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**ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF
SOCIAL REALITY ON DISASTER**

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ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY ON DISASTER

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Acceptance Page

This paper prepared by **JOSELEANOR MELLIZA MAGNO-MENDOZA** with the title: **“ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY ON DISASTER”** is hereby accepted by the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, U.P. Open University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree DOCTOR OF COMMUNICATION.

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Biographical Sketch

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She has co-authored textbooks such as *Purposive Communication: Bridging People through Language*, and *Headway: Read, Think, and Write* as well as published research papers in national and international peer-refereed journals. She has presented papers in local and international conferences, and facilitated seminars and workshops on business correspondence, technical writing, and advanced composition. Likewise, she is involved in university community extension services.

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Joseleanor Melliza Magno-Mendoza

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to

my mother, Eleanor Melliza Magno,

and

to my father, Jose Villoria Magno

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	i
University Permission Page	ii
Acceptance Page	iii
Biographical Sketch	iv
Acknowledgement	v
Dedication	vii
Table of Contents	viii
List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xii
Abstract	xiv
 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	 1
Background and Rationale of the Study	1
Research Questions	6
Objectives of the Study	6
Scope and Limitations	6
Significance of the Study	7
Definition of Terms	8
 CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	 10
Disaster and Disaster Communication	10
COVID-19 as a Disaster	14
Online Communication on Disaster	15
Communicators in Online Communication	23

Local Government	24
The Public	28
CHAPTER 3: FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY	32
Social Construction of Reality	32
CHAPTER 4: METHODS AND PROCEDURES	38
Research Approach	38
Qualitative Content Analysis	39
Thematic Analysis	40
Research Data	40
Data Collection	41
Data Analysis	42
Ethical Consideration	43
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	45
Online Communication	45
Local Government Unit's Online Communication	45
Public's Online communication	55
Disaster as revealed in Online Communication	91
Reality in Online Communication	95
How Reality is Socially Constructed in Online	
Communication through Social Media	98
CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION	109
Summary of Findings	110
Conclusion	111

Recommendation	114
Theoretical	114
Methodological	115
Practical	116
REFERENCES	118
APPENDICES	135
Appendix A. Transmittal Letter	136
Appendix B. Excerpt from the Key Informant	
Interview	137

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Facebook Profile Status of CT PIO and CT DRRMO	85
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Philippines' average time spent on media	20
Figure 2.	CTDRRMO Personnel Orientation on the outbreak	48
Figure 3.	Emergency meeting of the city council	49
Figure 4.	Four themes of the LGU's posts	52
Figure 5.	Repost on the mayor's offering of his salary	57
Figure 6.	Frontliners huddled and prayed together	58
Figure 7.	Shared post on the city's first confirmed Covid-19 case	60
Figure 8.	Online Engagements of the online users and LGU (Sample 1)	63
Figure 9.	Online Engagements of the online users and LGU (Sample 2)	64
Figure 10.	Donor acknowledgement	65
Figure 11.	Recommendation from an online user and the LGU's response	66
Figure 12.	Themes of online discourse related to Disaster Communication	67
Figure 13.	Expression of gratitude towards higher beings	68
Figure 14.	Expressions of faith and hope	70
Figure 15.	Expressions of gratitude towards leaders, frontliners, and donors	72
Figure 16.	Expressions of Pride	73
Figure 17.	Inquiries responded to by non-LGU personnel (Sample 1)	75

Figure 18.	Inquiries responded to by non-LGU personnel (Sample 2)	76
Figure 19.	Recommendations (Sample 1)	77
Figure 20.	Recommendations (Sample 2)	78
Figure 21.	Request for updated data	80
Figure 22.	Critiques on guideline violators, relief distribution and info dissemination (Sample 1)	82
Figure 23.	Critiques on guideline violators, relief distribution and info dissemination (Sample 2)	82
Figure 24.	Personal Experience	83
Figure 25.	Name Tagging	84
Figure 26.	Screenshot of (edited) post posted 3 years ago	101
Figure 27.	Border patrol checkpoints	103
Figure 28.	Comments on Figure 27's post	104
Figure 29.	Available post from three years ago	105
Figure 30.	Social construction of reality in online Communication	107

Abstract

Online Communication and Construction of Social Reality on Disaster

Human interaction produces a shared reality that is “subjectively meaningful and objectively factual.” This dissertation investigated the online communication and construction of social reality on disaster through the lens of Socio-Cultural Tradition which claims that communication is viewed as the creation and enactment of social reality. That is, as people talk, they collectively “co-construct their own social worlds.” Specifically, the study looked into the local government unit’s (LGU) online communication practices, the online discourse that arise from the LGU’s disaster communication, what the online communication reveals about disaster, and the social construction of reality on disaster.

Through the LGU’s official social media platform, which is publicly accessible and the primary online resource in information dissemination during the first six months of COVID-19 in the Philippines, the posts and comments used in the discourse were carefully examined. A qualitative approach particularly content analysis and thematic analysis was utilized to explore the meanings embedded in the online posts and texts.

Top-down online communication expressed the planning, monitoring, implementation and collaborative efforts of the local government while the online discourse related to disaster communication revealed expression of gratitude, acknowledged the efforts of stakeholders and examined the strategic plan of the local government among others. Online communication revealed that disaster is a construct that converges stakeholders, connects people together and strengthens community resilience. The permanence of language and its detachability from the “here and now”

permeates the reconstruction of subjectivity that influences conversations and narratives in online communication.

Keywords: disaster communication, local government unit, online communication, public online discourse, social reality construction and meaning

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale of the Study

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), discovered on December 2019, is characterized as a pandemic (WHO, 2020), a global health crisis (UNDP, 2020; OECD, 2020), and a public health emergency (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 has even been tagged as a disaster (Ferguson, 2022; Oliver-Smith, 2022; A. Santillan, personal communication, 2022; ECLAC-UNDRR, 2021; Kelman, 2020; Seddighi, 2020; Hitchcock, 2020), which is described as a “serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts” (UN General Assembly, 2016:13). It was also compared to a ‘war’ by some officials since it involves “life-and death decisions, an ‘enemy’ who can strike at any time, there are ‘battles’ on the ‘front lines’ and calls for the ‘home front’ to support the effort” (Levenson, 2020). As this contagious virus swiftly created an immense turmoil all over the globe, COVID-19 dominated the discussion and conversation in online communication especially during the first few months of its existence.

Communication in any disaster situations is essentially important since “the public wants to know how to obtain assistance, what ongoing personal risks they face, and how they can protect themselves and their families (Rubin, Amlot & Page, 2011 in Medford-Davis and Kapur, 2014:1). Haddow and Haddow (2014) emphasized that “communicating preparedness and mitigation information promotes actions that reduce the risk of future actions” (p. 1). Communicating timely, accurate, and

comprehensive information mitigates confusion and reduces casualties. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized that “disaster communications research was needed to enhance coordinated response and to find better ways to communicate the right information at the right time to the right audience” (Sondorp and Bornemisza, 2005 in Mathews, 2006:1). Despite the available frameworks (e.g., Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, and Hyogo Framework for Action), policies (e.g., Republic Act No. 10121 also known as the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction Management Act of 2010), and plans (e.g., Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Disaster Plan) on disaster management established by national and international experts and organizations, not everyone, arguably, was completely prepared to handle the outbreak of COVID-19 that eventually becomes the present pandemic.

For instance, Spain reportedly underestimated this health crisis situation (McMurtry and Zampano, 2020) and so did the Philippines (Beltran, 2020). Italy’s delayed social containment and late measures of controlling the spread of this virus (Indolfi and Spaccarotella, 2020) led to positive cases that overwhelmed its health system while India’s complacency, massive gatherings and religious events, and low vaccination rate fueled a more deadly second wave (Bhowmick, 2021). The Indian government’s premature declaration of victory over the virus last January 28, 2021 sent a conflicting message ensuing lenient compliance of safety protocols (D’Amore, 2021). On the contrary, New Zealand and Vietnam had been successful in flattening the coronavirus curve (Kapoor and Vu, 2020) by observing total lockdown, effective communication, and strict implementation of government rules, public compliance, and multimedia public service campaigns (Benner, 2020) while Israel was reported to

have almost reached herd immunity and had the highest vaccination rate in the world (Lubell, 2022; Schaer, 2021).

These scenarios exemplify, at some point in time, the pivotal role of an effective communication—strong and regular communication on what people can do to minimize the risk (Fisher, 2020); clear and simple message involving public's participation and responsibilities (Hunt, 2021); transparent communication (Abuza, 2020); clear and consistent communication (Penn, 2020); proactive, and open communication “ensuring public trust in and support for government response” (Nguyen and Ho, 2020); multiple communication, outreach strategies, and tailored messages promoting vaccine confidence and compliance (Choi et al., 2021)—strategized by governments during pandemic and disaster. Despite these strategies, dynamic situations did not exempt these countries from future outbreaks especially when their “economy is linked to their position as a trade hub,” when some members of the community are complacent, or when the government let their guard down (Tan, 2021). Take for example Singapore, which topped Bloomberg's COVID resilience ranking on April 26, 2021 due to its border curbs and strict quarantine programs (Hong, Chang and Varley, 2021); however, it dropped to 14th place in the June 29, 2022's survey because of unexpected rising cases while South Korea moved to the first place (Bloomberg Asia Edition, 2022). The specific form of communication system present in these scenarios is known as disaster communication, which Jayasekara (2019) conflated with risk communication while other scholars distinguished both, that “encompasses the information disseminated to the public by governments, emergency management organizations, and disaster responders as well as disaster information created and shared by journalists and the public” (Fraustino et al., 2012: 4).

In the Philippines, the pandemic made the people aware of the inadequate healthcare facilities and resources, and reactive to the government's decisions and actions. Unlike before when information was passed down to passive receivers, the Internet empowers anyone who has access to its technology to automatically respond. Because of the social distancing guidelines and the ascendancy of social media, the propensity for social connectivity intensified. Online news and social media feeds, particularly during the pandemic, were bombarded with posts demanding elected officials to act on their promises (Aspinwall, 2020), questioning DOH's data and statistics (UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team, 2020), petitioning for mass testing (change.org, 2020), mobilizing resource centers (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020), criticizing priorities in using limited supplies of test kits (Aspinwall, 2020), and politicizing the administration's plans and actions (Conde, 2020). As social media occupy the central means for online communication, the public becomes more visible and active online.

Media is considered "the most powerful agents of social reality construction" (Enache, 2006) as they dominate the individuals' everyday experiences. In particular, social media is a crucial platform for propagating news and information that allows for real-time interaction which traditional media is unable to do. Appropriating McLuhan's (1964) thesis, the structure of social media generates different meanings as compared to traditional media. Since the message is different in social media, given the public's active participation, the meaning then changes within the media because of the real-time interaction itself. It is in this sense that the "medium is the message."

The position mentioned in the preceding paragraph shares a similarity with that of John Dewey's. In fact, Dewey (1927 in Crick, 2004), whose concept of communication lies on the premise that it is the basis of what makes shared

experiences meaningful, articulated that “when communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking” (p. 312). Thus, in expounding Dewey’s view, the context of the reference shifts from what is outside to what is inside creating its own ecology in which one news article or post is commented by several users referencing another Twitter post or Facebook post. These narratives culled from the observed interactions are peculiar only to social media. The intensification of social media which can be seen with what Castells (2010) calls the “network society,” and the interaction created in the social media ecology revise the communication among interlocutors resulting in the creation of what Berger and Luckmann (1966) termed as social construction of reality.

Social construction of reality suggests that through their experiences, interaction and communication with others, people are able to form their own perception of reality. This reality of everyday life is organized in the “here and now” of individuals during face-to-face interaction—considered as the most important experience of others (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Applying Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality in the advent of Internet, Zhao (2006) identified three conditions that change interpersonal contact: the “there and now” zone, the electronic text chat which serves as the new mode of communication, and the online public domain which is recognized as the new social gathering place. These three conditions were examined in the present investigation.

The social construction of reality lens was utilized to analyze the online communication on disaster. Although the situation is dynamic and the events are time sensitive, this dissertation is expected to be correct since it provides factual accounts of the discourse and narratives within the identified time frame. This present study

explored online communication on disaster, the social reality revealed in this online communication, and how this reality is socially constructed with the intention of contributing to the expansion of theoretical pursuit in the communication discipline. The researcher hoped to comprehend the communication practice and shared meaning available in online environment as the public flocked together to communicate and co-construct their reality on a common subject, which in this case, was the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

This research study aimed to explore how social reality on disaster is constructed through online communication. Specifically, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. What does the online communication reveal about disaster?
2. What reality surfaced in this online communication?
3. How was this reality socially constructed in online communication through social media?

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to:

1. Identify what the online communication reveals about disaster;
2. Determine the social reality that surfaced in this online communication; and
3. Discover how social reality is constructed through social media.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

The nature of this study is time bound which means the dates and the respective activities that occurred during that time are meant to be interpreted within

those time frame (e.g., Singapore ranked first in 2021 in terms of Covid-resilient country but dropped to 14 in 2022). Interviews with the public or Facebook users who responded to the posts of the LGU were not conducted.

Significance of the Study

In 2022, the situation of COVID-19 in the Philippines reached a certain state of plateau with almost 66% of the population, based on the WHO's April 4, 2022 report, having been vaccinated (WHO, 2022). However, the importance of documenting the online discourse of this health pandemic during the first two quarters of the year 2020 cannot be underestimated. The visibility of public engagement in social media platform especially at the early stage of the pandemic in the country revealed interesting constructs that emphasize what is considered urgent, relevant, and prime concern in disaster communication.

Aside from its contribution to the field of disaster communication research, this study offers an analysis of the social reality through the public's online discourse in the event of a disaster situation. This case study on COVID-19 pandemic is an appropriate method for discovering the public's online communication of disaster and their construction of social reality. The findings and analysis derived from the discourse between the local government and the public, and among the public on how the pandemic was communicated will offer more ways for local government units and disaster risk reduction management agencies to better communicate disaster planning and responses to their constituents.

Furthermore, as language, communication and social media provide the means to interpret the meaning and construction of online discourse, their incessant

contributions to the creation of new knowledge will offer Communication students, teachers, and practitioners additional perspectives in their discipline.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined in accordance to the context of the study:

Disaster Communication - refers to the dissemination and exchange of timely, consistent, and reliable disaster-related information that capacitates the receiver to draw a sound judgement which could potentially save lives. This discourse is initiated by the local government and implementing partners who are responsible for increasing the publics' awareness and understanding of the four thematic areas of disaster management, particularly on disaster prevention and mitigation, disaster preparedness, disaster response, and disaster rehabilitation and recovery, to the general public including the media.

Local Government — refers to an organized body of people whose primary function is to establish an open communication among the government, appropriate agencies, the media, and the public with the goal of sharing expert and professional opinions, giving information and updates, and receiving feedback regarding COVID-19. In this study, the local government refers to a specific local public administration in one of the cities under the province of Cebu that organizes, facilitates, and maintains the public information office (PIO) and the local disaster risk reduction management office (LDRRMO).

Online Discourse — refers to the written or spoken communication of online community users who are involved in participatory engagements through social media

on state affairs or matters concerning the early stage of COVID-19 in the Philippines. The discourse is evident through Facebook posts, comments, likes and shares, and may include uploaded photos and captions, and videos.

Public — refers primarily to people of a state who are the intended recipients of messages, usually coming from the government, and who share a common interest particularly involving matters on COVID-19. Grunig (1992 in Rawlins, 2006) defined public based on John Dewey's writings as "a group of people who face a similar problem, recognize the problem, and organize themselves to do something about it" (p. 3). It is secondarily referred to as something that exists in open view or known to many people, i.e., not private. In the context of the present study, the constituents of the said local government unit, the online followers of their social media pages, and online participants of the said discourse constitute the public.

Social Construction of Reality — refers to the concept that social participants create a social phenomenon or subjective reality using language in their interactive activities and participatory practices online. The themes and categories that surfaced in the online communication are potential constructs of social reality.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter begins with a discussion of disaster and disaster communication and the important role that online communication plays in the current discourse on disaster, which is situated in the context of COVID-19. As communicators, the local government and the public are given emphasis as they utilize social media for various purposes responsive to the ongoing disaster communication.

Disaster and Disaster Communication

This section firstly defines disaster and disaster communication. Secondly, it presents foreign and local literature on disaster communication particularly the initiatives and practices in preparing for, responding to, and mitigating disaster situations which require collaborative efforts among stakeholders and the intentional use of social media. Thirdly, it reinforces the necessity of the government and the public to depend on online communication at that time when lockdowns were imposed, physical movements were restricted, and social distancing was mandated in order to slow down the rapid spread of COVID-19

As a community-based event (Seeger et al., 1998 in Mason, Flores, Liu, Tims, Spencer, and Gire, 2019), *disaster* is a “serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources” (UNISDR, 2020). It is a result of a “combination of hazards, vulnerability, and inability to reduce the potential negative consequences of risk” (International Federation of Red Cross Crescent Societies, 2010). Al-Dahash, Thayaparan and Kulatunga (2016) carried out a

comprehensive review of key literature of the term disaster and offered a cognitive map of disaster definitions. In the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the integral part of disaster risk reduction as a ‘core development strategy’ across different aspects and sectors of development is established.

Carr (1932 in Furedi, 2007) argued that ‘there is no disaster’ if serious injuries of deaths and other serious losses are absent—a perspective shaped by the “modernist imagination” of his times. According to Quarantelli (2001 in Furedi, 2007), people’s perception of disaster was first characterized as Acts of God, followed by Acts of Nature, and then eventually, Acts of Men and Women—where human agency is blamed as the cause. Early researches on disaster, which focus on the sociological perspective, emphasized the element of community resilience; however, the direction shifted to the community corrosion and regarded disaster from an ecological perspective post 1980s (Furedi, 2007). This present study aimed to identify the current perspectives on disaster as constructed in online communication.

Increasing the role of appropriate and specific kind of communication in disaster management minimizes the impact of damage to facilities, infrastructure, and public panic. Spialek and Houston (2018) proposed the phrase “networks of communication resources (e.g., organizations, media, and residents) that are utilized to cope with mental, behavioral, and physical health challenges occurring at different disaster phases” (p. 937) to define a specific communication ecology for disaster. Other researchers (e.g., Liu, Xu and St. John, 2021; Khumairoh, Widana, and Sumantri, 2021; Moorthy, Benny, and Gill, 2018; Tanner, Friedman, Koskan, and Barr, 2009; Matthews, 2006) utilized the term disaster communication within the context of the role of communication between stakeholders; coordination mechanism and trust building; and mobilizing information, respectively.

Matthews (2006) defined *disaster communication* as the “sharing and exchange of information with the victims immediately affected by a disaster” (p. IV). Harbi (2001) posited that the term, disaster communication, referred to the use of telecommunication skills and information technologies during disasters. Disaster communication is considered “a new term that developed in communication theory since the Mega Tsunami disaster that struck Aceh in 2004” and that the role of communication in disaster is to “reduce the dissemination of information that is not sourced, hoaxed, invalid, and uncertain which is troubling the community” (Khumairoh, Widana and Sumantri, 2021, p. 3). It is mainly focused on designing and delivering clear messages on disaster-related matters “disseminated by the government to the public as well as encompasses the disaster information created and shared by journalists and the public” (Fraustino et al., 2021). Moreover, it aims to prevent panic, prompt appropriate health behaviors, coordinate response among stakeholders, advocate for affected populations, and mobilize resources (Medford-Davis and Kapur, 2015). In a nutshell, disaster communication requires effective communication and coordination among stakeholders during different phases of disaster.

Disasters such as the World Trade Center bombing during the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 and the devastation of the Gulf Coast brought upon by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 revealed strong emphasis for communication system (Dwyer, 2006 in Moorthy, Benny, and Gill, 2018; Donahue and Tuohy, 2006), which is not limited to technological infrastructure, thoughtful planning, and preparation for all types of disasters. In the independent source of news and issues *The Conversation*, Terndrup and Kman (2016) shared the disaster communications they learned from 9/11 while Meeds (2006) also reported on the communication challenges from Hurricane Katrina. Likewise, Solymossy (2013) proposed communication

strategies during blackouts after analyzing the major blackouts and subsequent communication problems in the United States (i.e., multi-state blackout in 2003 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005), and Japan (i.e., earthquake, tsunami and nuclear in 2011) while Haddow and Haddow (2014) traced the emergence of social media as a disaster communications tool during China's SARS Epidemic in 2003. The Missouri Department of Mental Health (2006) even published a disaster communications guidebook which highlights event-specific (e.g., terrorism, chemical explosion, etc.) and audience-specific (e.g., culturally diverse groups, emergency first responders, etc.) messages.

In the Philippines, various initiatives and communication systems had been set up to enhance disaster communication and response across the country. Makati City acquired an Advanced Mobile Emergency Communication vehicle that serves as the city's back-up mobile emergency communication system ensuring the continuity of communication despite interruption in power supply and telecommunications (The Philippine Star, 2018). An emergency cellular network was made accessible for Pasig City citizens to use their cellphones in reporting the details of their location and condition of their emergencies even when cellular sites are down (Cruz, 2015). The Moveable and Deployable ICT Resource Unit (MDRU) launched in San Remigio, Cebu helped restore communications in the aftermath of super typhoon Haiyan (Icamina, 2015). Moreover, the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) in partnership with the online platform *Firechat* formally signed an agreement allowing the agency to "maintain vital communication lines during disaster events" (ABS-CBN, 2016). In addition, some academic institutions organized events to provide a platform for sharing best practices and plans in disaster risk reduction such as when the University of San Carlos and the University of the Philippines Cebu organized the

Philippine National LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) conference in 2017, while others reinforced disaster communication in their community as they conduct seminar-workshops, trainings and drills on emergency situation preparedness and response such as calamity preparedness, disaster risk reduction and management, and emergency response (USC website, 2019). Disaster communication, in the context of the present research investigation, refers to the communication concerning COVID-19-related matters—which could be in a form of news and updates, or call for community action—disseminated by a local government to the public through online communication, particularly social media.

COVID-19 as a disaster

As a force causing debilitating impact in the functioning of the global community, COVID-19 is classified as a disaster, a natural disaster (Kimmitt and Esparza, 2020; Seddighi, 2020; Nussbaum and Mason, 2020) albeit disputes and contrasting interpretations (Revet 2020; Brown, 2020; Montano and Savitt, 2020) which distinguish or associate the pandemic from natural disaster. It was even declared by the Indonesian government as national disaster (Putsanra, 2020 in Widyastuti, 2021). Hsieh et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2021) categorized the said pandemic as a communicable disaster or biological disaster while Alcántara-Ayala et al. (2020) argued that it is a global disaster and emphasized that:

While the epidemiological perspective is obviously essential, framing the pandemic as a disaster alerts us to the significance of the causal chain of root causes and risk drivers and their interactions with existing or novel hazards, both across and within territorial and governance scales (p. 2).

Although appropriately categorizing this pandemic can improve “responses and recovery effectiveness” (Montano and Savitt, 2020; p. 1), this framing of the

terminology and its subsequent consequences and implications is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, COVID-19 evolved from being a risk and a crisis to becoming a disaster. As reported in the foreword of ECLAC-UNDRR (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic is “a disaster that combines a biological threat with various vulnerabilities, such as the organizational and response capacity of health systems, overcrowding, informality, social work practices, and public transport” (p. 1). COVID-19 as a disaster is recognized by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); and articulated in the papers of Lindert, Jakubauskiene, and Bilsen (2021), and Alcántara-Ayala et al. (2020) to name a few.

The threats of COVID-19 in public health impede face-to-face communication and social interactions, and increased online communication usage. Lockdowns and restrictions affected the way people communicate and prompted them to virtually connect with their family, friends, and colleagues as well as with the rest of the world. Osler and Zahavi (2022) pointed out that the pandemic resulted in digital expansion. Online platforms like Facebook (now rebranded as *Meta*), Twitter (now rebranded as *X*), and Zoom became dominant and, perhaps for some, the only means of keeping in touch with others while observing physical and social distancing. This reliance on online communication for information accumulation, dispersal, and sharing; social interaction and support; course of action; or making sense of the surrounding is further discussed in the succeeding section.

Online Communication on Disaster

This section begins with the existing related literature on the role of online communication in disaster situations, followed by a brief narrative on the use of

traditional media during the early phase of COVID-19. The next part presents the dominant usage of online communication, particularly social media in traditional media reporting, and the surge of misinformation and fake news brought upon by unfiltered reports. Finally, the last part highlights the role of social media as a platform not only for disseminating top-down messages from the government and health authorities but more specifically a vessel for public engagements and interactions that shape shared meanings and experiences.

