TEXTING GOD :
SMS & RELIGION IN THE PHILIPPINES
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Introduction

No digital technology has caught the imagination of Filipinos more than the cell(ular) phone. Within five years since SMS (short messaging system) technology was introduced in 1999, mobile communications spread more than did personal computers so much so that now the Philippines is called the "SMS" or "texting" capital of the world.

"Meryll Lynch reported that for the first quarter of 2001, there were approximately 7.1 million cellphone subscribers in the Philippines: 2.9 million (40.6%) of them were held by Globe Telecom, 3.4 million (48.5%) by Smart Communications and 788,000 (10.9%) by Pilipinas Telephone Corp. (Smart's sister company). For this period, the average SMS transmission was about 65.4 million a day. In 2002, Nokia estimates that there are around 10 million cellphones in the Philippines, transmitting about 100 million text messages a day." (Pertierra et al, 2002, p.88)

"Ever since the beginning of SMS, it has become a vital part in the Filipino lifestyle. The SMS also helped overthrow the corrupt Estrada government in 2001." The major telecommunications companies have predicted that in 2005 "the number of mobile phones/subscribers will have risen to 49 million, almost 60% of the population." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communications_in_the_Philippines)

In 2003, mobile phone giants Globe Telecom and Smart Communications have registered nine million and 11 million subscribers, respectively. In the same year, it was noted that the average Filipino user sent some 2,300 text messages confirming the Philippines as being the most avid SMS user ahead of its neighbors in Southeast Asia and countries in other regions notably Europe and North America. "Texting" or the act of sending and receiving short messages have become so wide-spread, the verb itself has become part of the common lexicon among Filipinos.

Over the years, mobile phone companies have developed programs and services besides providing the core voice calls and delivery of short text messages. At some point, Globe Telecom boasts of "MyCards" (electronic greeting cards sent to persons designated as recipient), "StorIt" (virtual data repository to increase storage space for text messages, images and phone book entries) as well as GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) games. Smart Communications, meanwhile came up with "SmartMoney" to aid cash transfers from remote areas using the cellphone. The company is credited to this day for offering airtime and SMS packages in smaller denominations ahead of close rival Globe Telecom. Smart Communications offer insurance policies via cellphones. And for both Globe and Smart platforms, Social Security Service members can monitor their contribution and the status of their salary loans via SMS.

Mobile phone companies are also hands-on developing content with very high entertainment value. Given the number of such services, entertainment can now be considered the core of content development in the Philippines. Partnerships with wireless application developers have brought in a constant stream of ringtones, polyphonic tunes, wallpapers and screen savers. And this has become much of a fashion among young Filipinos. Although these products and services have a relatively shorter shelf-life, they remain constant offerings to mobile phone subscribers.

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The available SIM packs (Subscriber Identity Module) being sold by mobile phone companies, in fact, already have add-on services similar to those mentioned. GlobeXplore, for example, has possibilities for downloading headline news from CNN or from a local giant media network. The service also offers up-to-date information on traffic situation in the metropolis, entertainment, travel, weather, banking, forex rates and mass schedules. A special section called "Fun" includes horoscope readings for the day, games, icons, tones, mobile chat and daily scripture readings. This mobile chat service, which is also being offered by Smart Communications, is the focus of our study and will be discussed in a later section.

Philippine television has also actively employed the cellphone to boost ratings and revenue generation. SMS voting has become much of a staple among variety shows taking off from the voting scheme of the "American Idol" series which has been shown in the country since its first season in 2002. Both cable and free TV offers fully SMS-interactive channels where viewers can chat using their cellphones much like they do in Internet chatrooms. The difference is only the broadcasted messages are edited and restricted of vulgar content.

The next "killer app" (application or program appealing most to users), according to industry experts, is mobile gaming. With multi-media system (MMS) capable phones, users will be more inclined to download games in their cellphones, particularly Java-programmed games with enhanced graphics and speed far beyond the now trite and simplistic games like "Brick" and "Snake." The future remains open for possibilities a mobile company official was quoted as saying. Users should thus expect more mobile products and services in the future, more exciting and entertaining than the ones up for grabs now.

Among the few published books on cellphone and its impact on Philippine-society is one co-authored by social anthropologist Raul Pertierra. His book "Txt-ing Selves, Cellphones and Modernity" (2002) reported the results of a nationwide survey of some 700 cellphone users. In it are stories of varied cellphone use ranging from the pragmatic – how it aids business and professional work – to the pursuit of social, legal, and political causes. What is revealing in this study is the effect of the technology on the "self" – how certain people are empowered by it, and how low self-esteem apparently gets the necessary boost through cellphone use. (pp. 63-86) This paper tries to examine yet another use of the cellphone, that is, the spread of Christian faith through texting.

