appropriate and adapt to new and emerging communication technologies?

PART II: THE INFORMANT (Community Administrator)
A. Socio-demographic Information
(1) How do you think your socio-demographic characteristics affect your participation in the community and role as an administrator?

(2) What past occupations, places of residence, and other background experiences do you think have an influence on your role and experience as a community administrator?

B. Community Participation
(1) How long have you been a member of the community? An administrator of the community?

(2) (If not a founding member) **How did you find out about the community?**

(3) (If not a founding member) **Why did you join the community?**

(4) Narrate descriptively your experience as a community member.

a. How was your experience as a member prior to becoming an administrator?

b. How did you become an administrator of the community?

c. What problems and notable occurrences have you experienced as a member and administrator of the community?

d. Was there ever a period that you were inactive or minimized your participation? Why?

(5) How intense is your participation in the community as an administrator? (How often do you perform your tasks? How much of your time do you devote to community activity? How involved are you in online and offline projects or activities? Where do your administrative duties rank among your priorities? Do you like being an administrator?)

(6) What motivates you to continue participating in the community?

<u>C. Social and Political Orientations</u>
(1) How would you describe your current social and political orientation?

(2) What changes have you undergone in terms of these orientations since joining the community?

(3) How does your participation in the community influence your socio-political orientations?

<u>D. Perceptions and Opinions on Social Issues</u>
(1) What is your opinion on the following issues:

a. For Filipino Freethinkers – [*Religion and Secularism*] **The Catholic Church's involvement in political affairs,** [*Sex*] **the struggle for sexual freedom (LGBT) and reproductive health rights,** [*Politics*] **corrupt practices in the government**

b. For PATAS – [*Politics*] **The Church's involvement in political affairs,** [*Religion and Secularism*] **morality in terms of being religious and atheist/agnostic,** [*Sex*] **the struggle for sexual freedom (LGBT) and reproductive health rights**

<u>E. Response to Social Issues</u>
(1) How do you respond to social issues?

a. Online

b. Offline

(2) Are you or have you been involved in any political or social action not initiated by the community? (E.g. joining or organizing rallies, campaigns, relief efforts, educational seminars, etc.)

a. What are these and what issues do they pertain to?

b. How often do you participate in these?

(3) How has your participation in the community influenced your involvement in political and social action?

<u>F. Evaluation of the Self as a Community Administrator</u>
(1) What is/are your most significant contribution(s) to the community as an administrator?

(2) What are things that you wish you could have done differently or improved on as an administrator?

(3) What have you learned from your experience being a community administrator?

(4) What are the most significant ways in which your involvement in the online community has impacted you as a member of Filipino society?

<u>G. Evaluation of the Online Community</u>
(1) How well do you think the online community has achieved its purposes and objectives? Why do you say so?

(2) What do you think is the impact of the online community on Filipino society with regard to:

a. Disseminating information

b. Publicizing and emphasizing certain issues

c. Influencing opinion and promoting advocacies

d. Mobilizing support for offline social action such as rallies, demonstrations, etc.

Appendix C. *Interview guide for regular community members*

FOCUS INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE 2: REGULAR MEMBER

Name of Informant:			
Online Community:		**Date of Interview:**	

Instructions: Have informant accomplish personal information sheet before proceeding to the interview.

<u>A. Personal Background</u>
(1) How do you think your socio-demographic characteristics affect your participation in the community?

(2) What past occupations, places of residence, and other background experiences do you think have an influence on your participation and experience as a community member?

<u>B. Community Participation</u>
(1) How long have you been a member of the community?

(2) (If not a founding member) **How did you find out about the community?**

(3) (If not a founding member) **Why did you join the community?**

(4) Narrate descriptively your experience as a community member.

a. Are you a registered member?
(If no, what is preventing you from becoming a registered member?)
(If PATAS, how would you justify the membership fee?)

b. Do you have any specific roles, responsibilities, or positions as a member of the community? How has this affected your participation in the community?

c. What problems and notable occurrences have you experienced as a member of the community?

d. Was there ever a period that you were inactive or minimized your participation? Why?

(5) How intense is your participation in the community? (How often do you check online content and participate in offline activities? How much of your time do you devote to community activity? How involved are you in online and offline projects or activities? Do you like being a member?)

(6) What motivates you to continue participating in the community?