Online communication refers to technology-mediated interaction which has wider dissemination of instant information, highly interactive, easily accessible, and no geographical and audience-size boundaries. It facilitates the creation, dissemination, and sharing of user-generated contents among online communities. Kemp (2023) revealed that as of January 2023, 64.4% of the world's total population use the internet and that 92.3% of the world's internet users use mobile phone to go online. The advancement of information and communication technology essentially shifted human interactions (i.e., social connections, organizing groups, collaboration) from offline to online modality changing the way people communicate.

Before the internet, disaster communication relied on traditional media and face-to-face communication. Since its extensive growth in recent years, online communication such as social networking services (SNS) and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) which provide comprehensive source of information complemented the approach to disaster communication (Wisdywastuti, 2021). Internet-based media has been relied upon and used by government organizations, emergency agencies, the media, and the public to exchange disaster-related information and stay connected. This reliance on technology also increases people's desire to "share information to feel a sense of membership in these changing

modern societies, in that an abundance of information is instantly exchanged, and topics shift rapidly” (Yi, and Kuri, 2015, p. 2).

Yi and Kuri (2015) revealed that SNS were effective among the media for information sharing about disaster, relief goods rationing, confirming people’s whereabouts and seeking shelters while social media channels were adopted by government agencies to communicate with the public during two major disasters: Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami in 2011, and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. Tanner, Friedman, Koshan and Barr (2009) who allegedly were the first to assess the public health emergency information disseminated in television news websites reported that one of the most frequently discussed topics on multiple disasters include health pandemics. They found out that disaster-related information posted on the said websites has less cues to action, or mobilizing information, that increases people’s risk perception in order to act appropriately. The websites were also found to lack interactive mobilizing information such as hyperlink that leads the public to additional information on another web page and instruct them on what action to take during disaster situations. They recommended that instead of simply providing contact information (e.g., telephone number for emergency assistance), specific instructions on how to perform an action (e.g., coughing and sneezing etiquette), emphasizing the importance of an action (e.g., earthquake duck, cover, and hold), and including locational mobilizing information (e.g., details about evacuation areas) could initiate an “individual’s readiness to take part in some form of emergency preparedness and improve their self-efficacy for engaging in the recommended protective actions” (Tanner, Friedman, Koshan and Barr, 2009; p. 751).

The role of social media in different disaster phases has been highlighted in several studies: Rathnayake and Suthers (2017) used the viral hashtag

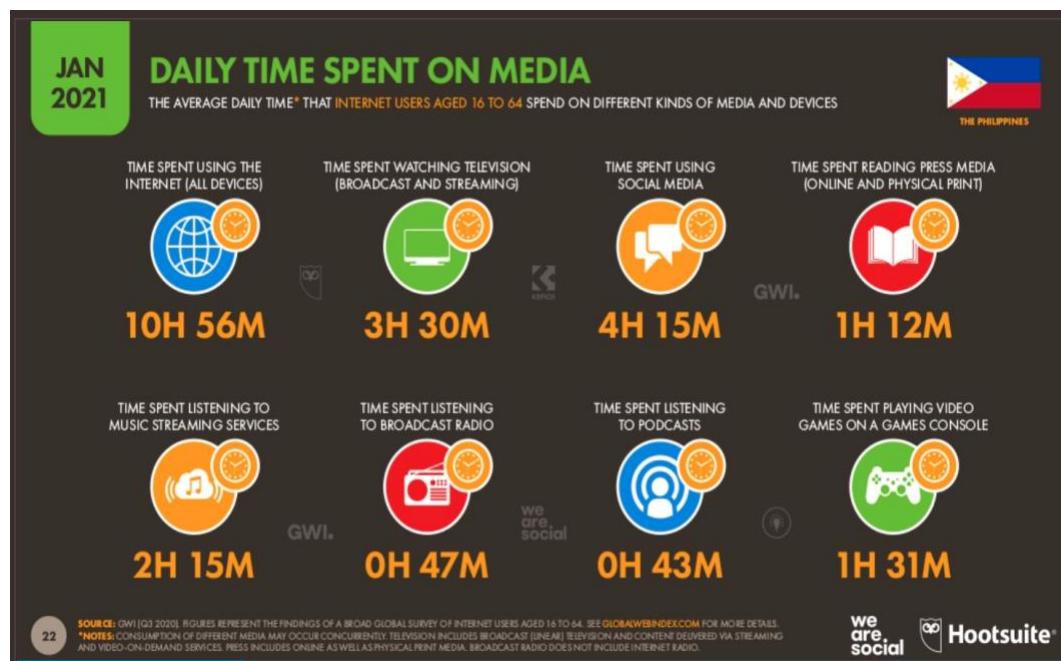
#NepalEarthquake as a case study to examine the online social phenomena of Twitter and how it illustrates the “constructs of momentarily connectedness” such as thoughts and prayers in times of disaster; Lwin, Lu, Sheldenkar and Schulz (2018) identified the strategic uses of Facebook in Zika outbreak communication while Baranyai, Barsi, and Nárai (2021) presented how local governments communicated with their constituents using online interfaces during COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary. Jensen (2014) and Kim (2013) revealed that Facebook and Twitters are effective communication tools that have the potential to generate social movements and even save lives.

When its common symptoms transitioned to severe physical difficulty causing a rapid spike in mortality rates worldwide, COVID-19 became the center stage for news coverage that circulated via print, broadcast and social media, mobile phones, and e-mails. People relied more heavily on media and media technologies for information to stay informed, connected, and safe (FIMS News, 2020) especially during lockdowns, quarantines, and forced isolations. The data analytics company, Nielsen, disclosed that during the early months of the pandemic, around March 2020, television consumption in the Philippines increased from 173 to 230 minutes (Oxford Business Group, 2020). These traditional media sources such as television and radio served as main sources of information about the virus among impoverished communities (Lau, Hung, Go, Ferma, Choi, Dodd, & Wei, 2020) and areas with limited connectivity. Newspapers, on the other hand, suffered economic losses due to quarantine (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020), difficulty in distribution, and lack of advertising (Tantuco, 2020). With lesser exposure compared to television and radio, newspapers are “losing their relevance as a source of information” (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017 in Estella and Loffeholz, 2020).

Owing to the pervasiveness of the internet, traditional media resorted to investing in online presence to maximize their reach, and as Chua (2020 in Estella and Loffelholz, 2020) reported, this “news reach of online media is exponentially increasing in the urban areas;” however, the digital divide in the Philippine media landscape remains visible (Estella and Loffelholz, 2020). Nevertheless, spending time on social media has significantly increased, as pronounced in the Philippines, mostly due to “social time” based on the Global Web Index special coronavirus study survey (Nortajuddin, 2020). As of January 2021, out of 110.3 million population (47.6% lives in urban centers while 52.4% lives in rural areas) in the Philippines, 89.00 million or equivalent to 80.7% of the total population are social media users (Kemp, 2021). According to the latest published report on Philippine internet users’ average time spent on media, social media platforms received more attention (4 hours and 15 minutes) compared to broadcast media (3 hours and 30 minutes for television and 47 minutes for radio) and print (1 hour and 12 minutes) (Kemp, 2021). These data are supported by WeAreSocial’s (2021) report revealing the country’s almost 11-hour-a-day online consumption as evident in Figure 1. Traditional media’s convergence with digital technologies materialized to reach a wider audience. Such is the case of Rappler, an online news platform established by journalists to provide “multimedia experiences” and citizen engagement.

Figure 1.

Philippines' average time spent on media.



Nguyen and Ho (2020) purported that “effective communication comprises not only the extent of its reach but also the importance of consistency and credibility” (p. 4). In conjunction with the surge of available and accessible information online, misinformation and sensationalized stories were repeatedly shared in social media platforms contributing to people’s anxiety of the current health crisis (Nortajuddin, 2020). Excessive and unsubstantiated information confused the public during COVID-19. Ferguson (2022) emphasized that “matters were made much worse with misinformation and disinformation about the virus that also went viral on the internet, leading to widespread confusion about how seriously to treat the contagion” (p. 287). The WHO director-general, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, even pointed out that, “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” (WHO, 2020).

With the advancement of social media in today’s milieu, the mass audience is furnished with more options to respond, interact, and initiate conversations launching

a new wave of risks such as data misuse, spread of fake news stories, misleading information, and privacy and security breach. Despite the efforts of gatekeepers to stop the proliferation of fake news, many users seldom evaluate the sources of information they come across with which may lead to panic, chaotic responses, emerging conspiracy theories, complicated situations, and uninformed decisions. For instance, the online health misinformation on Dengvaxia controversy that amplified parents' fear may have caused vaccine hesitancy in the Philippines. Facebook and Twitter were singled out for their role in this widespread use of misleading information (Skopeliti, 2020). Facebook was reported to have changed their algorithms and policies, removed fake accounts, educated people on how to spot fake posts, and partnered with local media groups to debunk false posts. Unfounded rumors, unfair criticisms, and negative information endanger individual and group reputations and increase doubts and mistrusts (Bovée and Thill, 2013). The ripple effect these can cause is unreasonably higher especially when the public is in dire need of credible and reliable news especially during disasters.

Nevertheless, the legitimate media's daily reporting of public health advisories particularly of the number of confirmed cases and death toll (e.g., Superbalita Cebu account, and Public Information Office Facebook Page) kept the public on their toes. The information sharing and live news coverage from the international community as well as daily reports of the Department of Health (DOH), media briefings, and news conferences of local authorities, and social media posts of local news agencies mobilize not only the local government but also the public. Zhang and Cheng (2021) observed that the "widespread use of social media provides a new way to obtain disaster information, and the comments released by affected people become the first-hand information of the disaster." At this pace, social networking and social media

have “permeated almost every aspect of online experiences” (Sauerbier in Grant and Meadows, 2010, p. 292) and have become “the driving force in the bleeding edge of crisis communication” (Coombs, 2014c:2 in Cheng, 2016). Its emergence vastly contributed to mankind’s personal and professional lives transforming everyday communication into a sophisticated network system that allows access to insurmountable data and, as coined by McLuhan (1967), “global village” where ideologies and agenda are integrated. As it dominated the public’s online communication preference, social media perpetuates shared experiences which stemmed from the totality of the community’s discourse that has underlying structures and dynamics. Such participatory engagement promotes shared meanings and communal activities that influence individual and societal behavior and perception such as in a disaster situation.

With the ongoing pandemic that the world is currently facing, online communication and engagement is becoming a vigorous social activity more than ever allowing users to become active participants in the communication process. It has become dominant and, for some, the only means of communicating and being with others (Cretu, 2021, p. 2). Cretu (2021) further commented that “the period marked by the pandemic brought online communication to its peak” (p. 1). Since Facebook has reportedly more active users and followers in the Philippines compared to other media channels, it is utilized in making sense of the disaster communication and the public’s online discourse of the COVID-19 outbreak. Facebook is the most popularly utilized social network site with 71,760,000 users in the Philippines as of January 31, 2020 (Internet Worlds Stats, 2020) and is gaining more website traffic compared to other online communication as it offers online sources of news and information, promotes socio-political related issues through its number of posts, likes and shares, and allows

feedback mechanism. In the present study, only Facebook is explored since the LGU's Twitter account is inactive and they are not subscribers of other digital platforms. Particularly, online posts and messages were looked into to make sense of the public's communicative behavior in an online discourse.

Communicators in Online Communication

Communication and collaborations among stakeholders improve mitigation capacity before, during, and after disasters. Communication process exists because of the actuality of the sender and receiver of the message. Despite various models of communication (e.g., Berlo's model, Shannon and Weaver's model, and transactional model), all explained that communication itself must come from a source, a sender, or an addressee. A communicator then is within the sending-receiving cycle of a message. Littlejohn and Foss (2009) categorized several communication traditions under the assumption of individuals as communicators with emphasis on the socio-psychological's trait theory and cognitive theory. As the sender sets the chain of events using words or non-verbal cues permitting the information to pass through written, verbal, and media forms towards an intended receiver, significant mental processes take place and meaningful social reality is created.

One of the traits in communication is argumentativeness, developed by Dominic Infante and colleagues, which refers to the "tendency to engage in conversations about controversial topics, to support your own point of view, and to refute opposing beliefs" (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009, p. 76). They believe that arguing constructively is a positive trait that may solve differences in a situation where individual characteristics and cognitive resources are activated. Littlejohn and Foss (2009) encapsulated the characteristics of the individual as communicator in the following paragraph:

A communicator's perspectives are never completely unique but always are shared to some extent with others. A communicator's interpretation and actions are always organized according to certain expectations, ways of understanding, and categories of thought. A communicator's interpretations and actions change over time through interaction with others (pp. 110-111).

Communicators can create and achieve multiple goals and meanings. As such, individuals connect to others because, as social creature in nature, of the need to identify with others, to seek acknowledgement and recognition, to be heard, and to be a part of something. For these circumstances to exist, people flock together to communicate. Craig's (2016) socio-cultural tradition claims that communication is viewed as the creation and enactment of social reality, that is, as people talk, they collectively "co-construct their own social worlds." People's sense of subjective reality is constructed based on the process of interaction. According to Apuke (2018), "understanding of reality is obtainable through communication" and it is through communication that "reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 25). The next phase of this section presents the local government and the public as communicators in an online discourse.

The Local Government

Local government units (LGUs) have first-hand knowledge of their community's needs, and are better equipped in channeling the necessary preparation and support especially during a disaster. They are the "official administrative actors closest to citizens, which makes them particularly prominent for communication tasks" (Baranyai, Barsi, and Narai, 2021, p. 1). Both the local officials and the community need to be empowered through access to the "necessary information, resources, and authority" (Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015) to communicate timely, accurate

and reliable information, implement actions, reduce risks, and build resilience. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction even published a special flyer for local government alliance for disaster risk reduction and highlighted the good practices and lessons learned, among which include active coordination with multi-level and multi-stakeholders, effective engagement with local communities to disaster risk reduction activities aligned with the government's priorities, and strong institutional capacities to implement DRR actions using innovative tools and techniques.

In the Philippines, the worst natural disasters based on the number of casualties, amount of damage and number of people affected are usually typhoons and earthquakes (De la Cruz, 2014). Due to the disaster risk profile of the country, the government implemented various legislation and policies to develop policies and plans, and implement specific actions and measures involving disaster risk reduction and management: In 1978, the National Disaster Coordinating Council implemented the Presidential Decree No. 1566 which emphasizes disaster and community preparedness against natural and man-made hazards; in 2010, the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act otherwise known as RA 10121 extended Decree 1566 focusing on pro-active disaster and climate risk reduction and management via participation of all levels and sectors; in 2011, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Plan (NDRRMP) 2011-2028 strengthened the mandates set in Decree 1566 and Disaster Act of 2010; in 2019, the Act on Strengthening Disaster Risk Reduction and Management of RA 10121 was amended (UNDRR, 2019); and in 2020, the updated NDRRMP 2020-2030 was released to the public.

Although these legislations have not included disaster communication among the terms defined, communication is situated in disseminating alerts and early warning system; in coordinating with local government and authorities including private sector,

other entities, and the public; and in one of the responsibilities of the Special Assistants to the Secretary which is to create and foster strategic communications with private sectors. RA 10121 mandates local government units (LGUs) to establish a Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (LDRRMO) which requires the coordination with local partners, stakeholders, and the public in strengthening the governance at the local level. As detailed in Section 12.a of RA 10121, LDRRMO is responsible for administrative and training, research and planning, and operations and warning within its territorial jurisdictions. The government capacitates the LGUs by “developing a checklist of actions to be taken and supplies to be procured together with providing communications and contingency templates for disaster preparedness” and by organizing joint trainings and projects (Alcayna et al., 2016 in UNDRR, 2019).

A local government in Cebu, Philippines is one of those LGUs that actively promote and implement disaster risk reduction and management, strengthen the resilience and adaptive capacities of the community, respond to people needing emergency assistance, and mobilize multi-stakeholders. The city’s LDRRMO and Council received a Gawad KALASAG (GK) Fully Compliant—Regional Level award during one of the culminations of the National Disaster Resilience Month (NDRM). The said awarding body aims to recognize the country’s DRRM practitioners and various stakeholders for their exceptional contributions and commitment in improving the society through disaster management initiatives and practices. Currently, the said LGU has two offices responsible for cascading information through various means and one of which is through their Facebook accounts: the DRRM Office, and The Public Information Office.

Primarily a residential and trading center, this 3rd class city in the province of Cebu has its own public information office headed by a public information officer (PIO).

In Article 16 sec. 489 of the local government code (1991) annotations and jurisprudence, one of the primary duties of an information officer is “to be in the front line in providing information during and in the aftermath of man-made and natural disasters and calamities, with special attention to the victims thereof, to help minimize injuries and casualties during and after the emergency, and to accelerate relief and rehabilitation” (p. 281). The office is responsible for providing information to the public and the media on its programs, issues and announcements initially through newsletters and press release then through online communication channels. On June 25, 2016, its official Facebook page was created. At the outset, the page’s posts covered updates on sports, press release, weddings, and birthday greetings; however, it started sharing health updates from local media’s digital posts when COVID-19 reached the Philippines and the entire nation realized the gravity of this situation. Other Facebook pages such as the Office of the City Mayor and the current mayor’s personal FB account also provided daily updates that did not only focus on the public service announcements, distribution of goods, and statistics but also revealed the current conditions of those constituents who have positive cases. As of June 2020, 61,776 people followed the said page while 53,060 people liked it.

The city’s Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (LDRRMO) was created in response to RA 10121. The office has an emergency response plan/contingency plan detailing the function of the office and lines of communication as well as the roles and responsibilities of the staff for disaster response and recovery. As detailed in the said plan, the city’s LDRRMO incident commander coordinates with the public information officer (PIO) who authorizes the release of information to the public. Their information drive includes setting up and operating communication centers, coordinating with the media (through the PIO), activating the barangay

responders (through the LDRRMO) and volunteers (e.g., REAVO, ACER, KABALIKAT), alerting the community (through barangay personnel and using the public address system (e.g., Philippine National Police and Bureau of Fire Protection). During COVID-19, the LDRRMO implemented mitigation strategies for communities with local COVID-19 transmission and created COVID-19 Response Must-Know handbook which specifies various preventive measures. As of 2021, the city's LDRRMO had an updated handbook on guidelines and manual of operations covering the organizational structure, evacuation plan, preparedness and response plan, incident command system, ambulance and emergency vehicle operation protocols, and EOC COVID-19 taskforce and frontliners operation. On September 11, 2019, the city's DRRMO Facebook page was created.

The Public

Originating from the Latin word *publicus* (a combination of *poplicus* 'of the people' and *puber* 'adult') (Great dictionary of the English language, 2001), public is associated with general, state or community and pertains to people, affairs and common interest. As a term that concerns "people as a whole" or that involves the community affairs, public used to mean "representation of authority through a lord" in the 18th century before the rise of a bourgeoisie society and its public spheres (Calhoun, 1992, p. 5). This sphere, practiced in salon, literary groups and several exclusive gatherings among men, is seen as a domain of social life (Habermas, 1991, p. 398) where individuals deal with matters of general interest, generate ideas, debate on issues and form opinions where social action can take place. When the powers of the church and nobility diminished at the end of the 18th century, the meaning of the word 'public' changed from the "representative court of a person and their authority" to "the legitimizing regulations of an institutional system that held governing powers"

(<https://opentextbc.ca/mediastudies101/chapter/habermas-public-sphere/>). These legitimizing regulations are upheld by people such as in a form of election. Hannay (2005) in tracing its origin pointed out, in his book entitled *On the Public*, that public was referred to as '*res publica*' in contrast to the present understanding of the word as 'the people,' and further suggested the ability of the public to become an agent of change in addition to the media's manipulative role on the public.

Today, public is associated with people in general and is sometimes associated with stakeholders involving people who have interest or concern on something. When RA 10121 was implemented, one of its main highlights is for stakeholders to build communities that can survive disaster — that is, emphasizing the importance of local communities' participation and synergy in disaster management which prioritizes disaster communication. In a legal sense, RA 10121 institutionalizes multi-stakeholder engagement. Public involvement, therefore, is one of the keys to building a resilient society.

The ability of the public to create any content and distribute this in the internet and social media is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it empowers individuals to share news to anyone, and contributes to fast information dissemination across the globe. As Haddow and Haddow (2014) observed, "we are all news producers and consumers" (p. xvii). On the other hand, it opens up the circulation of inaccurate information and proliferation of fake news misleading people to confusion, panic, or bad decisions and actions. In order to avoid such, the public has to be informed with complete, timely, and accurate information.

As disaster communication audience, public refers to the largest recipients of information and is "collecting as well as exchanging information and acting on that information often without government involvement" (Haddow and Haddow, 2014, p.

121). Stephen and Ross (2010) looked into the public as social actor and as social space, and argued that the public is “always a product of representation.” This coming together of individuals to talk about commonality and shared experiences is articulated in various media platforms where message distribution is instantaneous, information is unfiltered, and citizen involvement is wide ranging. Although the public’s interest is evidently taking shape in their active participation in social media (Napoli, 2014), this space is perceived as nurturing two dichotomies in an environment dominated by political, economic, social and cultural forces: one that attempts to foster constructive dialogue and transformation, and the other that has inherent biases in perspectives and conversations.

The public is more involved in participatory engagements online. Hannay (2005) pointed out that “the very idea of the public might be uprooted and undermined by the Internet and the global technology” because media has been known to manipulate their own propaganda, constructing agenda for the consumption of the public. This is supported by Happer and Philo (2013) who observed that media has impact in public’s beliefs and attitudes towards society. However, despite the influence media has on the public, it has provided a platform for public communication to become increasingly participatory (Media Linguistics, 2017).

In a study on the role of social media concerning crisis communication in Starbucks, Kim (2013) found out that receiving positive or negative reactions from the public helps public relations practitioners quickly adjust or supplement their actions. Flores and Asuncion (2020) also revealed that LGUs need to improve their risk/crisis communication such as to maximize the use of social media and other channels of communication for information dissemination and engagement during the pandemic to foster mutual trust and collective action between them and the public. Fraustino,

Liu, and Jin (2012) reported that the public uses social media for disaster communication because, aside from social norms, of convenience, personal recommendations, information seeking, timely information, unfiltered information, and humor and levity, it also provides a means to determine disaster magnitude, check in with family and friends, mobilize themselves, maintain a sense of community, and seek emotional support and healing. On the other hand, they also revealed that privacy and security fears, accuracy concerns, access issues, and knowledge deficiencies are factors that discourage the use of social media.

The present study situated the local government and the public as communicators, and explored how their narratives within an online discourse constitute a shared meaning, how individual values and opinions coincide or contradict with those of the local government and other members of the public, and how these shared experiences define their digital culture and social reality.

Chapter III

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Anchored on the Socio-cultural tradition which postulates that communication is “theorized as the (re)production of social order and that reality is socially constructed through micro level interaction processes” (Craig, 1999), this chapter discusses the social construction of reality. Through communication, reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed (ibid).

Social construction of reality is defined as a movement in the social sciences (Romaioli and McNamee, 2020), a pedagogical tool (Dixson, 2001), and a paradigm (Knoblauch, 2019). Along with many researchers and social constructivists, Adoni and Mane (1984) referred to it as a theory. Since its publication in 1966 and pioneered by Berger and Luckmann, the concept of social construction of reality was originally based on the phenomenological account of Alfred Schutz. The concept has continuously been cited in many literatures usually along the line of social construction and emerging realities such as in the direction of American Studies (Kelly, 1983), in pedagogy (Dixson, 2001), in the impact brought about by the Internet (Zhao, 2006), in the use of language (Luchini, 2010; St. Clair, 1982), in social media (Wohn and Bowe, 2014), in interpersonal communication (Echterhoff and Schmalbach, 2018), in Facebook posts (Quintos and Iwayama, 2017), and more recently, during COVID-19 (Al hourani, 2021). Searle’s (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality* (CSR) is different from that of Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality* (SCR) since the former focuses more on the collective intentionality of institutional facts such as money, property rights, and marriage which are considered facts because these are agreed upon as real by a group of people or an institution while the

latter highlights the social process allowing meaning to be embedded into society. Endreß (2016) highlighted in his critique the fact that Searle failed to take into account Berger and Luckmann's work on the sociological perspective of the social constructionism. Although their concepts are closely related and that both thinkers offer important contributions in social constructionism particularly in upholding the importance of language in the integration of everyday reality, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) SCR served as the lens that guided the present researcher in examining the reality in the online communication.

In their widely acclaimed classic book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that social reality is constructed by the individual member's knowledge and contribution, through social interaction, in shaping the social world. Knowledge, in this sense, does not just mean an accumulation of scientific production and intellectual insights from specialized areas but "a basic feature of everyday life in that it is what guides social action, any action at that" (Knoblauch, 2019, p. 334). This common-sense knowledge in the everyday life is partly shared by those who have experienced a similar situation and its limits (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 56). An individual cannot fully articulate pain if he or she has not yet experienced loss and pain.