The Philippines is known to have the largest Catholic population in Asia. Eighty-three percent, or 63.7 million, of its 77.1 million population are Catholics. In terms of percentage, however, the country ranks second to East Timor, where *93%* (767,000) of its 824,000 population are baptized Catholics. (2004 Catholic Almanac, p. 300 & 317)

With the many SMS services offered to Filipinos, it is interesting to know how young Catholics in the country use their cellphones. Are religious SMS services used and if at all, how far are they being used? Or do young Filipinos show a leaning towards alternative, secular SMS services particularly mobile chat services?

For this paper, a survey was conducted among 500 Catholic students in the greater Manila area. The survey questionnaire was administered from September-December 2004 to 190 male (38% of the sample) and 310 female students (62%) aged 15 to 24 years old. Interviews were also conducted. The sample is a purposive sample therefore, the statistics in the following discussion are indicative rather than conclusive.

However small the sample size, the results are quite revealing and might help the Church develop pastoral activities for the young. It was found, for example, that only one third of the students subscribe to religious SMS services. One third additionally subscribe to "mobile chat services" – the mobile version of Internet chatrooms where strangers meet, discover friends and find romantic matches. A full third of mobile chat subscribers, or one-tenth of the total sample, find more than just romantic matches but sexual partners as well.

In the survey it appears that young Filipinos are in need of *connection* with other people. Connection goes further than mere *connectivity* which cellphones provide. The study points to mutual sharing and openness as having positive consequences for ministry far more than mere sending of Biblical and inspirational quotes to young people, which on a general scale religious SMS in the Philippines is all about.

The one-way sending of quotes, however, should continue as it is helpful for evangelizing work. But complementing this with some form of interpersonal exchange will have a greater impact on young people's lives. Connection, relation, openness and dialogue are the building blocks of *community*, and community after all is what it means to be "church."

Cellphone and the Self

Communication scholar, Rich Ling (2004), describes the relationship of teens with their cellphones as providing security, allowing "anytime-anywhere-for-whatever-reason type of access," and bounding tightly together their respective social networks. "Its use as a type of lifeline and its use in coordination of everyday life are nothing if not functional and instrumental." (p. 85) The survey results suggests, however, that cellphone use goes beyond "functional and instrumental. The device itself has become an extension of "self."

All respondents were found to have cellphones. Eight out of ten have owned a cellphone for more than two years, and have changed units at least twice within that period. Practical uses of the technology include "Linking to family" (100%) meaning that young people are now better connected with their parents. Conversely, parents are better able to track down their youngsters.

Seven out of ten (70%) respondents cited the convenient use of the unit's alarm clock in keeping appointments and beating deadlines. While cellphones help them "meet new friends" (68%), they also bring relative ease to meeting the demands of academic life. A majority of the respondents said that cellphones are a "necessity." More than half of the young people surveyed said their cellphones are "a part of me" (54%), and a good "companion" (52%). This means today cellphones are no longer an accessory but something like clothing. Leaving home without it is unthinkable. "You feel naked without a cellphone," an informant said.

Pertierra and his colleagues (2002) gave three reasons why it is necessary for Filipinos to own a cellphone. One reason has to do with the inadequate landline telephone facilities especially in remote parts of the country. The other reason, which has more relevance to this study, is that the young people surveyed living right in the capital city, are in need of *mobile communication*. While on the go, it is necessary for them to communicate and unlike stationary landline installations, cellphones offer the ease of anytime, anywhere communication.

A third reason is the need for a companion in an increasingly individualistic world. Young Filipinos are seeking a kind of "grounding" amid the hustle and bustle of the modernizing world. That grounding is sought in being connected with relatives and friends as well as meeting new friends.

"Cellphones do not provide any viable answers to the problems of modernity but they give us the means to share our anxieties, uncertainties, trivialities and even banalities with others. They help us navigate and make sense of the virtual, real and imaginary worlds that we inhabit." (Pertierra, et al, 2002, p. 151)

Pertierra's second explanation point to a pragmatic use of cellphones – one that could lump together uses like keeping schedules and meeting the demands of academic life. The third reason gives a clue as to what young people are searching for in the midst of a busy and mechanistic life. We will return to this point in a later section. For now, it suffices to know that young Filipinos regard their cellphones as an extension of themselves. Without it, they feel incomplete.

SMS: A New Way of Communication

The survey conducted for this paper, found that only eight percent of the students expressed disliking for SMS, while 44 percent take a neutral stance, being neither affected positively nor negatively by texting. Close to half of the students (48%), however, said they actually "enjoy" exchanging text messages.

Figure 1:

Do you enjoy texting?