<u>C. Social and Political Orientations</u>
(1) How would you describe your current social and political orientation?

(2) What changes have you undergone in terms of these orientations since joining the community?

(3) How does your participation in the community influence your socio-political orientations?

<u>D. Perceptions and Opinions on Social Issues</u>
(1) What is your opinion on the following issues:

a. For Filipino Freethinkers – [*Religion and Secularism*] **The Catholic Church's involvement in political affairs,** [*Sex*] **the struggle for sexual freedom (LGBT) and reproductive health rights,** [*Politics*] **corrupt practices in the government**

b. For PATAS – [*Politics*] **The Church's involvement in political affairs,** [*Religion and Secularism*] **morality in terms of being religious and atheist/agnostic,** [*Sex*] **the struggle for sexual freedom (LGBT) and reproductive health rights**

<u>E. Response to Social Issues</u>
(1) How do you respond to social issues?

a. Online

b. Offline

(2) Are you or have you been involved in any political or social action not initiated by the community? (E.g. joining or organizing rallies, campaigns, relief efforts, educational seminars, etc.)

a. What are these and what issues do they pertain to?

b. How often do you participate in these?

(3) How has your participation in the community influenced your involvement in political and social action?

<u>F. Evaluation of the Self as a Community Member</u>
(1) What is/are your most significant contribution(s) to the community as a member?

(2) Are there things that you wish you could have done differently or improved on with regard to being a member? If yes, what and why?

(3) What have you learned from your experience participating in the community?

(4) What are the most significant ways in which your experience of the online community has impacted you as a member of Filipino society?

<u>**G. Evaluation of the Online Community**</u>
(1) How well do you think the online community has achieved its purposes and objectives? Why do you say so?

(2) What do you think is the impact of the online community on Filipino society with regard to:

a. Disseminating information

b. Publicizing and emphasizing certain issues

c. Influencing opinion and promoting advocacies

d. Mobilizing support for offline social action such as rallies, demonstrations, etc.

Appendix D. *Textual analysis guide for web pages*

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS GUIDE 1: WEBSITE

ONLINE COMMUNITY:	
SITE URL:	

Instructions: Describe all components in detail. Always indicate date of collection when adding new data. Specify URLs of each unique page analyzed.

I. Landing Page
A. Community Introduction/Welcome Message
- **Is there a section with initial information about the community? Describe.**
B. Website Navigation
- **Is there a navigation feature (links to other sections of the website)?**
- **What sections are linked? Describe each.**
- **What labels are used?**
- **Do the links work?**
C. Page Design
- **Describe the design of the landing page and its implications on website viewing.**
- **Aspects to consider: color scheme, text layout, fonts, inclusion and arrangement of visual elements**
D. Published Content
- **Are these visible on the landing page?**
- **How are they arranged?**
- **What options are available for viewing published content?**
E. Promotional Sections (Describe each type, if present. Indicate if paid advertising or for community content, advocacies, etc.)
- **Links**
- **Buttons**
- **Banners**
- **Others**
F. Feedback Mechanisms
- **What mechanisms for posting feedback are accessible, if any? Describe each.**
- **Describe how to contact the site administrator.**
G. Social Media Links
- **What social media sites are linked, if any?**
- **What features of social media sites are incorporated into the webpage, if any?**
H. Search Bar
- **Indicate if present.**
I. Community Announcements

- **What features are dedicated to communicating about the projects, endeavors, and other relevant information from the community? Describe each.**

II. Content Pages
A. Organization
- **How are content pages sorted? (e.g. according to: most recently posted, most popular, most recently received feedback, etc.)**
- **What are the different sections of content?**

B. Page Design
- **Describe the design of each content page and its implications on website viewing.**
- **Aspects to consider: color scheme, text layout, fonts, inclusion and arrangement of visual elements**

C. Nature of Content
- **Describe. Indicate if promotions, announcements, commentaries, etc.**

D. Forms of Content
- **Describe if text, graphics, video, sound, etc.**

E. Feedback Mechanisms
- **What mechanisms for posting feedback are accessible, if any? Describe each.**

F. Social Media Support
- **What mechanisms allow the content to be shared on social media, if any? Describe each.**

III. Venues for Interaction – Enumerate and describe each specific feature around the website that enables interaction among members (such as forums, chat boxes, etc.)