One must participate in a societal dialect to be in society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 149) since society is considered as an ongoing dialectical process with three 'moments' which are not in temporal sequence: externalization, which refers to the process by which the meaning is carried and communicated to the outside world; objectification, which refers to the process of treating non-objective things as objects; and internalization which refers to the process of internalizing and unquestioningly accepting the intersubjectively externalized and objectified understandings of a social

group as reality. Using the social processes of social construction of reality in the case of Jordan, Al Hourani (2021) proved his argument of the significance of power relations using these three stages: first, the externalization process presents the creation of the COVID-19 reality such as implementing social distancing; second, the objectivation process recognizes the rules and effect such as utilizing the mass media in spreading information of the local cases and death as well as government sanctions and punishment; and third, the internalization process reveals the reproduction and legitimization of this new reality that is Jordanians need to follow the new regulations because they have no choice. Challenging the traditional societal norms of Jordan is difficult but possible, takes time, and requires sustainability and maintenance to be fully internalized (ibid., p. 737).

A key arena for shared-reality creation is communication (Echterhoff and Schmalbach, 2017, p. 57). The participation in the construction of social reality is derived from thoughts and from interactions with others where information is negotiated in various social contexts, through language evident in everyday life, which shape the subjective interpretation of reality. Suryani and Soedarso (2019) contextualized the importance of communication and language by explaining that:

Communication and language bound to disasters context may mediate community resilience by reducing and anticipating other people's feeling of anxiety, evoking feeling of security, reducing more victims and damage even loss of life. This also indicates that the community helps each other, remind and save each other."

This reality bounds people to a "cultural tradition, which allows us to know reality through its systems of norms and signs, shared symbols, and negotiated agreements" (Romaioli and McNamee, 2020, p. 5). Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that as a "sign system, language has the quality of objectivity...rooted in a common-sense reality of everyday life... as it shares a pragmatic motive with others" (p. 53). They

further suggest that language has the capacity to crystalize and stabilize one's own subjectivity albeit with modification. Social reality, then, is articulated and made possible through language.

In relation to language's ability to be crystallized, Wohn and Bowe (2014) proposed a model known as crystallization, which "describes the process of information flow and reality formation in the age of social media" (ibid., p. 262). That is, social construction of reality is developed through social media as the latter "facilitates information produced or relayed by the members of our social network," whose production reflects reality (ibid., p. 261). In advancing this model, they are guided by specific assumptions including network attributes particularly reciprocity, proximity (i.e., physical and psychological closeness in the network), homophily (i.e., degree of similarity within the network), and diversity (i.e., heterogeneity in the network). These network attributes together with the individual's attributes and attitudes moderate the process of crystallization.

Al Hourani (2021) examined Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality from the social power perspective and revealed the necessity of coercive intervention in the said reality as exemplified in Jordan's sociocultural situation during COVID-19. As a close-knit traditional community, Jordanians share physical closeness, intense interactions, and strong relationship; hence, the transmission of the virus can easily penetrate this environment. Their existing reality centers on a "very strong and extensive bonding social capital" and on faith that all events are inevitable; thus, they were certain of their safety and security from the virus (ibid., p. 721). However, to curb the spread of the virus, Jordanian government "used its maximum power to establish the new reality and guidelines necessitated by the outbreak of COVID-19" (ibid., p. 722) such as limitations of the social relations, strict restrictions in gatherings and

interactions, and implementation of fines or jail time for violators. Al Hourani noted that “power, rationality, and information-based policies are the most important mechanisms for creating a new social reality” (p. 723).

Zhao (2006) revealed that the social construction of the reality of everyday life described by Berger and Luckmann is organized among individuals engaged in face-to-face interactions; however, there are already studies that explore social construction in the media and social media ecology such as Adoni and Mane (1984) who discussed the dialectical process of the social construction of reality in media which includes the social interaction, either real or symbolic, among individuals, society, and culture and where human beings act as the “creators and as products of their own individual social world or reality” (pp. 324-325). They developed a two-dimensional model on the types of social reality and the zones of relevance or the continuum based on the distance of social elements from life experiences. Adoni and Mane identified three types of reality, namely: objective social reality, which exists independent of individual thinking—that is considered factual; symbolic social reality, which consists of symbolic contents or representations like art, literature or media; and the subjective social reality, which is an amalgamation of both the objective and the symbolic realities. Further, the individual’s subjective reality is perceived to have ‘close zones of relevance’ when the individual is frequently exposed to personal social elements, actors, and direct experiences such as professional relationships while ‘remote zones of relevance’ are situated in a more abstract, and general social element which the individual does not have direct access to, such as public opinion, social system, ideology and power structure.

The approaches and related studies discussed in this chapter provide a foundation in analyzing the disaster communication between the local government and

the public as they initiate and engage in online discourse within the first two quarters of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Chapter IV

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter describes the qualitative method of data collection and analysis required to answer the problems posed in this study. The online disaster communication, through Facebook posts, of a local government unit represented by the Public Information Office (PIO) and Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (LDRRMO) during the first few months, from 01 January 2020 to 30 June 2020, of the pandemic in one of the cities in the Philippines was investigated. The public's responses, through comments and reactions, concerning the LGU's Facebook posts were categorized into themes and categories, and analyzed. From these, the social construction of reality that surfaced in the online communication was examined.

Research Approach

Qualitative content analysis approach and thematic analysis were used in the present study. Qualitative research approach is useful in making sense of the meaning people bring in the complex communication process. According to Lindlof (1991 in Keyton, 2019), qualitative methods "are sensitive to the social construction of meaning" (p. 22) and to the experiences of interlocutors during communicative interactions, which can be captured through text, audio, or video forms to preserve its naturalness. As a method that aims to explain the communication phenomenon within a specific context, qualitative approach aims for subjectivity which accepts varied and multiple plausible interpretations derived from symbols, discourses, and media operated by human actors who engage in the world to understand their environment, and to "pursue their situated, evolving interests" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019, p. 63).

Within constructivist or social constructivism worldview, qualitative method is closely associated with interpretivism which describes multiple realities based on the lived experiences of those involved. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011a in Sombounkhanh, 2014) stated that this approach “provides an in depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meaning, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviors” (p. 30). The theoretical perspective of this study is based on interpretivism.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a qualitative research method that is used in subjective analysis and interpretation of the content of text data which can be in verbal, print, or online forms. It is a means to analyze how communicators use language in expressing themselves. In the qualitative analysis of content, Zhang and Widemuth (n.d.) purported that:

Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner (p. 1).

Three approaches to qualitative content analysis which all adhere to the naturalistic paradigm but differ in codes developed, origins of codes, and threats to trustworthiness include conventional, which derived its coding categories from the text data; directed, which uses a specific theory as a guide in initial codes; and summative, which interprets the underlying context after counting and comparing keywords and contents (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Since the present study has no preconceived categories and allows categories to flow from the data, the conventional content analysis was used.

Thematic Analysis

Different themes of comments produced by the Facebook users (the public) in response to the COVID-19 related posts shared in the Facebook pages of the CT PIO and CT DRRMO were described and used as basis in describing the social reality which can be constructed from this online discourse. According to Quintos and Iwayama (2017), based on the sentiments of the posts, which are represented by different themes representing negative and positive reactions, a “constructed reality can be made” (p. 42).

Research Data

User-generated contents which are publicly viewable and available such as texts, images, reactions, and videos from the communicators—i.e., the local government represented by the PIO and LDRRMO, and the public who interacted or reacted in the Facebook posts of the said offices—who posted, commented, shared, and uploaded information in the Facebook pages served as the unit of analysis. These data were manually coded, classified and analyzed.

Franz, Marsh, Chen, and Teo (2019) pointed out that data from Facebook users “offer substantial opportunities for qualitative researchers” as revealed in their 23 reviewed studies that use qualitative methods in analyzing user-generated Facebook texts. One of the ways they described this social media qualitative research methods is passive analysis which refers to the study of information patterns of Facebook users such as identifying relational themes associated with posts and comments. This pattern searched was evident in the analysis of the present data where 558 Facebook posts from January 1, 2020 to June 30, 2020 were collected from the PIO Facebook page while 134 posts were collected from the LDRRMO Facebook page, of which 491

and 95 are COVID-19-related posts or shares, respectively. Miscellaneous posts such as birthday greetings, other government-service announcements, and non-COVID-19-related posts are excluded in the analysis since these have no direct contribution in the disaster communication which is the concern of this study.

Data Collection

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on all the COVID-19-related Facebook posts of the LGU's Public Information Office (PIO) and the Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (LDRRMO) posted from 01 January 2020 to 30 June 2020. The process began by collecting all available Facebook posts, with reference to COVID-19 from the LGU's Facebook pages, which was done using manual screening, screenshots of posts, and encoding in excel sheets and word file. These data offered information and perspectives as to the content and how the LGU communicated with their constituents, and which information were prioritized for public dissemination and action. The data source started on January 1, 2020, a day after China formally informed the WHO of an unknown pneumonia form. However, COVID-19-related posts only became visible in the LGU's Facebook pages within March 2020, when the WHO finally declared COVID-19 virus as pandemic on March 11, 2020; thus, most of the data were present around March 2020 until June 2020. The keyword "COVID-19" and its relation such as *pandemic*, *safety protocols*, *quarantine*, *lockdown*, and the like served as the screening method in harvesting the LGU's social media posts.

On the other hand, a thematic analysis was performed on the public's responses to the LGU's posts that are potential sources of social constructs. All

screenshots of the public's responses were scrubbed of names and anonymized to protect their privacy. The themes that emerge in the text data were mapped out.

Aside from the primary data, interviews with LGU representatives were done to gain perspectives regarding the government's disaster communication. Interviews with LDRRMO and PIO heads were conducted in three separate occasions in the city hall particularly in the mayor's office and in the LDRRM office. Consent to participate in the study was given and the key informants were able to discuss the plans and activities of their offices as well as share files like emergency response plans and procedures, roles and responsibilities of LDRRMO council, implementation of mitigation strategies for communities with local COVID-19 transmission, and the LDRRMO's guidelines and manual of operations. The inevitability of community quarantine and lockdown in the city prompted the maximum use of their Facebook pages to communicate with their constituents amidst the current pandemic. The PIO and LDRRMO Facebook pages served as the main online platform where safety protocols, donation drives, and government instructions and announcements were posted or shared almost daily since March 2020. The instructions and protocols addressed to the public online were also implemented by police officers and barangay officials who were visible in various vicinities.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the collected data for content analysis and thematic analysis, emerging topics and keywords were categorized into themes. These categories and sub-categories were illustrated together with examples from the posts. Corbin and Strauss's (2008) open coding process indicates that data are examined "line by line and codes [are] attached to words or groups of words" (p. 193). Each code is encoded

by: 1) date of the post, 2) uploaded posts (i.e., original texts, contents of video or documents, shared videos and documents) of the LGU represented by the Public Information Office and Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office, and 3) the public's responses and reactions to the said posts such as "like," "share," and "comment." The comments were then categorized and thematized. Thus, the unit of analysis is the online posts and texts on this online platform. Using Zhang and Widemuth's (n.d.) process of qualitative content analysis, the following steps were incorporated in the present study:

1. Preparation of the Data
2. Defining the Unit of Analysis
3. Developing Categories and a Coding Scheme
4. Testing the Coding Scheme on a Sample Text
5. Coding the Text
6. Assessing the Coding Consistency
7. Drawing Conclusions from the Coded Data
8. Reporting the methods and findings

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was not sought since the primary data gathered were available on the Facebook pages of government offices which are considered for public consumptions. The responses and reactions of the public to these posts are also open for public viewing and can be accessed without permission from the individual Facebook users. While the data analyzed were open for public reading/viewing and access, efforts were still made to protect the identity of the sources of data who, in this case, are the research participants.

Likewise, the heads of the Public Information Office and the Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office gave their consent before interviews were conducted.

Chapter V

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the online communication and the social reality on disaster by looking into the local government unit's online disaster communication, the online discourse that occurred in responding to the said disaster communication, and the social reality that surfaced in this online communication. The first part of this chapter presents the LGU's online disaster communication through its communication arms, the city's Public Information Office (PIO) and the city's Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (DRRMO), and the public's response to the said posts during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. The second part reveals the themes that support the potential social construction of reality evident in the online communication particularly through social media.

Online Communication on Disaster

This section is divided in three parts: The first part presents the online communication of the local government unit while the second part presents the online communication of the netizens in response to the LGU's online communication. The third part explains what the online communication reveals about disaster.

Local Government Unit's Online Communication

As explained in the methodology section, the time frame covered in the present study started from January 1, 2020, the day after Chinese authorities alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) of a pneumonia case in China, and ended on June 30, 2020, the day after the WHO marks its six-month anniversary of the COVID-19

outbreak. News of COVID-19 was first posted in the city's Facebook pages on January 27, 2020 and February 4, 2020 through its CT PIO and CT DRRMO accounts, respectively. As a communication channel in a crisis or disaster situation, online social networking websites like Facebook provide immediate access to up-to-date information and news (Atkinson, Kim, and Lee, 2021), enhance disaster communication process (Paton and Irons, 2016), are suited to establishing online communities (Anikeeva, Steenkamp and Arbon in Kapur, Bezek, and Dyal, 2017), and even empower people. Because Facebook can aggregate and disseminate real-time information, it became a valuable resource for local government units to capitalize on as their online communication platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two Facebook pages accommodated the information dissemination goals of the LGU through the city's public information office (CT PIO), and the city's disaster risk reduction management office (CT DRRMO), which are responsible for cascading official health information and updates, and responding to queries related to but not limited to health. Prior to the pandemic, the contents featured updates ranging from the progress of public works and highways, fire drills and safety precautions, weather and traffic advisories, crime and disaster responses, and anti-drug campaigns to light news like civil weddings, birthday greetings, and various sectors' activities like basketball games and competitions. When the actuality of the pandemic in the country produced perturbation and serious threats as evident in daily news broadcasts and online posts, the LGU activated its online presence and relied on Facebook to provide timely, reliable, and accurate information.

City's Public Information Office (PIO). The PIO's Facebook page is primarily the government's first official online platform for information dissemination. Few COVID-19-related posts were created directly by the CT PIO FB page's administrators and/or

authorized representatives. These original online posts included city council meetings, information drive on social distancing and safety protocols such as curfews and ECQ curfew violators, weekly monitoring updates, contact tracing and swabbing updates, transportation services, border restrictions, relief operations, donations, and the like. During the time frame of the data gathering, many of the LGU's posts were shared from the city mayor's Facebook page where frequent and almost daily news and updates were uploaded.

The city's COVID-19 Monitoring or Update post, an original post by the PIO composed of text and numbers, received a considerable number of engagements compared to other original uploads. This type of post provided an almost-daily update on active cases, recovered individuals, confirmed cases, and deaths with respective numbers per barangay. Aside from underscoring new positive cases and new recoveries, brief descriptions of positive cases were provided in terms of age, gender, barangay, swab test date, and purpose of the said test in the caption. Through infographics and charts, the LGU delivered data and information in a visually appealing format.

City's Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (DRRMO). The city's DRRMO Facebook Page is the other social media platform facilitated by the said local government. This page is populated with shared posts from partner organizations particularly from the Department of Science and Technology-Philippine Atmospheric Geographical Astronomical System (DOST-PAG-ASA) and the city's PIO. Since its creation in 2019, most of the page's contents are on weather reports but updates on earthquake drills, motor vehicular accidents, fire response, rescue operations, and DRRMO personnel's activities are also occasionally available.

During the time frame of the data gathering, their posts showcased the coordination between the city's health office and the city's DRRMO in giving an orientation on the recent outbreak of the virus to the personnel of CTDRRMO composed of emergency medical responders (Figure 2). COVID-19 hotlines were shared from the DOH's website and this was followed by another post when the city mayor called for an emergency meeting with the city council, barangay captains, and the head of the city's DRRMO (Figure 3). In honor of the province's executive order, the city supported its mandate to cancel all cultural and sports activities to avoid the spread of the flu virus. During this time, there were just three confirmed cases with one death in the Philippines.

Figure 2.

CTDRRMO personnel orientation on the recent outbreak.



Figure 3.

Emergency meeting of the city council.



Framework of the LGU's Online Disaster Communication

Although the resources and capacities of the local government are “quickly saturated due to the sheer demand” of the public’s assistance, concerted and effective information exchanges and coordination are undeniably necessary for the community to survive any disaster and crisis events. Timely communication, information gathering and coordination are crucial to assist those in need (Alonso, Schuck-Paim and Asrar in Kapur, Bezek, and Dyal, 2017, p. 178). Moorthy, Benny, and Gill (2018, p. 52) explained the importance of managing information:

The management of information among various stakeholders in natural and human induced disasters is fundamental to the mitigation and effective disaster-relief operations. The process of communication during and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster is a vital part of response and recovery, as it connects disaster victims with first responders, support systems, and other family members. As such, dependable and accessible communication systems are crucial to a community’s resilience (The Associated Press and NORC, 2013).

The said local government unit disseminated information by communicating their plans and actions to the public using their official Facebook pages as their main social

media platform, engaging in interviews and press releases that can also be heard in televisions and radios, and tasking assigned barangay officials to personally deliver news and instructions to far-flung areas that have limited or no access to internet. Facebook is used as a two-way communication channel that facilitated the dissemination of COVID-19-related posts, and allowed the public to directly interact with the local government. Currently, the city's official Facebook pages bridge the communication gap between the local government and the public, and encourage discourse to occur between and among these interlocutors. One of the important factors in considering successful online communication is the city mayor's attitude and behavior in using social media (DRRMO head, personal interview, October 2020). As part of the Gen Y or millennial demographic cohort, this local official maximized Facebook in updating his constituents and even promoting local businesses. Within the time frame allotted for the data gathering, the highest engagements in the posts happened when the mayor offered his salary to barangay personnel for eight months in order to distribute the social amelioration program (SAP) to those who are in dire need during the lockdown period.

The present data are supported by Jayasekara's (2019) study whose findings revealed that during the disaster phase, Facebook is massively used to share posts related to "disaster warning, request for help or rescue, share information about rescue missions, share contact numbers of rescue teams, request donation items, coordinate aid distribution, ask for volunteer work, and provide feedback about the ongoing funding programs" (p. 191) including donation collection and distribution. The use of Facebook in disaster communication has been highlighted in several recent studies (i.e., Atkinson, Kim, and Lee, 2021; Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini, and Lyness, 2020;

Mori, Barabaschi, Cantoni and Virtuani, 2020; Jayasekara, 2018; Finau, Tarai, Varea, Titifanue, and Kant, 2018; Paton and Irons, 2016).

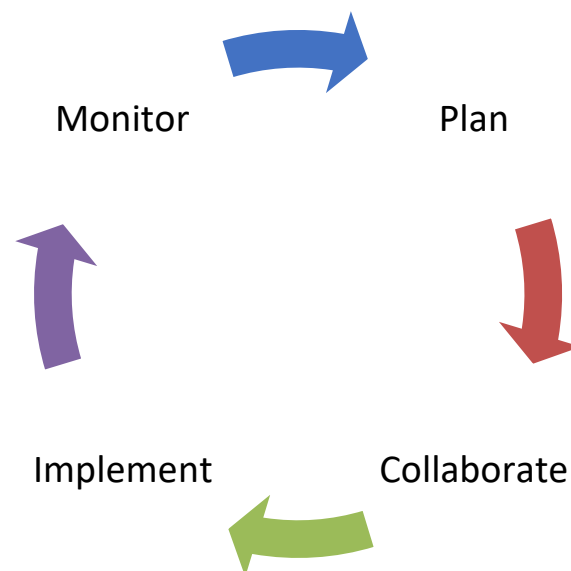
Haddow and Haddow (2014) pointed out that aside from “communicating policies, goals and priorities to staff, partners, and participants which enhances support and promotes a more efficient disaster management operation...establishing partnership with the media and active participation in social media are keys to implementing a successful strategy” (p. 1). As emphasized by the city’s DRRM head (personal interview, September 22, 2020), one of the contributors in helping emergency response was the social media, particularly Facebook, utilized by the city’s public information office that prioritizes disseminating government instructions and advisories to the public. Two COVID-19 hotlines were also set up to address different concerns—albeit similar in answering emergency calls—the PIO COVID-19 hotline catered to calls which are non-immediate cases while the DRRM hotline responded to life-threatening situations such as patients with comorbidities or showing symptoms of the disease. According to the said DRRM head (ibid.), these Facebook pages were personally monitored by the mayor and one or two selected staff who responded through private messages (PM) where the public’s misinterpretation of the message is reduced and where concerns of the message sender are discussed and properly addressed.

Based on the current data, this research thematizes the LGU’s posts illustrating their efforts and actions during the first six months of the pandemic. These are categorized into four, namely *planning*, *collaborating*, *implementing*, and *monitoring* as presented in Figure 4. Birkland and Schneider (n.d.), Farnham (2006), Flores and Asuncion (2020), and Haddow and Haddow (2014) also mentioned one or two of these elements in their research but not its entirety. The findings of the present study are

quite similar with that of Flores and Asuncion (2020) who made use of an elicitation study to reveal how local government units make use of Facebook in communicating with their constituents, particularly the LGUs' regular updates and reports, promotion of self-protective behaviors, encouragement of civic engagement, and addressing fake news. Posts like birthday greetings and other non-COVID-19 related posts are considered miscellaneous and are excluded in the present investigation.

Figure 4.

Four themes of the LGU's posts.



Planning. Thoughtful planning needs to take into account the information to be communicated, the recipient of such information, the urgent matters to be prioritized, and the important matters to be addressed. Root (2002 in Birkland and Schneider, n.d.) revealed that “planning must balance the costs of information dissemination against the need for information to be quickly communicated and immediately acted upon” (p. 29). The LGU, which is the subject of this present investigation, shared one of its planning activities which involved meeting concerned parties and stakeholders

who are decision makers in the community such as the Department of Education representatives, barangay captains, counselors, city health officials, business owners, disaster risk reduction management personnel, and department heads. The city mayor initiated this first call of action during COVID-19's detection stage in the Philippines to discuss the current pandemic situation and plan with various heads, although the details of the plans were not posted online during the early stage of the virus, i.e., January and February 2020. He also shared plans for border restrictions, through online posts and interviews, after his meetings with the province's governor to update the public. As pointed out by the DRRMO head (personal interview, September 22, 2020), the "planning of the city and province is integrated."

Collaboration. In concordance with planning, collaboration illustrates the coordination of communicating information from trustworthy sources within and among organizations such as from the World Health Organization, Department of Health, Cebu Province, and the local media. Although coordination within the LGU network is expected, collaboration in this context refers to inter-agency communication. The information from the authoritative organization or figure was shared, through infographics, video clips, photos and text, and links, in the online media platforms of allied organizations which have online followers in the local community. A space for announcements from basic necessities and service utilities like electricity, water, and telecommunication was also available. This phase also covers 'pakig-iguonay' (*Trans.: brotherhood*) where relief goods operations and donations from public and private sectors were publicly acknowledged inspiring and encouraging others to do the same. May (2006 in Haddow and Haddow, 2014, p. 82) suggested greater collaboration between government and the media, between the various forms of

media, and between the media and the community to improve disaster communication.

Implementation. The plans and collaborative efforts conducted by the local government were aligned with the country's implementation of safety measures and protocol guidelines. An emergency operations center (EOC), where the COVID-19 task force was housed, was set up inside the mayor's office where retired military officers, doctors, staff, and other trained volunteers worked daily. Aside from sharing infographics and following instructions from the WHO, the DOH and the national government, executive orders (EO) from the governor and the mayor were implemented. The city's EOs were created to strengthen the mandates on health protocols, and quarantine procedures which were locally contextualized. A trunk line was set up to respond to calls while staff members, and even the city mayor, were responsible for responding to social media inquiries 24/7. Barangay officials, personnel from CT DRRMO and Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), and local police were deployed to areas that had no access to broadcast and social media. A number of posts such as city advisories and daily updates were also shared from the city mayor's Facebook page which tend to have higher following and post engagements compared to the LGU's official pages; however, original publication materials on monitoring updates were also uploaded almost weekly especially after the first confirmed case in the city. One important factor that is crucial in the implementation process is the public's cooperation in following government mandates.

Monitoring. The public's cooperation and strict compliance of the implemented protocols and safety guidelines ordered by the national and local governments was monitored by the personnel of CTDRMO, Philippine National Police (PNP), Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), city traffic enforcers, and local police officers. Checkpoints

and borders were strictly imposed especially during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) and its implementation was monitored by police personnel who assured the public that these were followed by checking quarantine passes, roving in public places such as public markets, parks, and malls, and observing checkpoints. Restrictive measures for residents such as scheduling of market operations, monitoring of local prices for essential items and safety items, misting or decontamination operation or disinfection of public buses, city hall, and public market, curfew implementation for students and senior citizens, and apprehension of social distancing violators were also observed.