8%

48%

44%

- I don't like texting
- Texting is "just fine"
- I enjoy texting
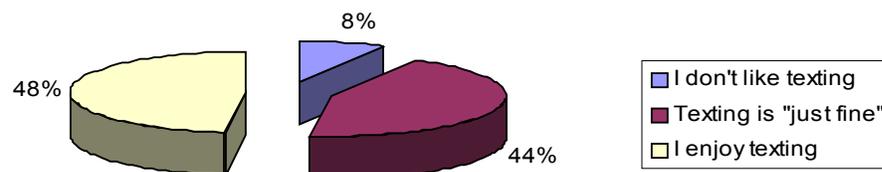
In mid-2000, a continental forum of communication professionals and educators had a session on the new SMS language and its influence on the proper introduction of young people to the English language. The way messages are encoded into the tiny device, in most cases ignoring proper syntax and spelling, was seen as both revolutionary and flawed.

The practice involves truncating letters so that meaning is deciphered on the basis of sounds produced by the remaining letters of what are supposed to be words. A text message with the letters "wer r u nw," for example, asks the recipient of his or her whereabouts ("where are you now"). The text "mt u @ d ofc 6pm" gives specific details of a planned meeting between the communicating parties ("meet you at the office 6 pm"). Morning and afternoon greetings are simply encoded "G'am," "gud am," "G'pm" or "gud pm." "Smileys" are often included to show emotions. Information technology experts call these "emoticons" or icons representing emotions. Thus, a smile can be encoded as ":-)" or the German *umlaut* for the letter "u."

Older users and those adept in English, try to insist on correct spelling and grammar. But they lose the advantage of encoding as much information as needed, not to mention the economy of lesser punches on the unit's keypad.

We see emoticons used sometimes in casual emails sent by friends. But at times, young Filipinos use SMS language even in love letters and casual emails sent to friends. Internet chatrooms employ this type of language as well including acronyms that are by themselves full sentences known only to chatters. But as in cellphones, fans of SMS language aim at economy of space and keypunches, in addition to a sense of being "hip," "stylish" or in fashion.

We find an explanation to this from communication scholar Walter Ong who was able to define stages in the development of communication technology. This age of computers, Ong said, is part of "secondary orality," the stage in the development of communication technology where the dominant "sensorium" or the "material practices of communication in each culture" involves sight and sound, voice, image and music. (O'Leary in Dawson and Cowan, 2004, pp. 38-41) This stage dates back to the onset of printing technology and has the aspects of both orality ("primary orality" of preliterate cultures which principally uses sound) and

literacy. In a computer-dominated world like ours, these two elements "are combined into a new, hybrid form of communication that, in the words of one networker,

> 'is both talking and writing yet isn't completely either one. It's talking by writing. It's writing because you type it on a keyboard and people read it. But because of the ephemeral nature of luminescent letters on a screen, and because it has such a quick – sometimes instant – turn-around, it's more like talking' (Coate, 1992)" (ibid.)

Cellphone as Inspiration

In the Philippines, friends very often greet each other with text messages, not simply using one-liner greetings or straightforward "G'am" or "G'pm." Full quotations are used, lifted from the Bible or famous soundbytes of some past sage. In some cases, stories of humor and wit are shared with friends culminating with the appropriate greeting of the day. Several informants said these kinds of greeting are the reason why text messages "Gives (them) pleasure" or why they "feel important" at the arrival of a text message.

The assurance of "connection" with another people, particularly those they consider to be friend or whom they want to be friends with, is woven in that single text message. And often, the urge to reciprocate cannot be resisted, thus, bringing the cycle into a full close. Linkage with the other is maintained, giving a feeling of satisfaction, a necessary boost for the day, an inspiration.

In the 2002 nation-wide survey by Pertierra, eight out of ten respondents (79.7%) said the arrival of a text message "gives pleasure." In the survey done for this paper, thirty percent of the students say the arrival of a text message "makes me feel important," and a third (33%) admits to being "inspired" by it. While the third response may conjure up romantic connotations, there is a strong possibility that the students are additionally referring to the kind of inspiration brought about by a connection with the Divine, and a reminder of a supernatural presence guiding their lives. In fact, many of pre-typed messages, so-called "forwarded messages" circulating in this predominantly Catholic country, have strong religious basis, or inspired by some religious thought. Simple greetings are loaded with references to the Divine as the following examples show:

<Example 1>	<Example 2>	<Example 3>
7 RULES 2 BE HAPPY: 1>never hate. 2>don't worry. 3>live simple. 4>expect a little. 5>give a lot. 6>always smile. 7>have Christ n ur heart God bless	Without "JESUS CHRIST", days are "moanday" "tearsday" "wasteday" "thirstday" "fightday" "shatterday" & "sinday" so allow Him to be w/"U" everyday.. ! GOD BLESS U	Today b4 u think of Sayng an unkind word, Think of sum1 hu cnt speak. B4 u complain bout d taste of ur food,thnk of sum1 hu has nothng 2 eat. B4 u complain bout lyf, thnk of sum1 hu went 2 erly 2 heavn & wen u r tired & complain bout ur job, thnk of d unemployed, d dsabld & thos hu wishd they had ur job.& wen depresng thots seem 2 get u down, put a smyl on ur face & thank GOD ur alive & stil arnd. Life s a gift.. Live it.. Njoy it