IV. External Links – Enumerate and describe any external links integrated as features of the website. (Excludes links that appear on published content and feedback posts.)

V. Donations and Support – Enumerate and describe each specific feature that solicits support (e.g. buttons that ask for donations for the community).

Appendix E. *Textual analysis guide for social media and YouTube*

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS GUIDE 2: SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTUBE

ONLINE COMMUNITY:	
FACEBOOK PAGE URL:	
FACEBOOK GROUP URL:	
TWITTER URL:	
YOUTUBE URL:	

Instructions: Describe all components in detail. Always indicate date of collection when adding new data.

FACEBOOK

I. PAGE
A. Category – Indicate.
B. Description (below Category)
C. Number of Likes
D. About Section – Describe content.
E. Photos Section – Describe content.
F. Notes Section (if any) – Describe content.
G. Events
H. Content – Describe in terms of:
- **Sources of content (GRP webpages or external webpages)**
- **Types of content (Articles, photos, videos, etc.)**
- **Nature of content (Promotions, announcements, commentaries, etc.)**
- **Frequency of new posts**
- **Number of likes**
- **Number of shares**
- **Number of comments**
- **Nature of comments**

I. Integrated Features
- **Indicate form (buttons, links, forms, built-in applications, etc.) of each.**
- **Describe function or purpose of each.**
- **Indicate other social media features that are indicated or linked.**

II. GROUP
A. Name
B. Description
C. Privacy Setting (Open, Closed, Secret, etc.) – Indicate and describe each.
D. Number of Members
E. Administrators
F. Rules and Guidelines
G. Content – Describe in terms of:

- **"Pinned posts" – Indicate and describe each.**
- **Sources of content (GRP webpages or external webpages)**
- **Types of content – Describe according to:**
  - **Form (poll questions, articles, photos, videos, etc.)**
  - **Whether "linked" or "uploaded"**
    - **Linked – content shared to the group**
    - **Uploaded – content added to the group; categorized into:**
      - **Photos**
      - **Files**
      - **Events**
      - **Posts**
- **Nature of content (Promotions, announcements, commentaries, etc.)**
- **Frequency of new posts**

TWITTER

I. PROFILE – Indicate and describe the following:
A. Name
B. Description
C. Location
D. Links

II. NETWORK ACTIVITY
A. Followers – Specify number of followers and indicate notable followers.
B. Following – Specify number and describe nature of accounts being followed.
C. Favorites – Describe nature of favorite "tweets".
D. Lists – Specify and describe nature of lists to which the community subscribes or is a member of.
E. Retweets – Describe nature of retweets.

III. CONTENT
A. Tweets – Describe in terms of:
- **Sources of content (group webpages or external webpages)**
- **Types of content – Describe according to:**
  - **Form (text, photos, videos)**
  - **Whether "original", "quoted", "linked", or "retweeted"**
    - **Original – content originally posted to the Twitter account; original "tweets"**
    - **Quoted – content quoting a Tweet from another account**
    - **Linked – tweets containing links to content**
    - **Retweeted – tweets from other accounts tweeted again by the community account**
- **Nature of content (Promotions, announcements, commentaries, etc.)**
- **Frequency of tweets**

YOUTUBE

I. PROFILE (Home View)

A. Number of Subscribers:
775 (Jan 16, 2:34PM)

II. ABOUT – Describe in detail.

III. VIDEOS
A. Describe videos listed under each viewing option.
- **Uploads**
- **Playlists**
    - **Which playlist has the most videos?**
- **Events**
B. "Most Popular" Viewing Option
- **Which videos are most popular? Describe according to:**
    - **Topic/title**
    - **Number of views**
    - **Type/classification of video (see category)**
    - **Date posted**

IV. DISCUSSION – Describe the nature of the comments.

Appendix F. *Personal information sheet*

PERSONAL INFORMATION SHEET

Name of informant:	
Online community:	Date of FGD/interview:
Position in the community (if any):	
Age:	Gender/sexual orientation:
Area of residence:	
Occupation:	
Monthly income: (If not willing to give exact, please provide a range.)	Do you contribute any part of your income to the community as a member? Explain.
Educational attainment:	
Do you associate with any religion? If yes, what and why? If no, why not?	
What other media do you use to get information about and respond to social issues?	