These elements—planning, collaborating, implementing, and monitoring—of online disaster communication are evident in the posts produced by the said local government as they regularly provided updates or reports on local response and management, shared policy regulations, safety protocols, restrictions, and other information from legitimate sources, and even addressed misinformation and other issues related to the pandemic. Sharing of the same message on both organization's Facebook accounts is conspicuous and pervasive. The pandemic prompted the local government to maximize its online presence in disseminating information, explaining procedures and processes (e.g., quarantine pass application, social amelioration program, public market schedule, transportation schedule), and encouraging the public to interact, and engage with them not only through the social media but also through the 24-hour hotline services, help desk, information centers, and the respective barangay officials.

Public's Online Communication

The public's primary means of obtaining and interacting with information related to disaster actively transitioned online with social media platforms creating opportunities for health experts, governments, traditional media, and other concerned stakeholders to maximize their network reach, reach out to target audiences, and engage the public. The city's local government has a clear infrastructure and communication capabilities to inform its constituents directly, through social media, of its plans, actions, and the cooperation needed from the community. It communicated a clear direction of what the city aims to do, what it has been doing, and what it demands from the public. Through the city's Facebook pages, relevant authorities headed by the city mayor responded immediately to situations that might have been blown out of proportion such as when a fake news of a confirmed COVID-19 patient in the city was posted online. The public's anxiety was appeased when the online user who posted inaccurate information was apprehended and his public apology was posted together with the LGU's confirmation of the fake news.

The online discourse, identified during the investigation period which encompassed 01 January 2020 until 30 June 2020, is based on the timeline when the coronavirus and its aftermath first started to be visible in the LGU's online posts. Among the consistent LGU online posts were monitoring updates, advisories, free rides, and donation acknowledgement. As mentioned, majority of the CT PIO posts related to COVID-19 were shared links and infographics from the DOH, online local news FB page, and the city mayor's FB page. Consequently, majority of the CT DRRMO posts were shared links from the CT PIO.

The posts with the most active responses (i.e., emoticons, likes and shares) from PIO and DRRMO Facebook pages were the repost from the mayor's Facebook

account when he offered his April-November 2020 salary to barangay personnel (see Figure 5), and an original post showing the medical personnel in PPA uniforms huddled together in prayer (see Figure 6).

Figure 5.

Repost on the mayor's offering of his salary.

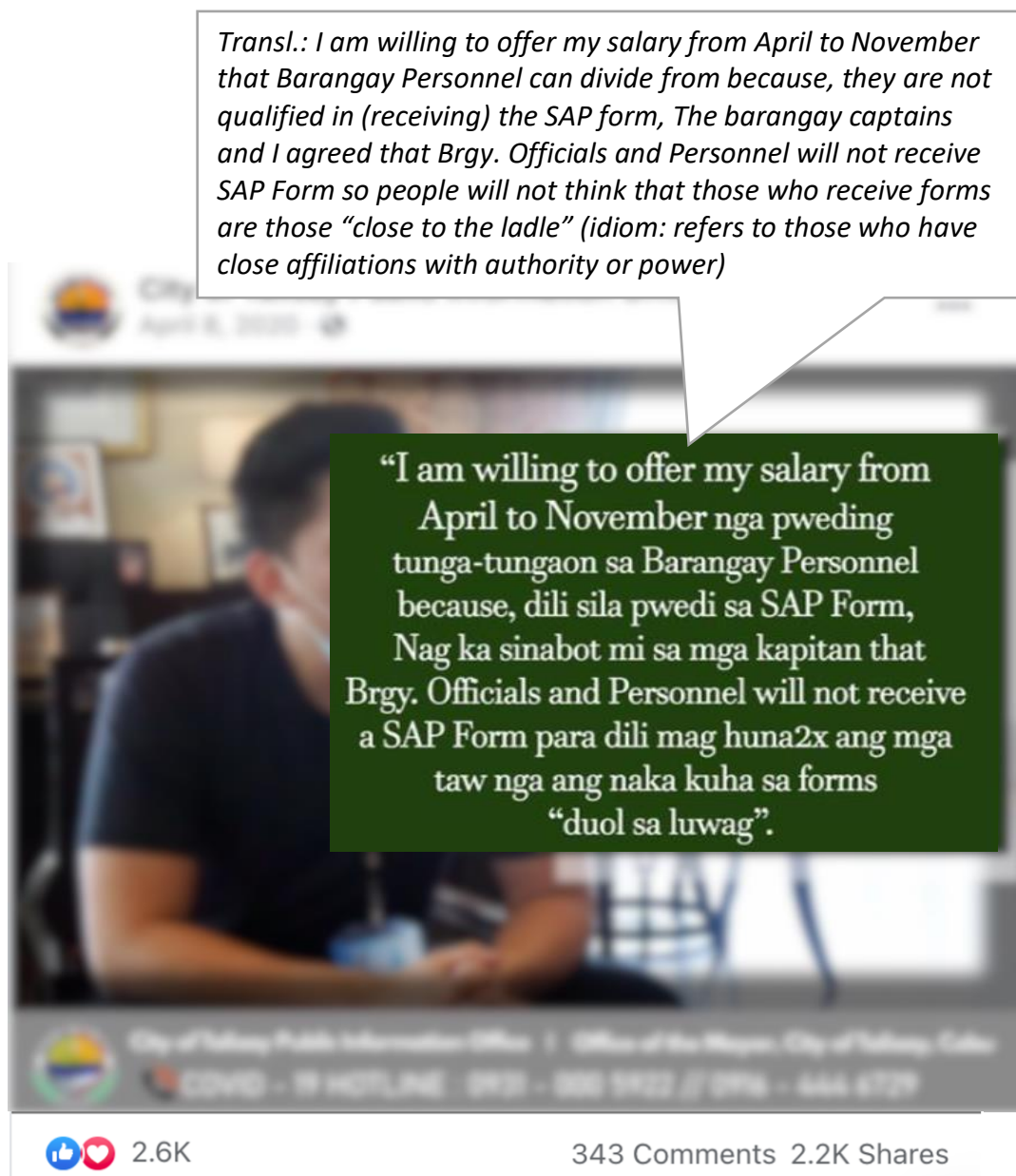


Figure 6.

Medical frontliners huddled and prayed together.



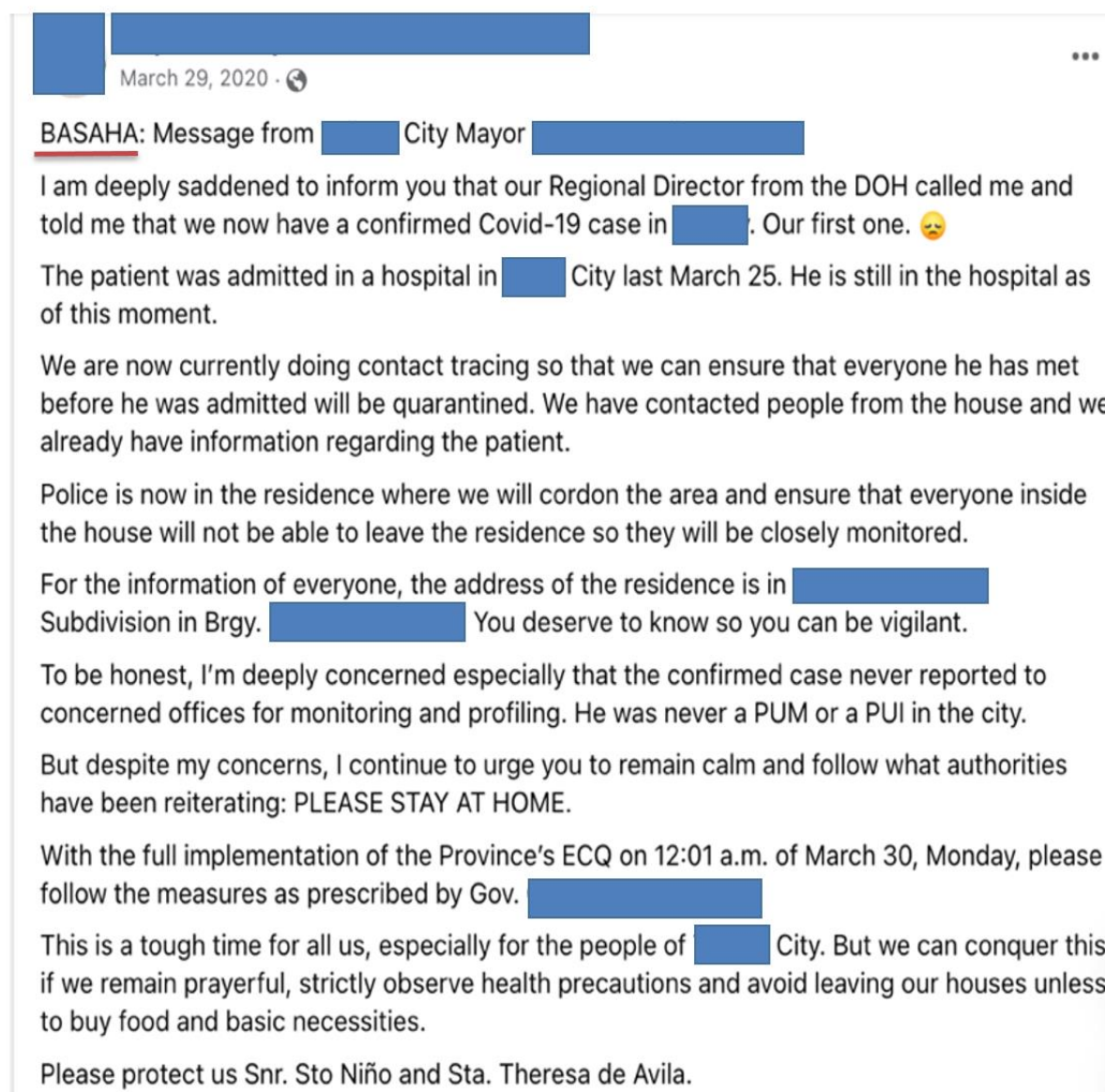
Seiter (2016) reported researchers' discovery on why people like, share and comment  on Facebook—the Liking function gives positive feedback, connects with things that one cares about on Facebook, or shows solidarity; Commenting is used when one has something to say and makes people connected; and Sharing brings valuable content to one another, to feel more involved in the world, and to get the word out about causes they care about among others. Findings of the present study revealed that comments were less likely utilized compared to liking and sharing relevant information with others particularly family and friends. The findings are similar to the study of Stephenson et al. (2017) who suggested the investigation of photographs with the most frequently shared or generate the most public interaction. In the present study, the top two posts from CT PIO and CT DRRMO with the greatest number of shares and elicited high number of engagements from the public did not have captivating photos or captions but the messages conveyed were clear to the public: the mayor's salary for eight months will be given to barangay personnel, and his mandate, Executive Order 21, to close all non-essential stores and establishments, and forbid the residents from going out on Sunday will be imposed.

Farina's (2018 in Solstice Media, 2019) examination of Facebook comment threads revealed that a post that projects "clear action, such as posing a question rather than an unclear statement, is more likely to receive responses, and that in order to increase participation, organizations need to engage "their own comment threads by responding to people who have posted comment response to their initial messages" (n.p.). Most of the PIO posts started with a word or catch phrase in the local language such as *pagmatnongon* (be aware), *pagpakabana* (be concern), *pahibalo* (Notice), *basaha* (read), or *tan-awa* (watch) followed by an original post or shared post

consisting of texts and/or images. Figure 7 illustrates this call to read (i.e., *basaha*) the message from the mayor.

Figure 7.

Shared post on the city's first confirmed COVID-19 case.



Responses from the pages' administrators were evident, albeit done occasionally, in the threads; however, as the head of the PIO (personal interview, October 2020) revealed, they usually responded using private messages to clarify and

address individual concerns to avoid misinterpretation and miscommunication. Three types of post are worth highlighting because the first one received backlash from the public while the last two were consistent posts posted weekly on the LGU's FB pages: *misinformation or fake news, civic engagements, and monitoring updates*.

Misinformation or Fake News. Based on the interview with the city's DRRMO head (personal interview, October 2020), responding during the onset of COVID-19 was more challenging compared to other disaster situations because of the inability to address people's concerns in a face-to-face set up, and the mandatory practice of physical distancing. People turned to social media in discovering and uncovering information which sometimes led to misinterpretation and unwarranted exposure to fake news if unmonitored. Haddow and Haddow (2014) purported that the top-down information model is already rejected by the media and the public, and that the command-and-control structure of information dissemination is no longer within the hold of government agencies since everyone has become news producers and consumers.

One such case occurred when an online user using multiple false accounts spread the admittance of a COVID-19 patient in the city's district hospital. The confirmed ex-employee was eventually apprehended and was required to publicly apologize to netizens for spreading the said fake news. The post of his apology—the first COVID-19-related information posted in the CT DRRMO Facebook page as discussed in the first section of this chapter—garnered numerous engagements. Some online users commented whether the CT DRRMO's post was legitimate (i.e., *how legit is this? This is soo alarming if this is true?*), and asked for verification (i.e., *Please validate*). Others seemed emotional in their comments as evident in their use of local language (i.e., *Yawah b4 mo magpost ing ani siguraduha usa.. pataka taka lang mo*

just to create panic... be responsible—Transl.: Devil, before you post something like this, make sure first...your carelessness will just create panic). Others contributed information regarding the identity of the individual (i.e., *Taga [REDACTED] mani tawhana nag puyo sa [REDACTED]*—*Transl.: This person is from [REDACTED] and lives near [REDACTED]*), sought actions from the local government (i.e., *I hope legal action should be opted by your city administration to discourage future fearmongers...*), and criticized those who shared the news without proper verification (i.e., *Katong mga ihas share dayun—Transl.: Those gullible people automatically share*). This is one of the few posts where the local government responded to the comments of the netizens as seen in Figures 8 and 9. Moreover, the CT DRRMO FB page administrator also posted a link to a report from a local print media debunking the information with the caption “FYI.NOT TRUE” which stirred panic, anxiety and the anger of the public for this unverified information prompting them to criticize the local media.

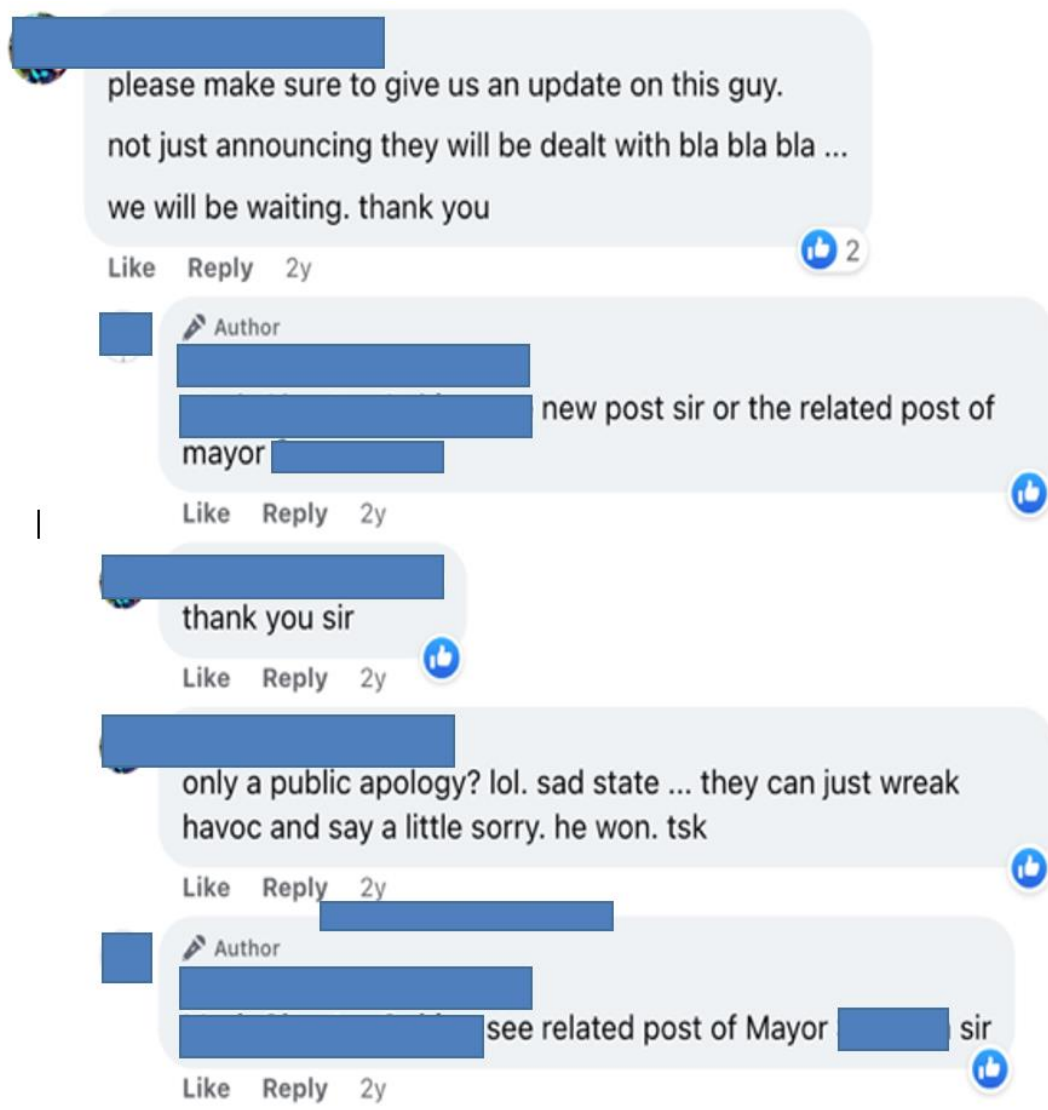
Figure 8

Online Engagements of the online users and LGU (Sample 1).



Figure 9.

Online Engagements of the online users and LGU (Sample 2).



Civic Engagements. Monitoring updates and community involvement were the two posts which populated both the local government's Facebook pages. Civic engagements refer to the acknowledgement posts of donors and contributors. Unlike Flores and Asuncion's (2020) findings, the present study shows that the local government did not post calls for support and donations; rather, their posts related to civic engagement showed photos of private individuals and firms who donated food (e.g., canned goods, sacks of rice), and safety protocol gears (e.g., face masks,

protective gear, etc.) introduced by captions of gratefulness and encouraging words for others to follow as showcased in Figure 10. Words of gratefulness, encouragement, and inspiration were evident in the threads on posts under civic engagements.

Figure 10.

Donor acknowledgements.

Transl.: *Even with the threat of the dreaded virus, another [redacted] with a soft heart is present.*

Sir [redacted], of Brgy [redacted], delivered his donation of face mask to be used by our frontliners who are facing various emergency calls every day.

The facemask is special as it has a printed seal of the city.

Thank you so much Sir. You are one of the [redacted] that should be emulated by others.

[redacted]
March 29, 2020 · 🌐

Bisan sa hudlat sa kagaw nga gikahadlokan, duna na usab laing [redacted] nga dunay malumong kasingkasing.

Gihatud ni Sir [redacted] taga [redacted], ang iyahang donasyon nga face mask para magamit sa atuang mga frontliners nga kada adlaw nagtubag sa nagkadaiyang alarma.

Espesyal ang face mask nga gitakatakan pa sa selyo sa atuang dakbayan.

Daghang Salamat Sir [redacted], usa ka sa mga [redacted] nga angay sumbanan sa uban!



Raggio and Folse (2011) underscored studies expressing gratitude and highlighted its economic and social marketing benefits. They revealed that “public expressions of gratitude encourage those who did not participate in prior relief/recovery activities to do so in the future” (p. 168). The local government’s recognition of individual and group’s donations through their online posts may, as Raggio and Folse (ibid) pointed out, have functioned as a social reward for those who have participated and as a motivator for future participation among those who have not.

Monitoring Updates. The monitoring updates, created by the CT PIO and shared by the CT DRMMO, refer to the infographics or situational reports which presented, almost weekly, the number of confirmed cases, persons under investigation and persons under monitoring. Also observable in the said report is the additional information provided by the city mayor concerning the status of contact tracing and the local government’s assurance of “providing up-to-date news to the community whether this be bad or good” (CT Mayor’s post, May 26, 2020) and his request to pray for those patients in their facility. In some posts like the one exemplified in Figure 11, the local government acknowledged suggestions from the public and incorporated these in the next round of monitoring update infographic.

Figure 11.

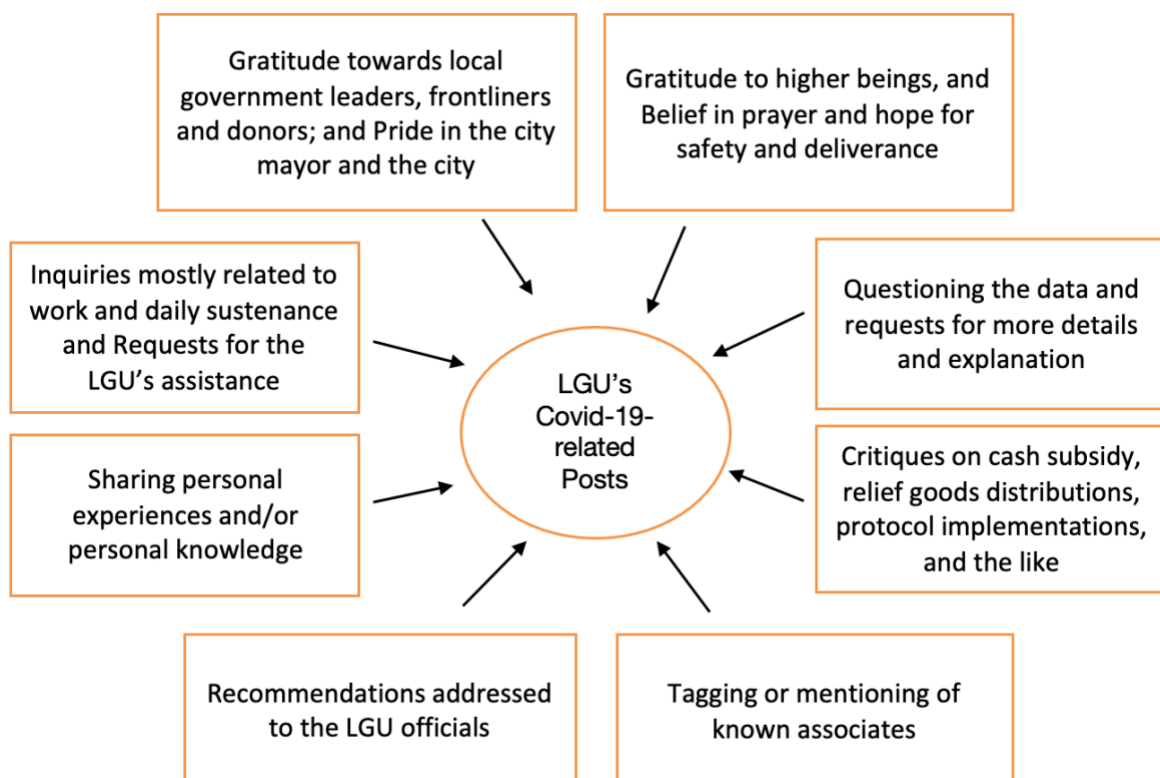
Recommendation from an online user and the LGU’s response.



Based on the data coding from the retrieved comments, these themes illustrated in Figure 12 are identified: *gratitude towards higher beings and belief in prayer and hope for safety deliverance; gratitude and pride towards the local government officials, particularly the city mayor; and gratefulness for frontliners and donors.* Also apparent were *inquiries and requests related to work, daily sustenance and clear data as well as suggestions for the LGU, and critiques on cash subsidy, relief goods distributions, and protocol implementations.* Moreover, *sharing of personal experiences and tagging of names* were also found.

Figure 12.

Themes of Online Discourse related to Disaster Communication.

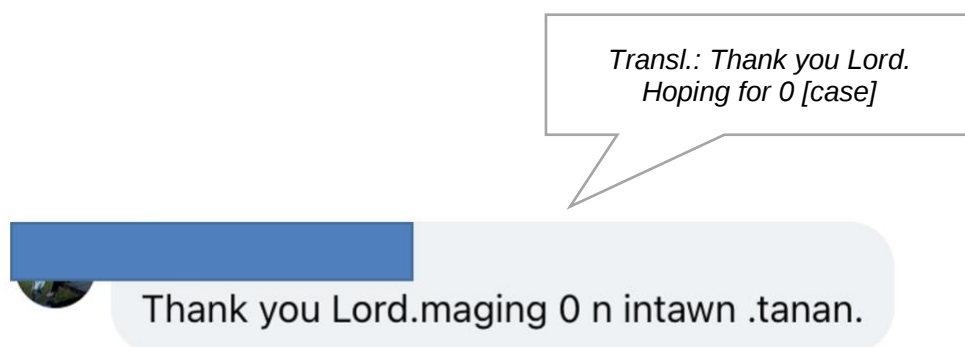


Gratitude to higher beings, and belief in prayer and hope for safety and deliverance. Gratitude refers to an appreciation for what an individual receives.

Majority of the local government's monitoring updates received comments like "Praise the Lord," "Thank you Lord and Mama Mary," "Praise, Santo Niño," and other patron saints like St. Joseph or St. Teresa de Avila. Even some of the posts of the city mayor showcased this act of gratitude and prayer. An article from the Harvard Medical School (2021) pointed out that being grateful helps people "connect to something larger than themselves as individuals—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power." Bednar (in Weaver, 2017) attributed this sense of gratitude to Filipinos' resilience, resourcefulness, and outstanding virtue of being grateful despite many and frequent natural disasters they face. Figure 13 exemplifies one such instance.

Figure 13.

Expression of gratitude towards higher beings.



Findings from Adisaputri (2016) revealed that religious beliefs and practices "can be one of the capacities that bind local communities together and contribute to successful coping with disasters" (p. ix). Canete (2021) commented that the "faith in Christ takes precedence over the destructive force of the pandemic" (p. 2). Numerous online posts that call out to higher beings for hope, protection and salvation seemed to imply a recognition of omnipotent and intangible beings who may have played a role in the current pandemic, crisis, or disaster, and have the capacity to change the course

of fate. This faith in the unknown offers a certain comfort, i.e., reasons for the existence of a pandemic or disaster may not be understood but with trust and steadfast faith, the situation may turn out for the better.

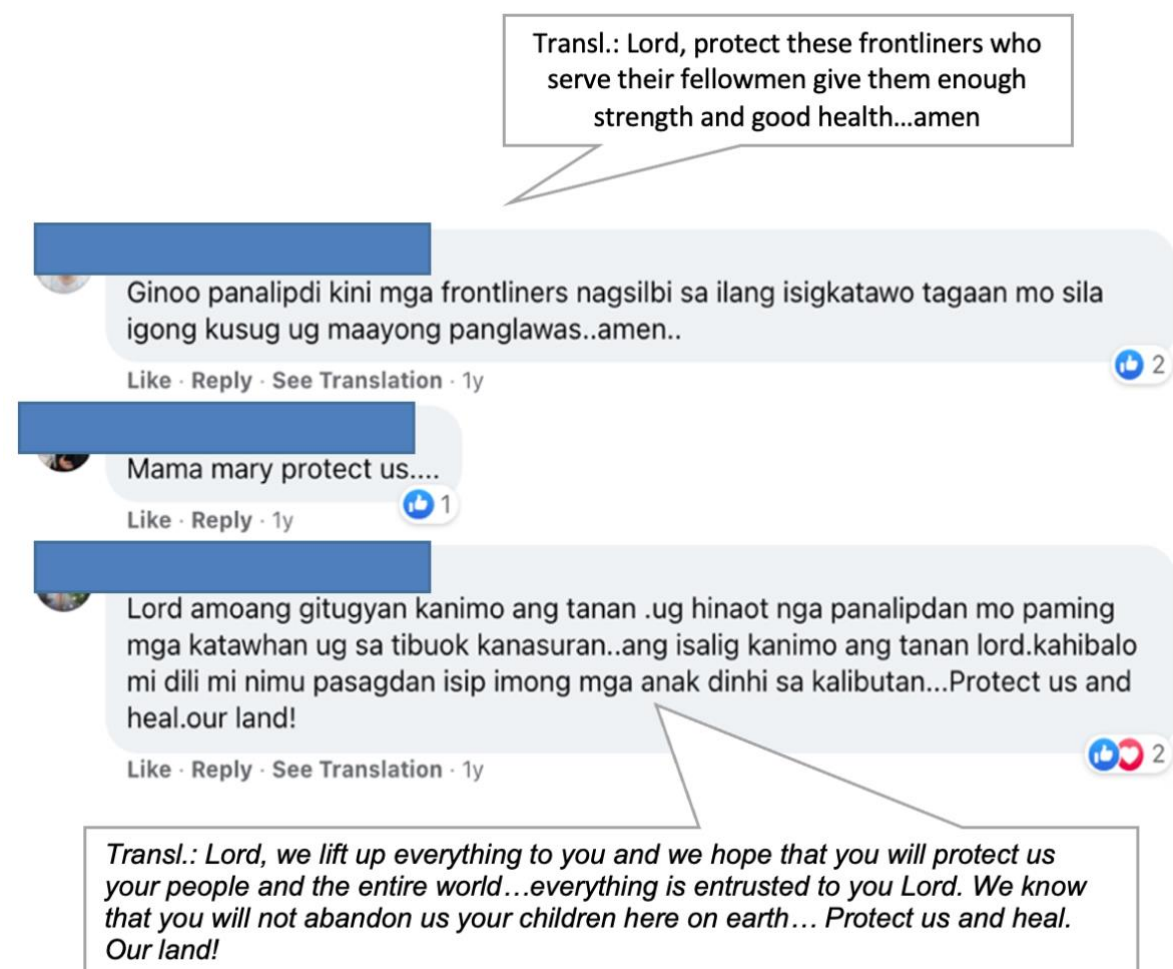
Haddow and Haddow (2004) articulated that “Changing our beliefs during a crisis or emergency may be difficult. Beliefs are very strongly held and are not easily altered” (p. 203). Cebuanos are highly religious (Dioko, 2006). Religiosity and spiritual beliefs are usually associated with Filipinos, who in the midst of calamities and disaster call upon a supreme being—God—and other saints who, they believe, will protect them and answer their prayers. Many are known devotees of Santo Niño, the child Jesus known for granting miracles, and rely on their strong faith for him and belief for deliverance. In many of the posts, “God bless you/us/the mayor,” “praying for their recoveries,” “Mama Mary protect us,” “hopefully Lord God, all the test results will all be negative..pray lang jud ta (*Transl.: let’s just pray*),” and “ayaw mo pag too anang fake news ampo ta ug atong isalig sa ginoo ang tanan” (*Transl.: don’t believe in fake news let us pray and trust everything to God*) and similar texts were present.

According to Sun, Deng, and Qi (2018), religion is “firmly embedded in local daily life and has become an integrated element of culture” (p. 588). Its presence, or absence, is intertwined in people’s identity, their values and traditions, experiences, and relation with others. For instance, Catholics are encouraged to be charitable and encouraged to donate to the church and to the less fortunate as a sign of spreading the love of Christ. These are evident in the online posts where individuals and groups from different walks of life contributed what they have, either goods or services, to those who are need. Others saw the pandemic as a wrath of God for the sins of humanity, and were acting based on the notion that whatever necessary precautions they do, such as protect themselves using face masks, if it is the will of God that they

perish, then “thy will be done.” Their “beliefs influence their understanding or response to a series of disasters” (Ha, 2015, p. 1316) as illustrated in Figure 14, and such beliefs are reflected in their way of accepting the situation as it exists. Although religious beliefs and faith may constraint people’s responses to disasters, their “religious attributes can also foster and promote individual and social disaster resilience” (ibid.).

Figure 14.

Expressions of faith and hope.



Simons (2018), whose research sought to understand how people in New Orleans used their faith prior to, during, and after the Hurricane Katrina, pointed out that a “person’s interpretation of a natural hazard as being under God’s control may strongly

influence their belief of survival from the event” (p. 2733). Similar to the study of Rathnayake and Suthers (2017), prayers were evident in the current investigation. Dioko (2006) observed that Cebuanos’ thinking is inclined towards what they believe in especially in the realm of faith and that “thoughts on God is ever present in their consciousness.” Some posts even included direct reference to God to give the city mayor the wisdom, strength and compassion to solve the rising cases of COVID-19 in the city. Canete (2021) further observed the influence of faith during the pandemic:

Having faith to God has found beneficial in maintain mental stability as it provides meaning and the very reason to hope for something good out of the pandemonium of the present situation (Del Castillo, Biana, and Joaquin in Canete, 2021)...The pandemic did not break the faith of Filipino Christians but instead it rejuvenates it all the more. The faith of Filipino Catholics has given them reason to hope for a better tomorrow and maintain their purpose in life.

Gratitude towards local government leaders, frontliners and donors; and Pride to the city mayor and the city. Expressing gratitude improves one’s relationship and helps people feel more connected to others (Scharm, Welch, and Lemme, 2020). Similarly, the public was appreciative of the efforts, as evident in Figure 15, exerted by the local government headed by the city mayor, and extended their gratitude towards the frontliners and donors who were continuously offering their medical and healthcare services, and had contributed something to those directly affected by the pandemic, respectively. Kotter (in Weaver, 2017) observed that Filipinos “were grateful for small acts of kindness shown to them... and they are happy because of their ability to see and acknowledge the blessings of the Lord.”

Figure 15.

Expressions of gratitude towards leaders, frontliners and donors.

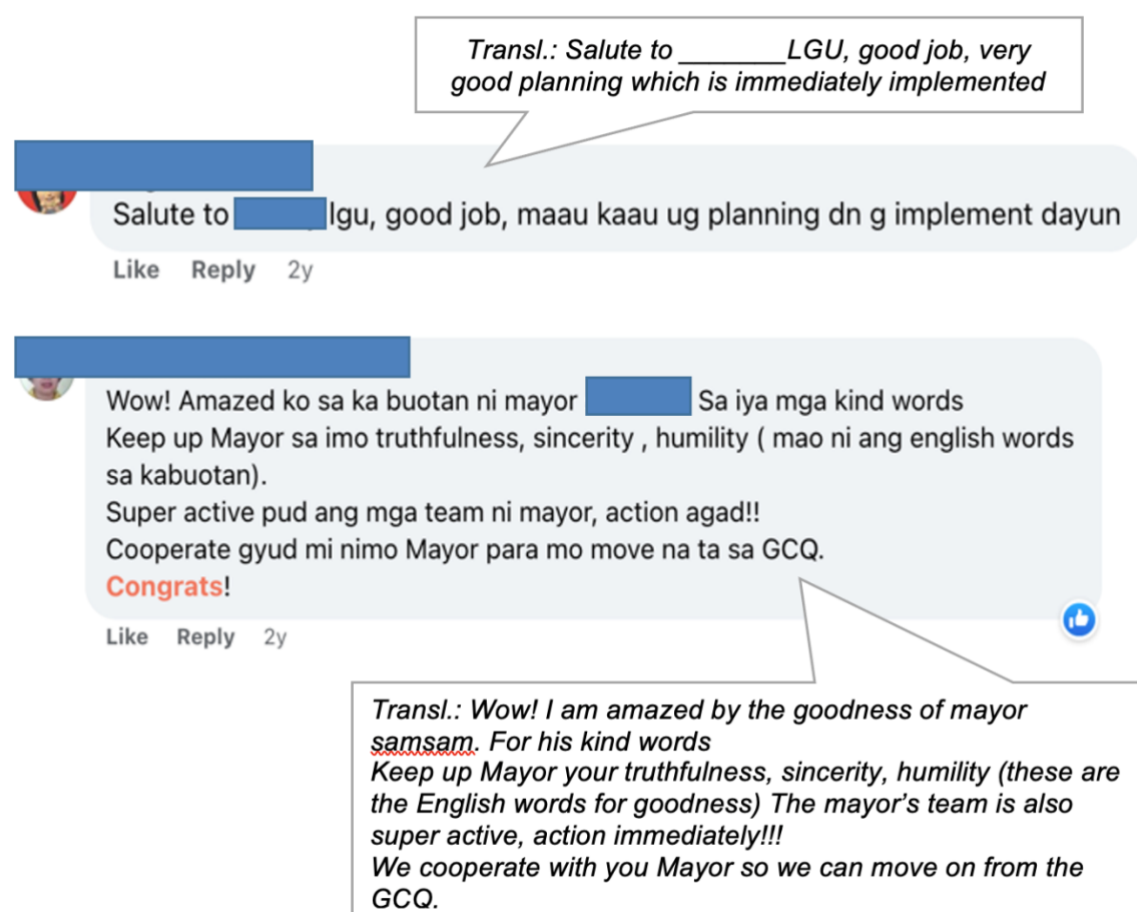


Aside from their gratitude towards the city's local government leaders, many also expressed their admiration to the city's disaster management team, especially their

immediate response, during COVID-19 with comments like “very good,” “Way to go!” “good job mayor,” and “We’re proud of you, Mayor” as exemplified in Figure 16.

Figure 16.

Expressions of Pride.



The public acknowledged the local government’s active public services before and during the pandemic because these were communicated frequently on their social media platform which gradually enhanced public engagement, participation, civic trust, and cooperation. The role of the local governments in dealing with risk reduction has been “recognized as one of the key factors in building resilient communities and nations since the beginning of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction” (UN, n.d.). In their publication of the Local Government Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction,

the UN acknowledged a provincial government in the Philippines for establishing and managing an independent and institutionalized office which mainstreamed DRR into local government's plans and programs (ibid.) such as the city's DRRMO, which has fully-capacitated and well-trained personnel, fully supported by its local government, and in active coordination with concerned agencies and instrumentalities; but, as pointed out by the DRRMO Head (personal interview, September 22, 2020), they were all unprepared for the pandemic that hit the city.

Inquiries mostly related to work and daily sustenance, and Requests for the LGU's assistance. Most of the public inquiries centered on the city's free transportation services, schedule and routes, and its accommodation capacity for BPO workers, healthcare professionals, and other workers who have midnight until dawn shifts. Further, many also asked if they can work or go out without quarantine pass, the requirements needed to avail of certain passes such as vehicle pass, confirmation for outside tasks as long as they have a certificate of employment and identification documents, and even if they could go out for exercise. These direct and indirect inquiries and requests for government's assistance were explicitly stated as comments to the LGU's posts. Although numerous inquiries were not responded to visibly, few engagements from the CT PIO were evident as the FB page administrator(s) responded to few questions and clarifications on the implementation of protocols in compliance with the enhance community quarantine. Some questions involving exemptions were responded to, even if the answers were already stated in the EO, and inquirers were forwarded to the governor's executive order no. 5. Contact details of the concerned offices were published and reposted several times encouraging the public to utilize this channel of communication especially for emergency and urgent cases. Other queries were also answered by other people, not from the local

government, who had knowledge of the situation and could offer valuable information as exemplified in Figures 17 and 18. Instances of online users discussing news with each other because of the limited engagement from the local leaders were also apparent.

Figure 17.

Inquiries responded to by non-LGU personnel (Sample 1).

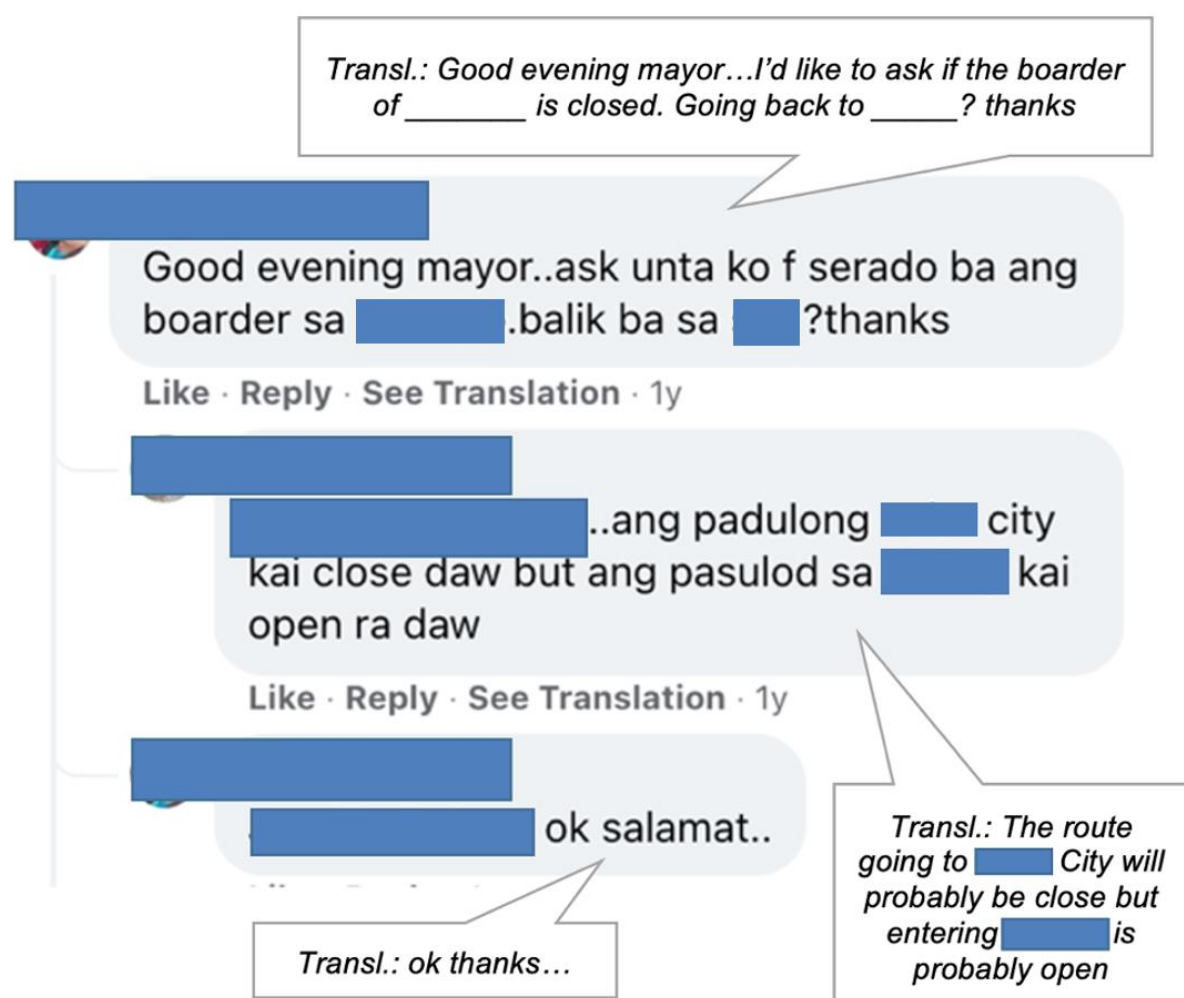
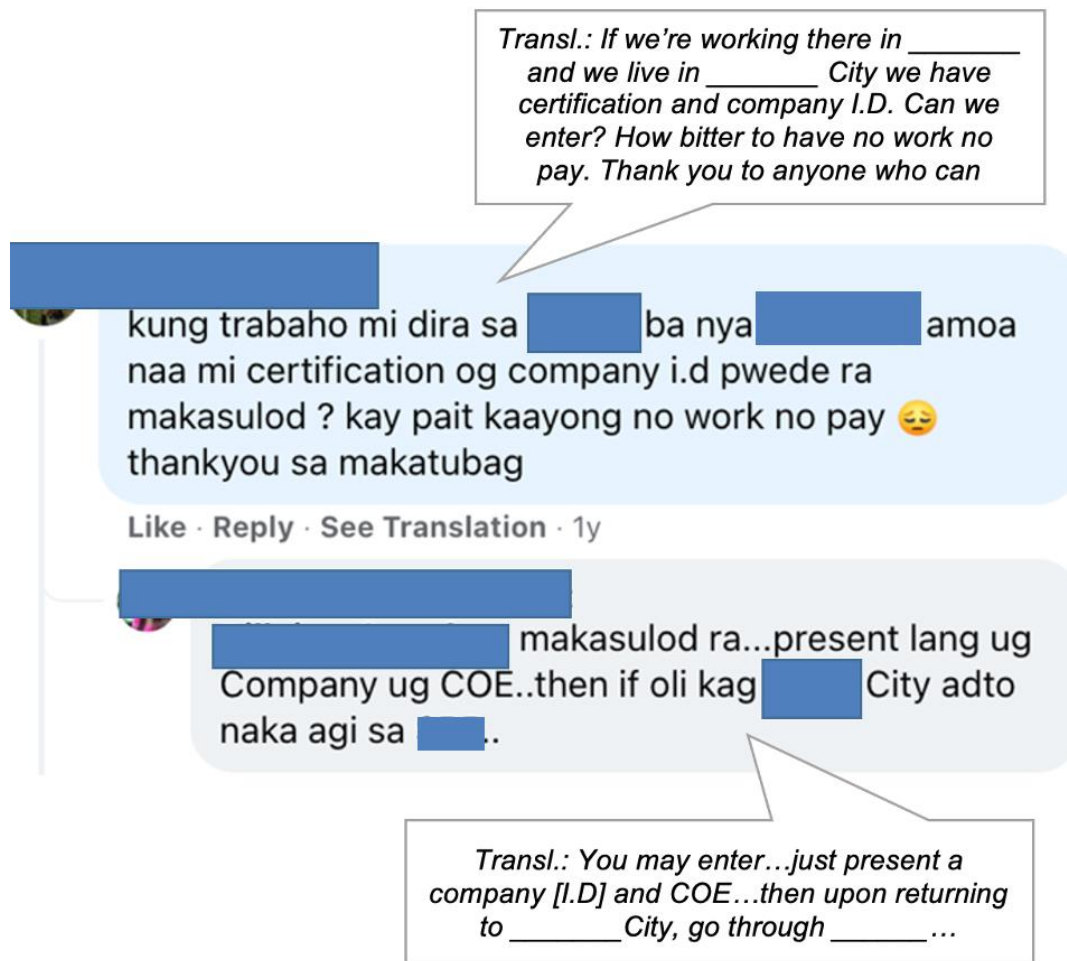


Figure 18.

Inquiries responded to by non-LGU personnel (Sample 2).



Recommendations addressed to the LGU leaders. Implicit and explicit suggestions were found in the comment section which included call for mass testing, regulation of basic necessities' prices, proper implementation of city guidelines, regular updating of data, and clear information dissemination among others. Many commented that implementing curfews and checkpoints as well as a strong police force visibility should be practiced beyond quarantine period or even after the virus since it keeps away criminals, drug addicts, and "tambays" (e.g., *pirmiha nalang ning curfew oi kay wala nay samok wala nay tambay*—Transl.: *just maintain this curfew*

because there will be no more trouble, no more bystanders), minimizes crimes, and establishes peaceful, clean and orderly environments. It is noteworthy to mention that many of the suggestions, requests, and inquiries were directed towards the city mayor (e.g., “Plss Mayor ayaw namo pasulod ug mga gulay gikan sa [REDACTED] city basin maka dala ug virus nyam aka sulod na nuon dinhi sa [REDACTED]—Trans.: Please Mayor don’t bring in vegetables from [REDACTED] City because these might bring virus and might manifest here in [REDACTED]). This direct reference to the city’s highest official suggested a sense of close affiliation with a local government official.

Figure 19.

Recommendations (Sample 1).

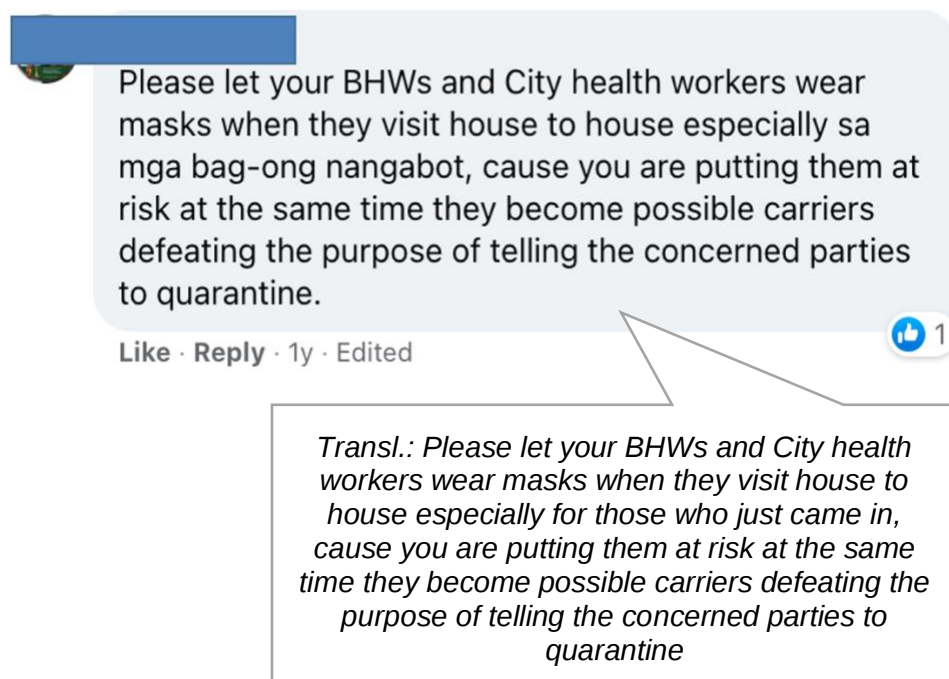
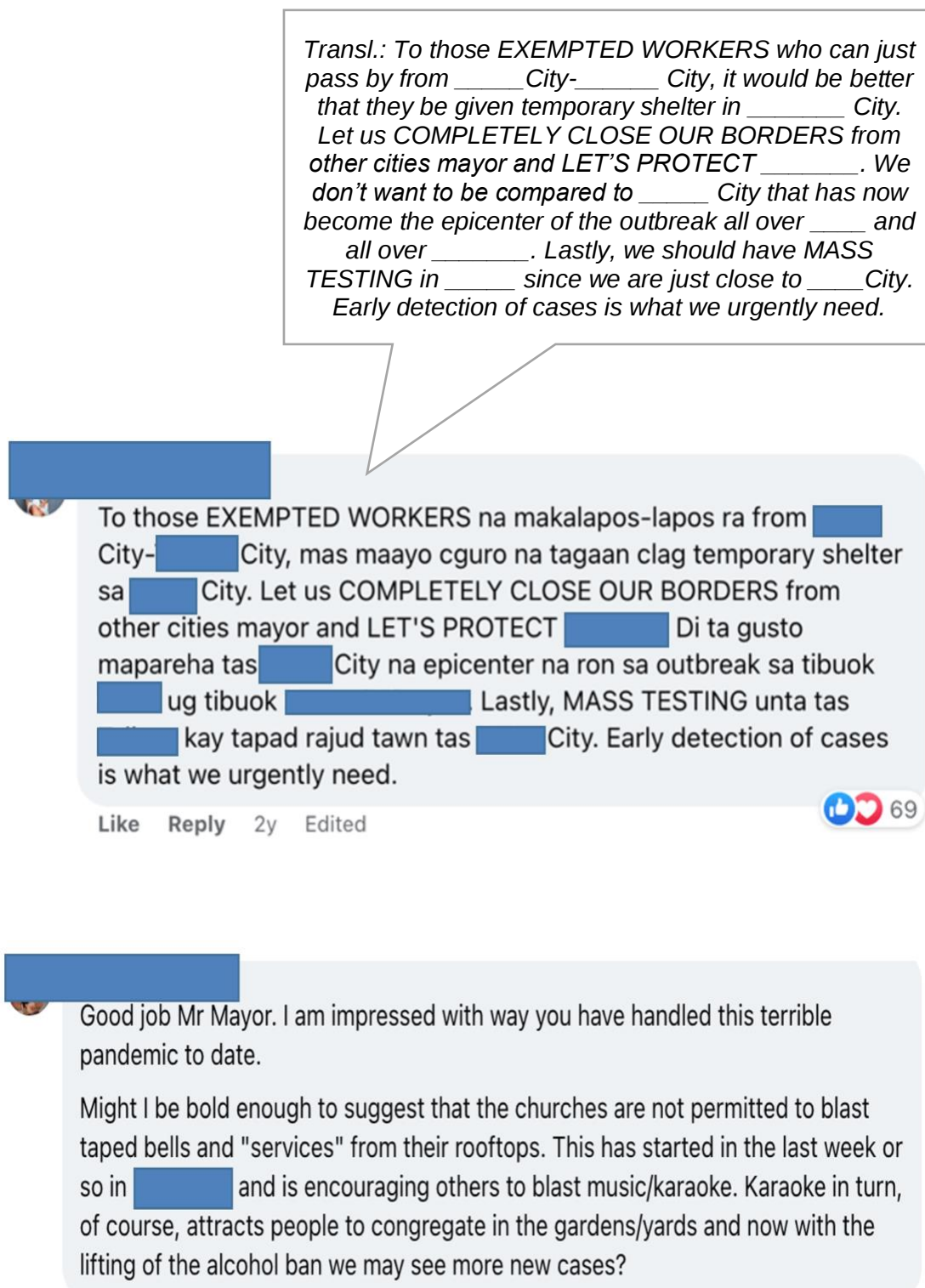


Figure 20.

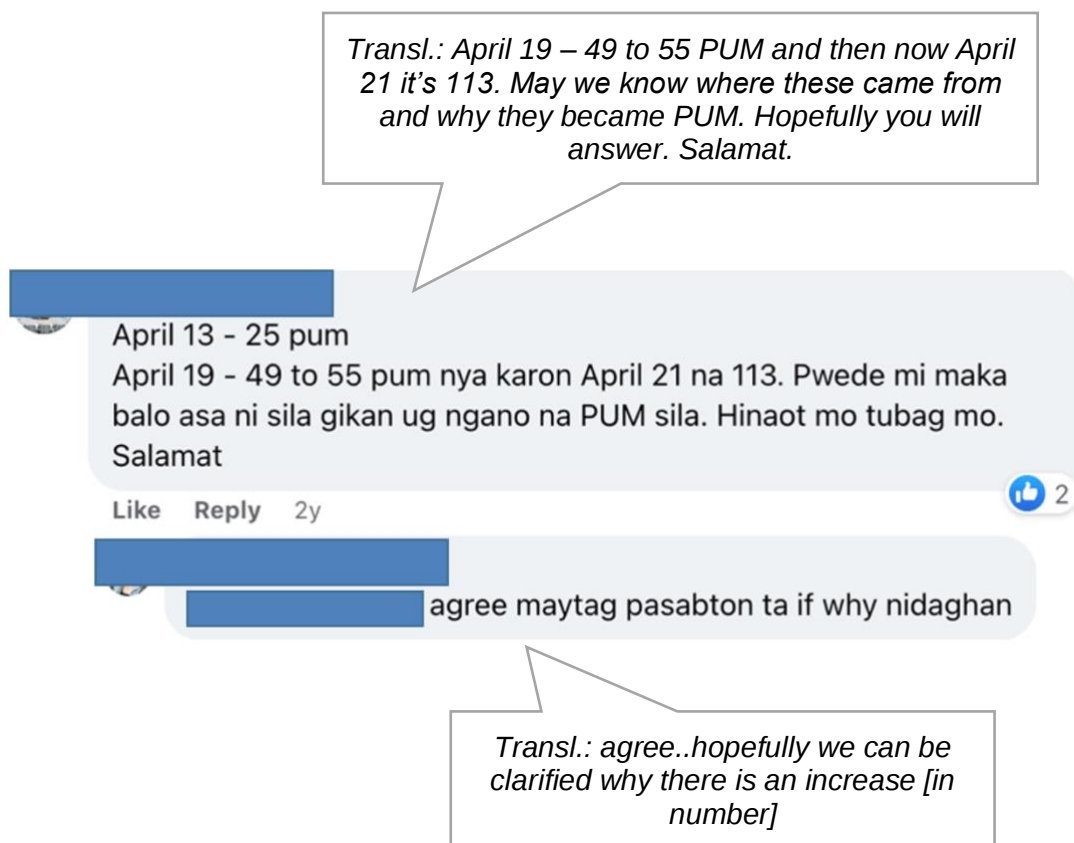
Recommendations (Sample 2).



Questioning the data and Requests for more details and explanation. Initially, national news, regulations, and data were published on the LGU's social media accounts and later local information—which included the mayor's printed and video messages, briefings, reports, and interviews—dominated this online space. Requests for updated data (e.g., *wala na lagi tong pum pui chart update Ninoy sir? Murag April 19 patong last 55 ang pum—Transl.: your PUM PUI chart update is apparently no longer available sir? It looks like the 55 PUM was updated last April 19*), clarifying uncertainties in the data (e.g., *nausab lagi inyong data @CT PIO, pag April 16 daghan man to—Transl.: your data were apparently changed @CT PIO, last April 16, there were many*), and questioning inconsistencies in monitoring updates (e.g., *Any update from our municipality regarding on our inventory for PUM, PUI, Recovered, Dead and Positive as of to date? We need to know for some transparency and for some precautions. Kada adlaw naa ang [REDACTED] City update pero kita diri sa [REDACTED] so far wala pa tay update since nagka record ta sa [REDACTED]—Transl.: Everyday, [REDACTED] City has updates but here in [REDACTED] so far we have no updates since we have a record in [REDACTED]*) were also found suggesting that the public were also vigilant in monitoring the news posted by the LGU, and demanded clear and comprehensive explanation of information.

Figure 21.

Request for updated data.



Critiques on cash subsidy, relief goods distributions, violators, protocol implementations and the like. Aside from praises and complements afforded to local government officials, criticisms were also evident in the online discourse particularly comments involving distributions of cash assistance and relief goods, and inconsistent implementation of city mandates and protocol in some areas within the city. Some barangays have no confirmed cases and thus received complements (e.g., “As usual barangay [REDACTED] ang pinaka BUOTAN ug OBEDIENT sa ECQ. CONGRATULATIONS—*Transl.: As usual barangay [REDACTED] is VERY GOOD and OBEDIENT during ECQ. CONGRATULATIONS*). One of the barangays in the city that initiated its own organized lockdown by placing signages, barricading their area, and

guarding their entrance garnered positive responses from the public and high engagements, which prompted other barangays to also share their own resourcefulness in maintaining a safe and orderly area. The CT DRRMO and its head praised such initiatives and encouraged the rest of the community to post similar examples for inspiration, cooperate, help each other, and be part of the solution (CT DRRMO FB Page, April 19, 2020).

On the contrary, other barangays received criticisms (e.g., *Heighest [highest] baya ta oi mga taga [redacted]! Patuo na tawn ta—Trans.: We are the highest fellow [redacted]. Let's hopefully follow [the rules]*) for consistently having an increase or existing cases while other local agencies such as the ones responsible for distributing relief goods were accused of using their authority and political affiliations. Still others criticized the local enforcers for their leniency during border checkpoints (e.g., *“pero naa paman lage makasulod ug [redacted] nga taga [redacted] city nga maglakaw ra mayor. Adtng pag strict na jud sa borders—Transl.: but there are people who can enter [redacted] city by just walking, mayor. That's when the borders were strict*) and access to public areas such as markets and bus stops. Such posts elicited requests from other online users to stay at home, cooperate with the local authorities, and follow government protocols for everyone's safety.

Figure 22.

Critiques on guideline violators, relief good distribution, and information dissemination (Sample 1).

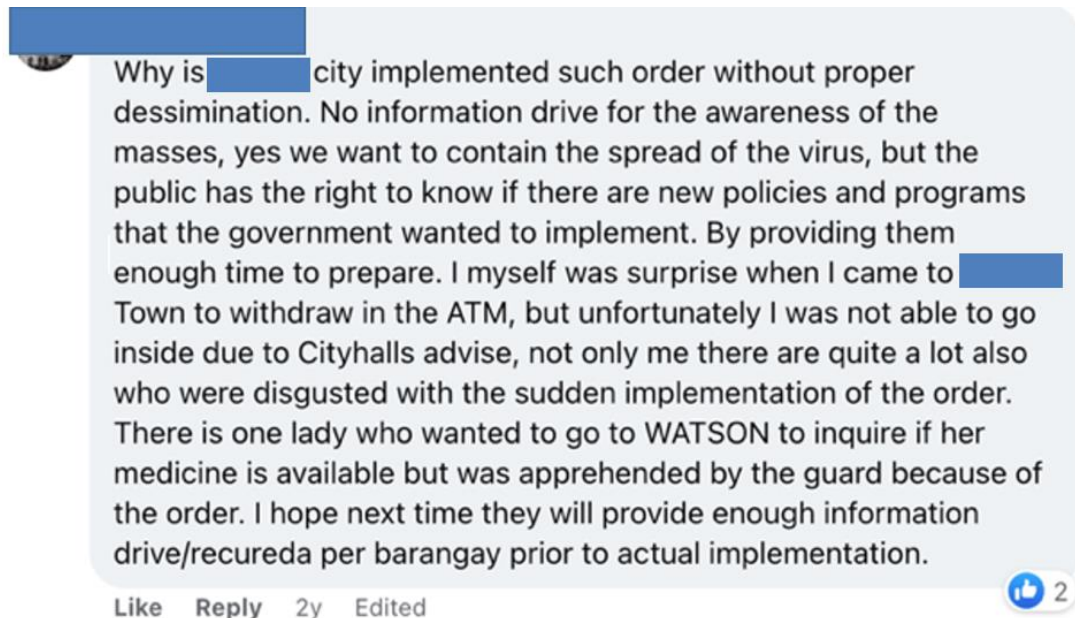
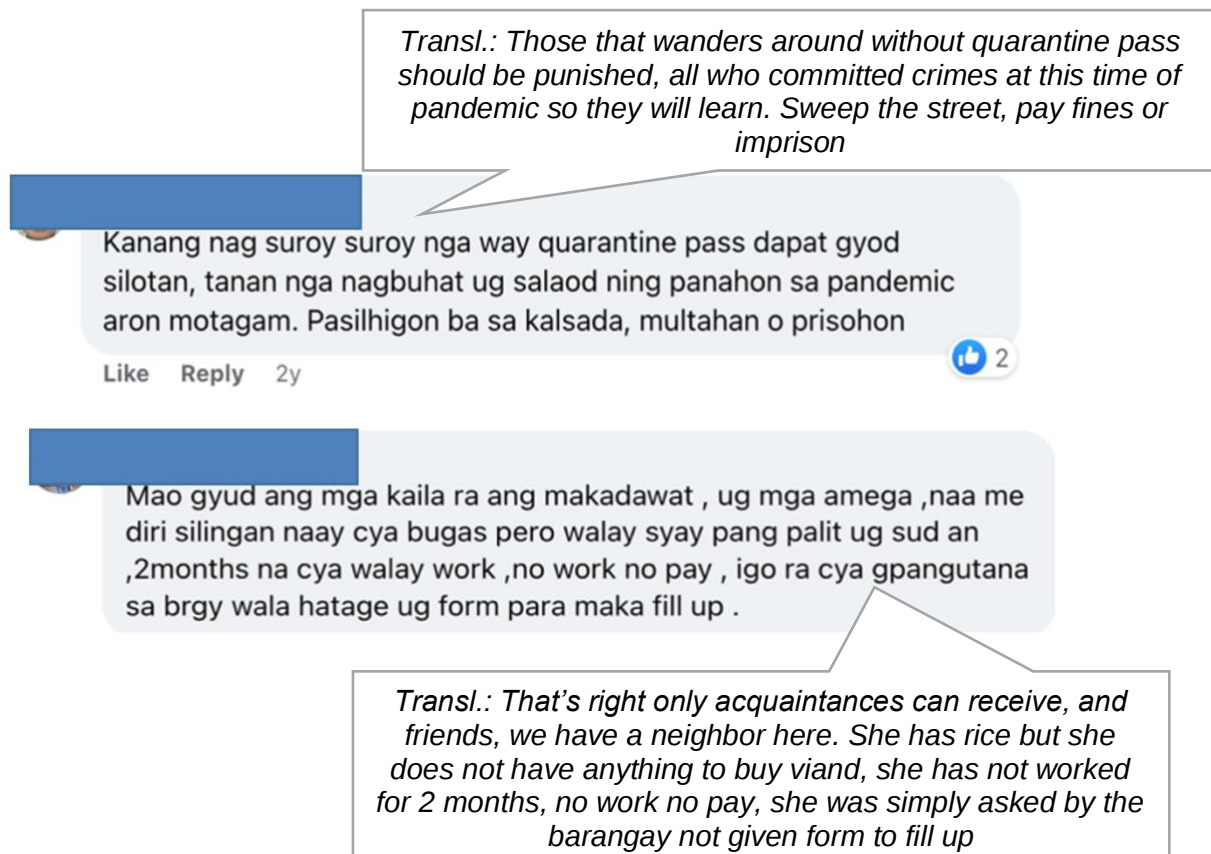


Figure 23.

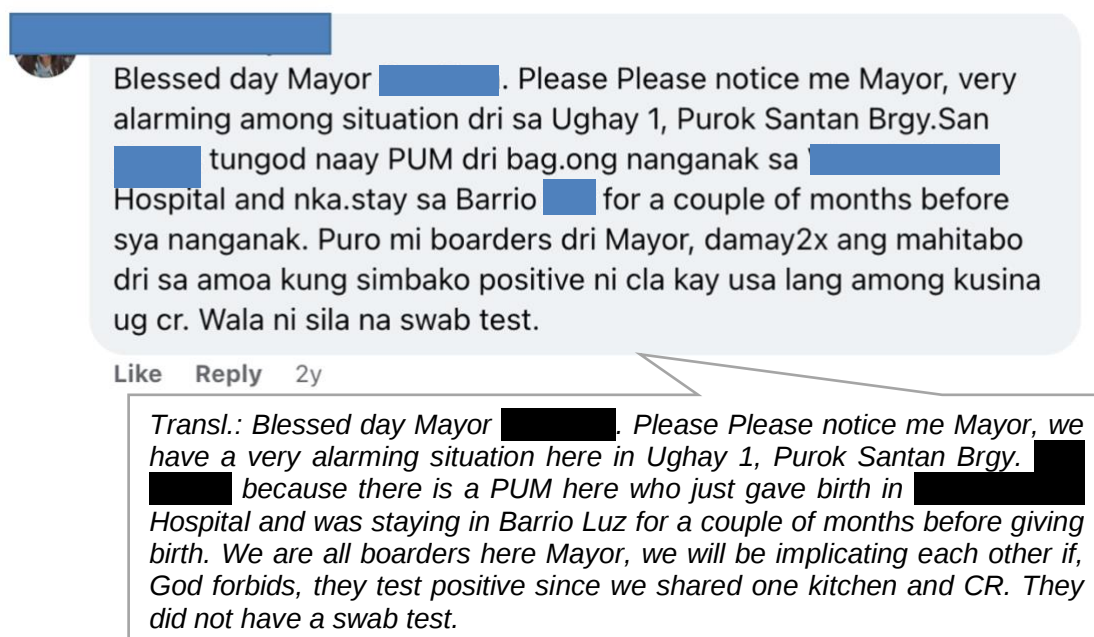
Critiques on guideline violators, relief good distribution, and information dissemination (Sample 2).



Sharing Personal Experience and/or Personal Knowledge. Anecdotes or stories related to personal or that of others' experiences constitute some of the requests posted as a response to the LGU's posts. The need to justify requests for amelioration, guidance in vehicle pass or transportation, to name a few, somehow prompted others the propensity to disclose personal information and share their narratives online as manifested in Figure 24. Waldman (2016) put forward "empirical evidence suggesting that trust is a significant factor in individual's willingness to share personal information on online social networks" (p. 193). Sharing personal experiences, during the pandemic, contributes to knowledge sharing and building, and even creates possible connection and relation. These experiences also give government officials a glimpse of the constituents' current situations from the ground level. One example was when comments regarding barangay residents' initiatives to build barricades to ward off non-residents were trending in the post. The CT DRRMO acknowledged their efforts in protecting their community, and recommended that they also include photos to inspire others and encourage them to follow the same practice.

Figure 24.

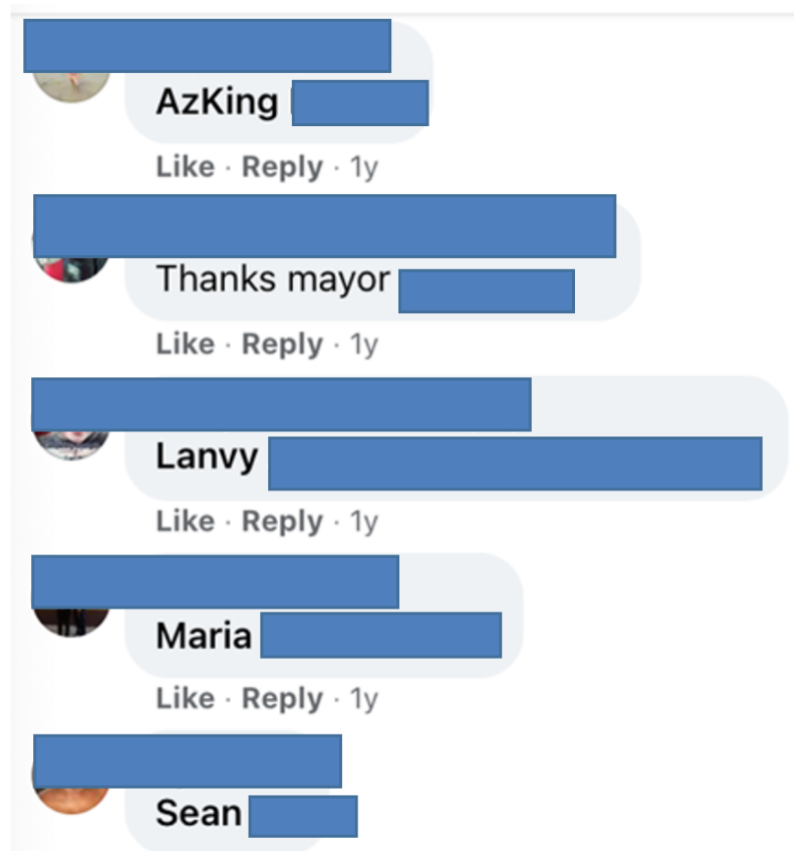
Personal Experience.



Tagging or Mentioning of Names. Tagging is getting the attention of another online user or users by explicitly mentioning their profile name and letting them know of the information that is shared. People who are tagged to the post or mentioned in the comment section are most likely to see the post. Since tagging notifies the person being tagged, it directly attracts attention and is a good strategy in reaching more people on Facebook and connecting them to information, credible or not. Aside from sharing the LGU posts on their timeline, online users tagged or mentioned the names of their known associates, most likely family and friends, to refer them to the LGU's posts. Some comments only mentioned names while others included messages such as “@name, basaha” (*Transl.: @name, read*).

Figure 25.

Name tagging.



In summary, the topic categories where the comments are coded are defined and presented in Table 1. These online information exchanges are more likely contributory factors in making sense of the public's sentiments and improving the local government's communication and coordination system, disaster management enhancement, and psychosocial support essential before, during, and after a disaster.

Table 1.

Topic Categories, descriptions and examples of online discourse on disaster communication.

Category	Description	Example posts
Gratitude towards the higher beings	Reference to beliefs in higher beings like the Roman Catholic's God and other saints	Praise The Lord! Thank You Lord. Please continue to heal us, protect us and keep us all healthy and strong to face these trials in our lives! We Praise and Love You Lord! (response to CT PIO post, May 9, 2020)
Gratitude towards the city mayor, the frontliners, and donors	Gratefulness for the actions done by the local government and the contributions of private and public donors	1) God bless sa mga tao nga naai kasing2 sama nila. Ang Ginoo na magbalus sa inyo kaau (response to CT DRRMO post, March 25, 2020) <i>Transl.: God bless people who have hearts like them. The Lord will reward you.</i> 2) Thanx kaayo sa badge & for the transparent information nga updated Jud mi kanunay tungod niini & thanx also for a sack of 25 kg rice. It helps a lot labi na Jud sa mga Solo Parents na family. Nakahilak Jud ug bogbog pag abot sa balay. Among kinasingkasing pasalamat sa Mayor & prayers for the Mayor & PIO Staff. God bless you, & always keep you safe with your

		loved ones (response to CT PIO post, May 16, 2020) <i>Transl.: Thank you for the badge and for the transparent information that keeps us updated daily and thank you so much for the 25kg sack of rice. It helps a lot especially for families with solo parents. I cried upon arriving home. Our heartfelt gratitude for the Mayor and PIO staff. God bless you, and always keep you safe with your loved ones.</i>
Belief in prayer and hope for safety and deliverance	Strong belief and expectations for something good that will happen	Dasig lng, stay home and keep praying. We will beat COVID-19 (response to CT PIO post, April 19, 2020) <i>Transl.: Keep hopeful, stay home and keep praying. We will beat COVID-19</i>
Pride for the local government leaders and city	Expression of admiration and satisfaction for the LGU personnel's deeds in the community which is usually added with thanksgiving	1) You're such a good leader and very blessed gyud kaayo.mi nga ang mayor manggihunhunaon buotan labaw sa nagpakabana para sa kaayuhan sa tanan we salute you and proud of you nga amo kang mayor...God will provide more than nga naa sa imong kasingkasing. May god bless you always uban sa imong pamilya (response to PIO post April 8, 2020) <i>Transl.: You're such a good leader and we are very blessed that you are our mayor thoughtful, good, and most of all, concerned for the welfare of everyone. We salute you and [we] are proud that you are our mayor...God will provide you with more than what you have in your heart. May God bless you always including your family.</i> 2) Mkaproud u. Proud [REDACTED] here. You're doing the best job so far Mayor!!! (April 8, 2020)

Inquiries mostly related to work and Requests for LGU's assistance	Request for help and assistance	<i>Transl.: You make [me/us] proud. I'm a proud [REDACTED] here. You're doing the best job so far Mayor!!</i> Good job mayor ng hinaot pud mi nga matabang nmo ang mga seaman nga na stranded dri sa [REDACTED] hapit na cla mag 2mns dri pru gpa asa ra cla sa owwa ganahan na kaayo cla makita ilang pamilya hope matabang nmo cla (response to CT PIO post, May 13, 2020) <i>Transl.: Good job mayor we are also hoping that you will help the seamen who are stranded here in [REDACTED]. They are almost 2 months here but they were just given assurance by OWWA. They really wanted to see their family. [I/We] hope that you will be able to help them.</i>
Calling the attention of the LGU to act	Request for action from the local government	1) No facemask No Entry... But here to my sitio, 2 of the 3 in the checkpoint, dont wear a facemask, but want people to use. How to be serious about this checkpoints? @ City of [REDACTED] DRRM Office (response to CT DRRMO post, April 19, 2020) 2) ANG BUGAS MAHAL KAAYU WALA NINYO TAN.AWA ... WALA NINYO NA CHECK NA GIPAHIMOSLAN MAAYU ANG BUGAS PATAAS OG PRISYO.. SAUNA MAKALALIT KAG PINAKA UNOS 27 PESOS TO 44 PESOS KARON TAG 40 PESOS ANG PINAKABARATO OG PINAKAMAHAL 50 KAPIN. (response to CT DRRMO post, April 18, 2020) <i>Transl.: RICE IS VERY EXPENSIVE YOU DID NOT CHECK...YOU DID NOT CHECK [THEY] ARE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF PRICE</i>

INCREASE OF RICE ... BEFORE YOU CAN STILL BUY A MINIMUM OF 27 PESOS TO 44 PESOS NOW THE MINIMUM IS 40 PESOS AND THE MOST EXPENSIVE IS 50 PLUS

Recommendations addressed to the LGU

Recommendations for the improvement of disaster response, information dissemination, and the like

1) Dear sir, With all due respect, may i suggest to your good office, in order to manage more effectively in line with the principle of small numbers can be easily manage compared to a larger number.

It is better to divide barangays into 200 family cluster, to be headed by someone who knows intimately these families or at least know better than the barangay leaders in assessing these families whether they are qualified to the government assistance or not.. Respectfully (response to PIO post, May 9, 2020)

2) suggestion mayor hugtan gyud ang pagpanakop bisan diha sulod sa Urban Poor areas, subdivisions, sitios, brgys up to the City. wala gyuy pasayluon (response to CT PIO post, May 26, 2020)

Transl.: Suggestion, mayor. There should be tight arrests even inside Urban Poor areas, subdivisions, sitios, barangays up to the City. There should be no excused.

Sharing Personal Experience

Online users' direct experience in relation to the pandemic, and the local government's management which usually involves subsidy distribution and protocol violators

Blessed day Mayor [REDACTED]. Please Please notice me Mayor, very alarming among situation dri sa Ughay 1, Purok [REDACTED] tungod naay PUM dri bag.ong nanganak sa [REDACTED] Hospital and nka.stay sa Barrio [REDACTED] for a couple of months before sya nanganak. Puro mi boarders dri Mayor, damay2x ang mahitabo dri sa

		amoa kung simbako positive ni cla kay usa lang among kusina ug cr. Wala ni sila na swab test (response to CT DRRMO post, April 19, 2020) <i>Transl.: Blessed day Mayor [REDACTED]. Please Please notice me Mayor, we have a very alarming situation here in Ughay 1, Purok [REDACTED] because there is a PUM here who just gave birth in Vicente Sotto Hospital and was staying in Barrio [REDACTED] for a couple of months before giving birth. We are all boarders here Mayor, we will be implicating each other if, God forbids, they test positive since we share one kitchen and CR. They did not have a swab test.</i>
Questioning the data and requests for more details and explanation	Comments concerning the LGU's released of data related to PUI and PUM	1) nausab lagi inyung data City of [REDACTED] Public Information Office pag April 26 daghan man to (response to CT PIO post, April 29, 2020) <i>Transl.: your data change City of [REDACTED] Public Information Office. There were many last April 26</i> 2) update sad sa mga PUI and PUM maam/sir; same jud tag concern sir. Semana naman y update oi; mao jud sir, ug naa ba kaha tay testing kits diri sa [REDACTED] sir noh (responses to CT PIO post, April 29, 2020). <i>Transl.: updates too for PUI and PUM maam/sir; we have A similar concern sir. It's been a week without update. That's right sir, if we really have testing kits here in [REDACTED] sir</i>
Comments on the virus, violators, and the like	Comments regarding the virus and protocol violators	daghana gyod tawong badlongon maayo unta ug sila ray mataptan dili maapil ilang pamilya (responses to CT PIO post, April 29, 2020).

		<i>Transl.: There are many hardheaded people and it would be good if only they would be infected and not their family</i>
Critiques on cash subsidy, relief goods distributions, and protocol implementations	Comments concerning the management and implementation of cash and goods distribution	Mao gyud ang mga kaila ra ang makadawat, ug mga amega, naa me diri silingan naay cya bugas pero walay syay pang palit ug sud an, 2months na cya walay work, no work no pay, igo ra cya gpangutana sa brgy wala hatage ug form para maka fill up (response to CT PIO post, May 26, 2020)
		<i>Transl.: That's right only acquaintances can receive, and friends, we have a neighbor here. She has rice but she does not have anything to buy viand, she has not worked for 2 months, no work no pay, she was simply asked by the barangay not given form to fill up</i>
Tagging of Names	Tagging names, with or without a message, which are assumed to be known associates	@ [REDACTED] (response to CT PIO post, March 24, 2020) @ [REDACTED] see unsa kamingaw?! (response to CT PIO post, March 24, 2020)
		<i>Transl.: @ [REDACTED], see how deserted?</i>
Jokes	Phrases that are meant to be funny Phrases or statements that cause amusement to lighten the mood	Maayo gyud ning nay curfew...Hipos tanan nga criminal...Daghan police daghan sad tanod...Kanus a kaha madakpan nila si COVID para isulod sa presoan (response to CT PIO post, March 24, 2020)
		<i>Transl.: It's good to have curfew. Criminals are secured...There are many police, there are also many tanod...When will they catch COVID and put it in jail?</i>
Miscellaneous	Posts that do not have anything to do with the pandemic	How about to restore the internet from globe? (response to CT PIO post, April 8, 2020)

The interactive feature of Facebook grants the public the opportunity to partake in conversations leading to relevant discussions which might be considered in the government's decision-making process and plans, and to improve public service deliveries through feedback and questions. Occasional statements bearing indirect relation with the LGU's posts as well as humorous comments were also found in the posts. Haddow and Haddow (2004) pointed out that "Research has shown that the public's belief that an emergency response was effective correlates with how much access to information they had during the crisis" (p. 142). The public's access to information was apparent since the city's LGU has transparent data provision and apprise the public with daily updates, albeit not consistent. The public relied on the information posted on the LGU's official Facebook page, including that of the city mayor. It was also observed that some questions raised have answers evident in the post which could mean they have not read the post in its entirety or may just want to clarify their own interpretation. Some questions and comments remained unanswered publicly but may have been responded to privately, as pointed out by the CT DRRMO head.

Disaster as revealed in Online Communication

Disasters usually result to loss of home, possessions, livelihood, and lives as well as disrupt community functioning not to mention the psychological and mental health issues for some people. Albeit online-mediated platforms have been credited for its importance during disaster situations, their vital role is magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic when mandatory isolation, lockdown, and quarantine measures were implemented increasing people's dependence on online communication. Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini, and Lyness (2020) revealed that during the pandemic, "social

media use has accelerated to the point of becoming a ubiquitous part of modern healthcare systems” (p. 1).

One of the legitimate sources of information is the local government unit responsible for constructing messages that convey control of the situation and assurance of protection and security before cascading information to the public online. They sifted through available data, retrieved from health authorities, before forwarding to their social media accounts, and created public service announcements and reminders. Aside from these, reportorial narratives of news updates were evident. The public was made more cognizant of the local governance projecting plans, monitoring mechanism, collaborative endeavors, and implementation of strategies through online visibility.

Although online communication allows the public to automatically share their knowledge and experiences, one of the drawbacks related to this reliance on technology is the abundance of information making it difficult to filter factual and reliable contents. In some cases, the spread of fake news may cause emotional exhaustion and could lead to decisions and actions that may be harmful to one's health. For instance, Barcelos et al. (2021) reported that terms retrieved from fake news were higher in the number of searches during the first six month of the pandemic in Brazil. In the Philippines, a local news outlet denounced a post announcing work place and school suspensions, and urged the public to follow their official social media channels for news and updates (CT PIO FB Post, March 10, 2020). An online message from a local public official also revealed a scam (CT PIO FB Post, March 12, 2020).

The earlier discussion in the previous section showing the disaster communication of the LGU and the response of the public acknowledges the dynamic role of online communication in providing immediate access to information and

allowing synergy in data sharing between and among government, media, organizations, and the public beneficial to efficient and effective service delivery for both response and recovery efforts. *Online communication reveals that disaster converges stakeholders, connects people together, and strengthens community resilience.*

Disaster converges authorities, specialists, and the public to share valuable information for situational awareness, needs assessment, and relief operation purposes. As these stakeholders turn to technology-mediated sources for rapid and world-wide information dissemination, sharing of knowledge and experiences advances making these available for global audience within seconds. While the public ask for information (e.g., how to protect themselves, how to slow down the transmission, updates on work/class advisories, or available relief operations) to navigate their choices, make informed decisions, and exchange information with others, experts and government officials take advantage of the affordances of online communication tools to address these concerns and instruct the public what to do. They encourage people to become active participants (e.g., *report violators*) in the preventive action and to work together, especially with authorities, in order to mitigate if not eradicate the pandemic. Their appeal to report suspected cases, utilize their health and emergency hotlines, communicate with health and local authorities, and adopt safety protocols is posted online. On the other hand, some individuals tend to step up and respond to the questions posted in the comment section either by sharing their experiences or by forwarding the inquirer to available information. Many questions or comments related to travel protocol, and relief goods and financial distribution were evidently unanswered; however, these may have been answered

already in a private message as shared by the DRRMO head (personal interview, October 2020).

Disaster brings people together. Smallen (2022) shared that disaster can inspire human connection. People felt more meaningful, more motivated, and more urgent to connect because of a common struggle. This connection is even made more possible through online communication where networks are created and a sense of community is built. People's experiences of collective events, such as disaster, humanizes them. As evident in the data, volunteers and contributions poured in. Expressions of appreciation to donors, frontline workers, and government officials were posted weekly while the public engaged in emoticons (i.e.,  ), shared posts, and relayed their gratitude in the comments section. First and second-hand experiences were shared in public space and people raised questions addressed to the authority or to the public in general to make sense of what is going on around them. Bruns et al. (2011 in Spiro, 2018) observed that the "online public engages in diverse forms of communication, including but not limited to soliciting opinions, sharing emotions and reactions, expressing condolences, and providing social support" (p. 2). The uncertainty of COVID-19 pandemic evoked a sense of shared reality.

Disaster strengthens community resilience. People who have suffered losses and have been through disasters are more likely to exhibit resilience when facing another disaster. Abdalla et al. (2021 in Ahmad et al., 2021) reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, positive feelings (e.g., empathy and solidarity) and behaviors (e.g., mutual aid and cooperation) were demonstrated which led to community resilience. Building social connections is one strategy in building resilience (Katella, 2022) and online communication especially during the pandemic facilitates this connection. Xie, Pinto, and Zhong (2022) found out that the use of social media and

social media engagement was associated with community members' perceived community resilience. As reflected in the present data, public posts and exchanges included expression of gratefulness to frontliners, authorities, and donors; asking for assistance; questioning the implementation of safety protocols and guidelines; and sharing their faith. Ferris (2020) purported that "when people feel engaged and involved with what is happening around them, they are far more resilient than they would be if they felt they were being kept in the dark" (p.1).

While it complements traditional sources of news and information, online communication remains steadfast in its capability of being more interactive and participative. Its social media platforms arrange public space for discourse to occur and for social constructs to surface and be examined. As such, disaster as a social construct represents a common language that is a result of human interaction and commonsense knowledge. The classification of COVID-19 as a disaster has implications in the response and recovery efficiency as well as dictates how people are expected to behave in order to survive. Their prior experiences with other forms of disasters e.g., earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, and landslides activated their individual subjective opinions which shape their actions and thoughts concerning the present pandemic. In turn, these subjective realities are put forward in online environment for others to engage in and co-construct a shared reality.

Reality in Online Communication

Information constructs realities (Flor, 2022) and a shared reality is a key factor in human connection (Smallen, 2022). Through interactions with others and by life experiences, people perceive their reality differently, and thus vary in their responses towards everyday situations. Residents of flood prone areas, for example, are more

likely accustomed to the ways and means of navigating the area and, as Panman, Madison and Falisse (2018) put it, “making the best choices given the constraints they face,” compared to residents who have not experienced flooding. Instead of relocating to safer parts of the neighborhood, these residents continue to return to these areas because of lack of infrastructure, lack of transport causing job displacement, and lack of affordable housing (ibid.). Their choice to stay despite their hazardous living conditions are shaped by their background, experiences, and current reality.

Zhao (2006) showed that the emergent Internet era has altered the conditions in which individuals interact with and encounter in everyday life, and this leads to new ways of constructing the lifeworld, such as the online public domain realized through the spatial and temporal structures—“there and then,” contrasting with Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) reality of everyday life which is organized around the here-now space. At the former’s “temporal flexibility”, online messages and posts are received whenever they arrived and responded to whenever recipients, intended or otherwise, choose to respond at their own pace and time. The online posts and exchanges in the LGU’s Facebook accounts illustrate this temporal flexibility. Since Zhao’s thesis, the internet has expanded at an accelerated pace and has continued to offer online social media services enabling simultaneous synchronous/asynchronous communications and making it possible for “instant communication with distant others.” The online posts found on the LGU’s Facebook pages and the corresponding comments from the public preserve the language and its intended meaning across space and time. The permanence of writing, as exemplified on Facebook, allows the online discourse to be captured and “preserves the flow of expressed subjectivity that can be retrieved later for careful examination and reflections” (Zhao, 2006).

The internet has changed the conditions of social interaction and altered the conditions in which individuals construct the reality of their everyday life (Zhao, 2006). The permanence of language available in online environment allows for modification of subjectivity playing an important component in the direction of conversations and narratives. The public's responses to the LGU's disaster communication have mixed reactions, as shown by the different themes, with many leaning towards a grateful stance. As manifested in the study's findings, the city's constituents explicitly expressed their gratefulness and appreciation for the key players involved in the planning, coordination, implementation, and monitoring of their health needs as well as their essential necessities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the information shared by the government in their official Facebook pages, the public was made aware that the city's LGU took early notice of the infectious disease months before the former President Duterte declared a state of public health emergency in the Philippines on March 9. The online recipients of the posts were able to keep track of the LGU's active collaboration with the national government and other concerned agencies such as health organizations and the media and because of these initiatives, the public is observed to have a sense of consolation and hope that the government is doing its part in the face of adversity and disaster.

Socio-cultural factors such as religion, belief, values, social classes, and attitudes contribute in shaping conversations and narratives in online communication and thus affect public's construction of social reality. By drawing from their individual experiences and sharing these in the social media landscape, the public creates a certain ecology derived from common subject matters and interactions. In most cases, the discourse exudes a certain level of trust in the local government's plans and capabilities coupled with skepticism and criticism in the implementation of these plans.

The LGU's decision to share the administration's plans and activities online empowers the public to be active participants in community issues which guide both parties to support each other with the LGU improving its public and health services, and the public cooperating with the government. Likewise, it was observed that some online participants were mindful of the information they consume and tend to clarify the authenticity and timeliness of data shared online. Inquiries related to work and daily sustenance and requests for more details and explanation were abundant but not as dominant as expressions of gratitude towards higher beings, the local government, frontliners, and donors.

How Reality is Socially Constructed in Online Communication

When people participate in online communication, their involvement in conversations and narratives offers valuable perspectives and shapes the reality of both active and passive participants in the communication process. Social Media particularly Facebook engages the public through reactions, link, clicks, shares, and comments thereby improving users' engagement experiences. Simply clicking the emoticons can already signify one's reaction towards a post or comment, and the conversation thread affords multiple engagements in numerous comments which are already taking place. The present researcher agrees with Wohn and Bowe (2014) that social media facilitates social construction of reality.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) described the reality of everyday life of the individuals who interacted with each other in face-to-face situations, considered as the most important experience of others, and described such reality within the here and now where continuous interchange of expressivity is present. Face-to-face situation enables flexibility, allowing the other person to be vividly present and close, to be fully

real in that the “continuous reciprocity of expressive acts is simultaneously available to both interlocutors” (ibid, p. 43). A person’s expression such as a smile or a frown elicits an immediate appropriate response and vice versa, and this expression evidently changes as the interaction progresses in varying direction. For instance, the face-to-face encounter of the present researcher with the DRRM head during their key informant interview sessions initially introduced a rigid business-like relation which was modified to a semi-formal interaction. The pattern exhibited during the initial state of that encounter changes to accommodate the evidence of other’s subjectivity available during the face-to-face situation. A friendly and accommodating impression contradicts the initial subjective view of a strict person because of the face-to-face modality. In this instance, both gain access to each other’s subjectivity.

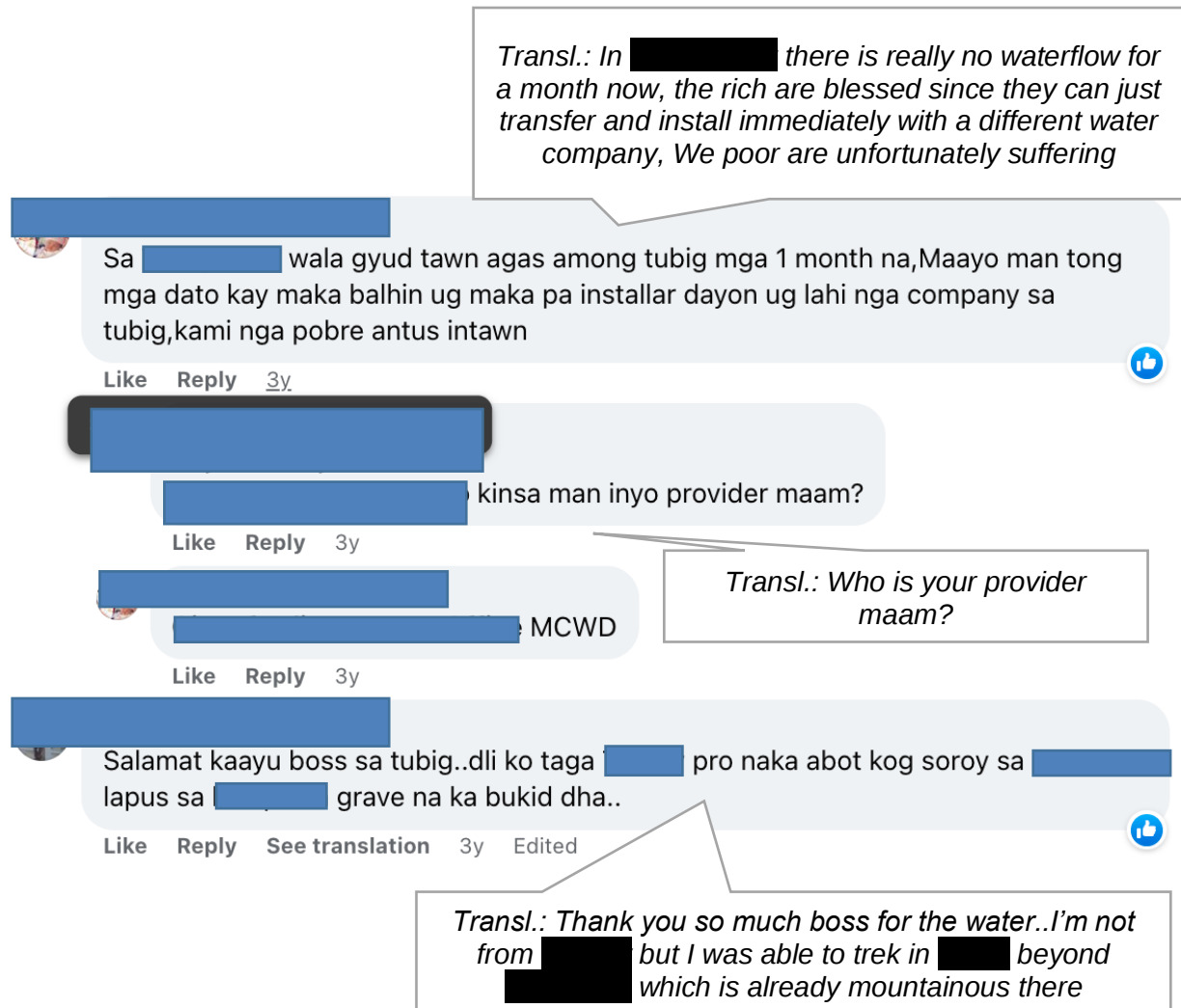
Zhao (2006) observed that the Internet has changed the conditions of social interaction and hypothesized that such changes have possibly altered the conditions in which individuals construct the reality of their everyday life. He further argued that because of the internet, a spatiotemporal zone (i.e., there and now zone), a new mode of communication (i.e., electronic text chat), and a new social gathering (i.e., the online public domain) contributed to the “formation of a new matrix of social contact, the maintenance of the subjective reality through text chat, and the involvement of the online world in the socialization process” (ibid, p. 458). These three conditions, adapted in the analysis of the present investigation, brought about changes in online social interaction.

Unlike the here and now orientation of face-to-face interaction, online communication is remote and entails a certain anonymity. Berger and Luckmann (1966) revealed that directness or indirectness of experience of others is an important aspect in everyday life. The constant and direct negotiation and renegotiation of

language and interpersonal contact evident in face-to-face interaction and missing in online communication shapes the construction of reality. Since the internet provided new means of communication allowing people to communicate despite the proximity and time difference, online communication offers a mediated means to reach out to others. For public posts, a person does not need to have any type of relations with others in order to send or reply to a message since social media allows sharing of opinions with a wider audience. Anyone who has a social media account can respond to anyone's comment or question anytime within the same social media platform. Post exchanges can be read by anyone everywhere, can be edited, and can even be screen captured for documentation and other purposes as illustrated in Figure 26.

Figure 26.

Screenshot of (edited) posts posted 3 years ago.



The social reality of everyday life in online communication is characterized by this certain degree of anonymity of the other's experience since interlocutors are removed from the here and now of the face-to-face context. This anonymity in online communication exposes everyone to different threats and risks such as hacking, phishing, cyberbullying, and even identity theft. Anyone with a social media account, even those with fake accounts and bot, can post a story/message/narrative/information online, redirect the narrative, and manipulate the

ongoing discourse. And before someone is able to report the falsity of some claims or before anyone is held accountable, the post and the account may have been deleted already while the post has been forwarded, shared at an accelerated pace, and circulated the world wide web. What people define as real because of their background assumptions and life experiences is subjected to constant negotiation and renegotiation of meaning as they are confronted with multiple contradicting narratives online. However, they are not only consumers of these narratives but are expectedly active producers in shaping online discourse and thus, contributors in the ongoing construction of reality. For instance, Figure 27 posted by the LGU showcased the city's border checkpoint; however, there were people who posted comments that deviate from the message intended by the said photos as shown in Figure 28. Instead of commenting on the photos, the discussion revolves around a different context, i.e., lenient monitoring of quarantine pass inside a mall. Moreover, another commenter also posted a different topic and inquired regarding his 3 kilos [of rice].

Figure 27.

Border patrol checkpoints.

Transl.: LOOK: Border patrol checkpoint in Camp 4 together with barangay tanods and staff of CT-TODA

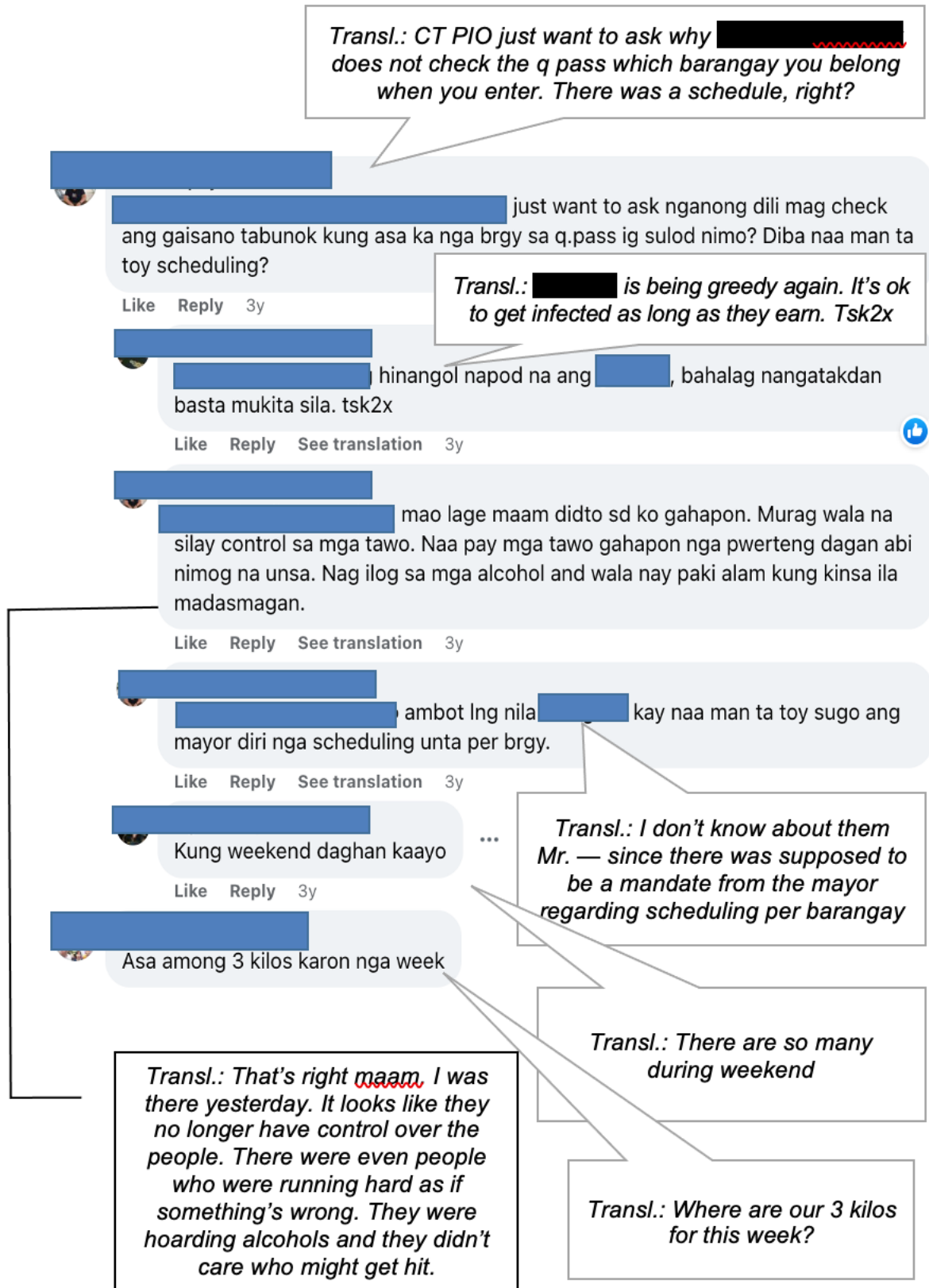
April 26, 2020 ·

TAN-AWA: Border patrol checkpoint sa Kampo 4 uban sa mga Barangay Tanod ug mga sakop sa CT-TODA.



Figure 28.

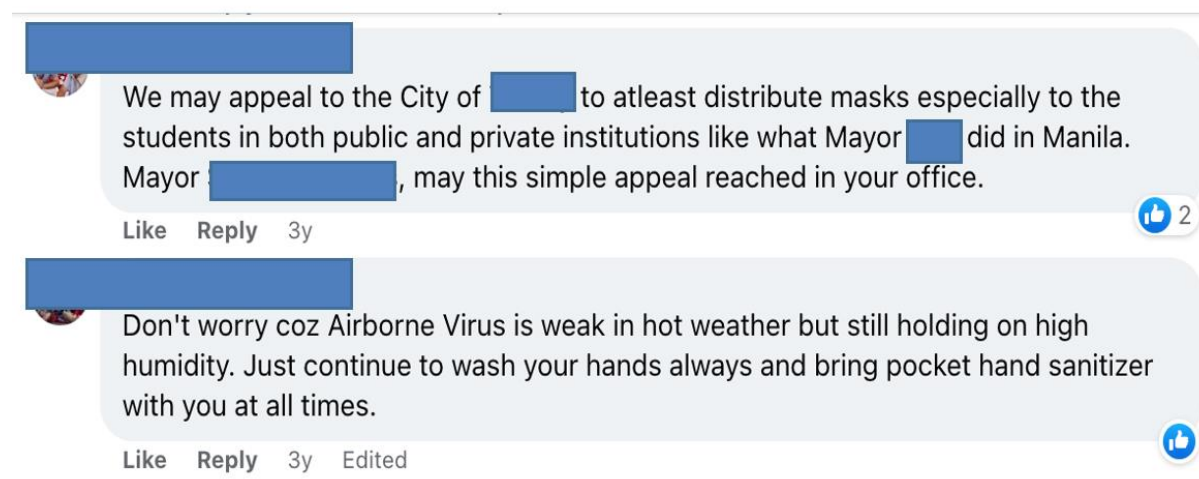
Comments on Figure 27's posts.



Although online anonymity allows one to observe others more frequently and easily, it inhibits meaningful social connection (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020) which is observable through nonverbal cues and spoken language reciprocity. Emoticons and emojis may represent the writer's facial expressions or moods but these fall short of the actual emotion recognized in face-to-face situations. On the other hand, language plays an essential role in both modalities within the "here and now" and the "there and now" zone. The electronic text chat utilized as a communication means in online exchanges combines the permanence of writing and synchronicity of speaking (Zhao, 2006) which enables language to be "objectively available beyond the subjective intentions of "here and now" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). People jointly construct their understanding of the world through language (Zhao, 2020, p. 2). The detachability and asynchronic property of language allows messages to be captured and the flow of expressed subjectivity can be preserved, which can then be retrieved later for careful examination and reflection (Zhao, 2006, p. 462) as exemplified in the post below which was published three years ago but is still visible and available up to this date.

Figure 29.

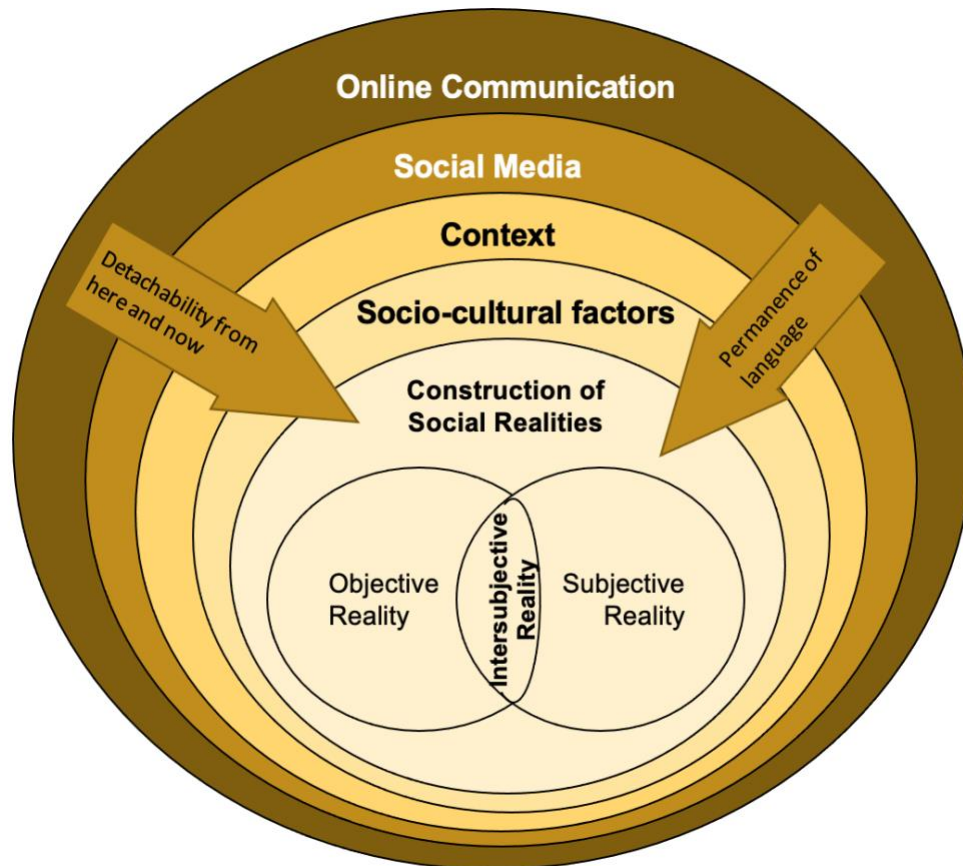
Available post from three years ago.



A summary of how social reality is constructed through social media is illustrated in Figure 30. Online communication provides a space for people to communicate and collaborate remotely especially the flexibility afforded by synchronous and asynchronous communication. The use of social media as a tool for social engagement and now, a source of news and information has rapidly increased interpersonal interaction. Individual beliefs and experiences of certain contexts are affected by socio-cultural factors such as religion, values, and social classes. These shape one's subjective reality (i.e., individuals' personal beliefs and feelings based on their subjective consciousness of their environment) which in part is dependent and influenced by others' subjective reality and the existing objective reality (i.e., exist independent of individual's personal beliefs and awareness). In the process of interaction, a so-called intersubjective reality, a term coined by Harari (2020), is formed which supposedly "exists in human mind and are given force through collective belief" (Sun, 2019).

Figure 30.

Social construction of reality in Online Communication.



In as much as online exchanges contribute to information sharing, the authenticity of some messages in the online public domain is put into question since fake accounts and false information have proliferated causing confusion, and can influence people's perspectives. Sharing content without fact verification, whether intentionally or by accident, manipulates subjective reality and creates a false sense of objective reality. The uncensored way of communicating gradually increases confidence to share what is on one's mind without filter and occasionally, at the expense of dire consequences such as the misleading information of an alleged COVID-19 patient in the city which caused panic based on the public's online exchanges. Due to lenient regulation, citizen journalism, and tolerant editorial standards, the circulation of misleading news and information distorts accurate

perception of the objective reality, and because people have tendencies to seek information that synchs with their views, verifying whether the information is accurate or not before sharing it on social media is not something many are motivated to spend time doing. The rampant spread of false information and fabricated narratives shared online and consumed by the public is challenging the mainstream media.

Rand and Pennycook (2021) pointed out that social media platforms by nature are social which means the focus is on social concerns and engagements instead of truth. Nonetheless, traditional media reporting is already complemented by their social media accounts for wider audience reach. In Facebook, the 'Suggested Page For You' and 'Add Mutual Friend' features optimize interconnectedness. These features are due to the app's algorithm which "determines what people see every time they check Facebook, connects users with the most valuable content for them," and tracks the level of engagement. Social media connects people by showing the names and number of friends one is currently connected with, monitors user's online activities and words commonly searched, and recommends connection with common friends as well as following pages which are most likely aligned with the user's personal interest. Interconnectedness in online environment enables people to communicate their subjective realities to everyone and participate in the construction of objective reality. The absence of geographical boundaries and audience limitations expanded human's desire to be heard and to communicate.

Chapter VI

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The present study is framed within the Socio-cultural tradition of communication which theorizes that through communication, “reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.” This examination of the construction of social reality in online communication is also anchored on Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) idea that social interaction facilitates individual member’s knowledge sharing and meaning-making process.

This study aimed to identify the local government unit’s online disaster communication, the online discourse that occurred in responding to such disaster communication, and the social reality that potentially surfaced in their online discourse. Using a qualitative method, content analysis and textual analysis were utilized to make sense of the LGU’s online posts related to Covid-19 from January 1, 2020, the day after the Chinese authorities informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of the flu-symptom virus to June 30, 2020, the day marking the WHO’s six-month anniversary of addressing the said pandemic. Online data were retrieved from the LGU’s official Facebook pages, namely: the Public Information Office (CT PIO) and the Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (CT DRRMO). The online communication of the LGU and the public provided valuable information and insights as to how the local government communicated with their constituents during the first six months of the pandemic in the country, and the public’s responses to the LGU’s disaster communication.

Summary of Findings/Results

The answers to the specific research questions raised in exploring how social reality on disaster is constructed through online communication are summarized below:

What does the online communication reveal about disaster?

Through the social media posts of the local government and the public's engagement to the said post, online communication has revealed disaster as a construct that converges stakeholders, connects people together, and strengthens community resilience. It essentially creates a space, beyond the boundaries of physical presence in the same location, enabling people to access and share information and experiences, resources, and feedback that are crucial during disaster situations.

What reality surfaced in this online communication?

Subjective realities illustrate gratefulness towards local government leaders, frontliners, and donors; gratitude addressed to higher beings; and a strong belief that prayer might provide protection and deliverance from disaster. Also evident in the online communication is the public's contrasting views and attitudes towards the local government with one side appreciating the efforts done by the local government while the other highlights the inconsistencies in data presentation and implementation of guidelines and protocol. The discourse in online communication also reveals the influence of socio-cultural factors such as religion, values, economic status, and belief in their conversations and narratives. These are apparent as they share personal experiences and knowledge.

How was this reality constructed through social media?

The public's online engagement through the social media features (i.e., reactions, links, clicks, shares, and comments) and interconnectedness initiate their participation in sharing subjective realities, and contribute in the construction of objective reality. Through online communication, the detachability from the "here and now" zone, and the permanence of language preserve the objective availability of the written word allowing interlocutors to modify or 'edit' their initial subjective intentions which could change the course of conversations and narratives.

Conclusions

The Socio-cultural tradition of communication theory is based on the premise that through the process of interaction and socialization, people are able to form understanding, meanings, norms, roles, and rules that shape their culture. Craig's (2016) socio-cultural tradition claims that communication is viewed as the creation and enactment of social reality, that is, as people talk, they collectively "co-construct their own social worlds." This construction of social reality is exemplified in the online communication between local government and the public as they engaged in an online discourse on disaster.

From the local government's perspective, the reality of disaster was created by emphasizing on the gravity of the situation through their daily monitoring updates and reports of loss of life; and by assuring the public of their responsibilities and capabilities involving immediate response and actions to meet basic human needs and save lives. Utilizing Facebook pages to spread information of local cases and deaths, and reinforce and implement rules such as curfews, social distancing, and quarantine

enabled the public to receive timely and reliable information allowing them to make informed decisions that direct their actions.

From the public's perspective, the reality of disaster was shaped by emphasizing the pandemic's disruption in the functioning of the community as evident in their comments and reactions involving basic necessities like food, health, transportation, and livelihood not to mention psychological and mental health needs due to isolation, contact restrictions and physical distancing. Their participation in the online discourse through their likes, shares, and comments of the local government's posts revealed their dependence on the LGU's instruction, guidance, and relief operations as they made sense of the disaster and navigated their way to survive the present health condition. However, despite this dependence for information, they were also quick in pointing out inconsistencies in data, instructions, and implementations; delayed results; lack of clear system; unavailability of relief goods for certain areas; and unresponsive social media staff.

Online communication creates opportunities for stakeholders to continuously engage in meaningful exchanges and discussions, beyond the geographical, audience, and time constraint, on relevant matters such as disaster that affect the community. In the process of the online communication and interaction between the local government and the public, disaster is viewed as a construct that converges stakeholders, connects people together, and strengthens community resilience.

As a construct, disaster activates a level of urgency and employment of appropriate resources among communication stakeholders. The importance of disaster communication as a communication phenomenon is essential among local government units who are frontliners in addressing the immediate needs of the community and who are at positions to build stronger relationships and trust with their

constituents. Likewise, the public is dependent on this disaster communication for survival.

The present study's application of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality and Zhao's (2006) concept in the online public domain transform the reality of everyday interaction. The contrasting properties of the face-to-face situations and the "here and now" spatiotemporal zone; and the online (synchronous and asynchronous) communication and the "there and now" zone explain the differences in the construction of subjective and objective realities

Socio-cultural factors such as religion, belief, values, social classes, and attitudes contribute in shaping conversations and narratives in online communication and thus affect public's construction of social reality. Two constructs are identified that reflect the public's social construction of reality: religious belief and a sense of trust in the local government. Cebuano people are known for being religious and for their devotion to Senior Santo Niño and other saints which are articulated in their online communication. Although a good deal of posts indicates references to God or other higher beings—for safety, protection and deliverance, characterizing the pandemic as acts of God, as revealed in Quarantelli's (2001 in Furedi, 2007) paper, is absent. Likewise, their faith, hope, and a sense of trust in the local government, who is apparently transparent but inconsistent, in its plans and actions, prompt them to cooperate and follow the safety protocol and guidelines albeit a number of people who violate the rules and who are skeptical of the pandemic situation.

Online communication through social media offers flexibility in shaping and reshaping one's subjective reality due to the permanence of language in online environment and its detachability component from the present. The availability and accessibility of printed and even verbal (through videos and audio files) messages are

captured and examined; thus, one's response is not as spontaneous compared to face-to-face situations.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions of the present study, the following recommendations are identified:

Theoretical Recommendation

As the tradition concerned with the creation of the individual's social reality, the Socio-Cultural tradition is viewed on both macrolevel and micro-level perspectives. The current study attempted to explain the microlevel of social interaction that demonstrates shared meaning dependent on "a shared context of social institutions and cultural patterns," which are produced and adapted during interaction. Further analysis on how online interactions produce social and cultural patterns in other communication phenomena should also be considered.

Other communication traditions such as Critical, Semiotic, and Socio-psychological traditions could be explored in investigating a similar study. The ideological assumptions and power structures investigated using the lens of Critical Tradition could emphasize the emancipation that surface among public commenters. Likewise, the production and interpretation of signs theorized by Semiotic tradition complements well with Socio-Cultural tradition in discovering how social reality is produced, maintained and transformed. Both can be associated to the perspective of the Socio-Psychological tradition where communication is explained through behavioral interaction with psychological causes and effects.

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) phenomenological account of the social construction of reality and Zhao's (2006) sociological review on how the internet

transformed the reality of human interaction in everyday life provided an essential foundation in investigating online communication. Other accounts and interpretations of social construction of reality such as John Searle's (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*, Kenneth Gergen's (2009) *An Invitation to Social Construction*, and Dave Elder-Vass's (2012) *The Reality of Social Construction* could be applied in the analysis of other communication phenomena.

The proposed framework illustrating the four themes of online disaster communication should be further investigated and developed. An improved version could be implemented to help address communication problems not only of other local government agencies but also of other stakeholders whose purpose is to disseminate verified news and information to a wider audience.

Methodological Recommendation

Other methodological approaches such as an online survey could be utilized separately or complementary with the current study in order to build a more holistic and insightful picture of social reality in online communication. The numerical data particularly in terms of shares, likes, and comments could draw valuable relationships as to the engagement level and type of post.

Given the limitation of this study to engage only in key informant interviews, focus group discussions with other stakeholders such as inter-agency task force, medical frontliners, local police force, and donors could also be done to shed light on collective and coordinated actions in online communication related to disaster. Such strategy could provide better views of online communication initiatives from their lens as well as their description, explanation and account on disaster communication.

Likewise, interviews with online users especially those who constantly responded to or commented in the LGU's posts, and shared personal narratives could contribute more perspectives of their online engagements, how they define situations as real, and what their subjective interpretations are or definition of reality. Further, individual interviews could verify authentic social media accounts, some of which are possibly fake accounts that widely disseminated fake news, hate speeches, conspiracy theories and the like.

Practical Recommendations

Given a considerable number of followers in their official Facebook pages, the local government should interact more with and engage the public who have contributed recommendations on how the LGU could improve their services. A team composed of social media managers and online staff members could be activated to respond to public concerns, and maintain consistency in their information dissemination. Aside from Facebook pages and other social media platforms, the local government should continue to strengthen other means of communicating to the community especially those who have no access to internet or online resources.

Other local government units could refer to this LGU's disaster communication strategies and use these as a benchmark in improving their respective online disaster communication practices. For example, local language and layman's terms are essential means of communicating the right information to as many people as possible; thus, infographics and other publishing materials should continue to be translated from English or foreign terms to Cebuano-Bisaya/other local languages and non-technical terms to be more inclusive in their information dissemination campaign.

Religious beliefs, traditions, and community practices within the sphere of disaster communication should also be investigated. As part of Filipino culture, religious beliefs contribute to people's way of understanding a situation and responding to it. Considering the present study's findings on faith and religiosity, their influence on the public's perception, information reception, decisions, and actions is another significant field to look into.

Another interesting topic to explore is the expression of gratitude during disaster or times of crisis. Although multiple related studies and references already existed supporting its emergence and association with psychological effects such as reducing stress and positivity, further research on the science of gratitude and its impact in improving disaster communication should be investigated.

Data privacy limitation involved in conducting research studies should be reviewed and should not limit academic scholars to pursue their subject of interest.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

Transmittal Letter

November 4, 2020

Mayor [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] City Mayor

Dear Mayor [REDACTED]:

I pray that you and your family are doing well. Thank you for all that you are doing for [REDACTED] City. As one of your constituents, I am blessed to experience a good service from your office.

This is a follow up letter to my email last October 15. I am studying in the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) and am currently working on my dissertation with a working title, **The Public's Social Reality of COVID-19 Pandemic through an Online Discourse**". I have been monitoring yours and the city's PIO's Facebook account which prompted me to look into how our local government is communicating with the public particularly in the event of COVID-19.

This research study aims to present the social reality of the public in a disaster situation as evident in their online discourse and hopefully help our local government improve its disaster and risk communication practices. Specifically, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does the local government unit communicate its plans and actions to the public in the advent of the pandemic?
2. What are the discourse online in response to this pandemic and the organization's (LGU) disaster communication?
3. What social reality surfaced in this online culture?

May I request an interview with you at your most convenient time? Attached are the guide questions for your review. Your insights and strategies in communicating to the public to save lives are valuable information for this study. Should you have any clarification or concern regarding this request, I can be contacted at jmmagno@usc.edu.ph.

Thank you and I look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

Joseleanor M. Magno, M.A.
Candidate, Doctor of Communication
University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU)

APPENDIX B

Excerpt from a Key Informant Interview

- L: *So Sir asa man diri sa [REDACTED] ang kasagaran maconsider na location or evacuation site?*
- A: *Ang mga schools nato. Naa man tay automatic*
- L: *Excluding private? Like [REDACTED]? Or [REDACTED]?*
- A: *ay ang, o kana dili na sila, in wrong kanang worst case scenario ang Sisters of Mary ni ok ang naay approval. Ni ok na sila na we can make their school as evacuation. Naa silay mga areas. In fact kining mga public schools nato, naa ray designated nga pila ra ang icater. So naa nay gihatag ang DepEd ana nga mao ra ni ang number of families nga among i cater if worst case scenario mao ni xa.*
- L: *Nya naay specific families sir nga dira lang ka?*
- A: *Kuan barangays jud, barangays naa man ta drmm plan sa kaning evacuation, kanang designated evacuations.naa sa schools, there are also..*
- L: *At least aware na ang mga families asa sila moadto in case naay disaster*
- A: *ummm.. Evacuation also is like for example temporary ra imong evacuation, pwede ra ka sa barangay hall kung gamay ra. It depends on the number of families or people noh nga mo evacuate. Say for example, 50 families ra ka. Di man na sila mosud sa barangay kay daghan naman na. So 50 butangan nimog 5 so sa gym naka before ka moabot ngadto sa school so there might be, if you have the capacity or capability to hold them in an open area where you can put tents, pwede ra pud na. But kato gyud, standard sa SPHERE, katong international, imo gihapon tong ifollow nga naay CR. although dili tanan completo, at least makatulog sila didto. Mao na xa kasagaran. Not entirely correct nga schools tanan. Naa ra puy, naa sad gani uban nga nasunog? Evacuate na sila diba. Asa man ang ilang evacuation area ana? Dira raman sila nangatog sa ilang mga parenti. Mga clan nila. Ang uban kay namalhin na kay nag abang ra. Wa mi problema. Ang amo lang ang pagdistribute ngadto. 3 days jud nang pagkaon then sa city, basta kaandam lang basta di na xa katong worst case scenario. Katong earthquake nga devastating kaayo, intensity 7, 8 9 and 10 nya wala nay ma sakyanan, you cannot cater a cooked meals nila so ang akong seminar nag include pud na xa sa 3-day provision nga included sa emergency kit.*