The 2002 Pertierra study also reported that nearly half (45.9%) of the total number of forwarded messages received daily are "inspirational," and half (24%) fall under a so-called "informative" category. Only 16 percent of the messages are labeled "humorous" which often come with sexual innuendoes and regarded as ridiculous yet amusing. During political exercises, satirical treatments of political figures contain those humorous texts.

Faith via SMS

It is not surprising that cellphones are used by the Church for straightforward evangelizing purposes. The technology lends itself to such possibility that elsewhere besides the Philippines, SMS is used to spread the Christian faith and more.

The late Pope John Paul II, a promoter of modern media use for evangelization, delivered his 2004 Midnight Mass and Christmas Day messages via cellphones in Italy. This was made possible through collaboration with the Italian state-broadcaster and two popular cellphone operators in the country, *Vodafone* and *Telecom Italia Mobile*. Although the service was enabled for third generation cellphones only, it shows the utility of the medium for faith-based communications. (Curnow, Robyn: "Dial-a-Prayer, upgraded" in *International Herald Tribune*, January 17, 2005, p. 12)

In England, a non-denominational Church catering to the gay and lesbian community has used text messaging to extend care and support for its clientele. The project involves two-way communication where texters actually interact with a pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in Manchester. (ibid.)

Islamic groups also use wireless technology to maintain contacts with their followers. In Britain, the Islamic Prayer Alert Service sends out more than 70,000 messages a month to remind Muslim subscribers of the times for daily prayers and quotations from the Qu'ran. (ibid.) (For more information about SMS and Religion around the world, visit *<http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/cat_sms_and_religion.htm>*)

Back in the Philippines, cellphones are used for a wide range of purposes from politics – ousting a president in 2001 and curtailing a coup attempt in 2002 – to the rather low-key Catholic education and evangelization. Religious texts take on a high-profile status only when universal Church concerns are at the fore of news and gossip. Pope John Paul II was repeatedly a subject of forwarded SMS including his rumored death in 2003. Whenever his health slips, forwarded messages were circulated asking prayers for his recovery. Text messages flooded during the Pope's final hours with prayers and tributes to his work as pontiff of the Catholic Church. Requests to light candles in churches and in homes were also announced via SMS on the eve of his death.

Text greetings have indeed become a custom among Filipinos today. Besides getting messages across with relative ease, Filipinos find texting as the only cheaper alternative than voice calls. Here are few sample text messages circulated last Christmas and Easter:

<Example 4>	<Example 5>	<Example 6>
This CHRISTMAS, I wish u not Just smiles but Laughter,not Just happiness but Pure Joy; Not just wealth but Heaven's Treasures;& not just silence But God's Peace!	D Risen Lord is NOT a relic of a past 2 b cherishd. He is a living presence 2 xperience & share. Let's live &proclaim His msge of Peace 2 all always &evrywher!	J-E-S-U-S- Can't b spelled w/out -U- Bcause -U- are the reason y He gave up Hs Life on d CRoSS. AS He Loves me, He Loves -U- too!! HAPPY EASTER!!

One wonders where such forwarded messages come from, and who initiates them. To this day, no one knows exactly. Some informants allege that mobile phone companies themselves send these out to few subscribers for re-circulation. Such messages include so-called "chain texts" or prayer requests to gain heavenly favors or to avert some dooms-day prediction. All these are meant to keep people hooked on their keypads and spend money credits.

<Example 7>	<Example 8>
Sr Reodica * predicts Intensity 9 erthquake On apr14 @ 5pm. Pls pray 2 save us from dis trial. Pass on!!! *Sr. Raquel Reodica, rvm (Religious of the Virgin Mary) is said to possess healing powers and prophecy. The earthquake predicted in this text message never happened but many people did pass the message on to friends and relatives.*	2day is Mama Mary's feast day. Pray 1 our father 3 hail marys 1 glory be. Pass on to 5 frens & xpect a miracle 2nyt. Don't ignore!!

In this day and age, anyone can craft a text message and have it re-transmitted to a network of friends. Text manuals are available in bookstores and anyone with a hint of piety, for example, and time to spare could devise a relevant greeting and send to his/her friends. A good return rate is likely assured, sometimes with equally impressive and touching thoughts ready to be re-circulated. On Palm Sunday 2005 with no manual at hand the greeting below (Example 9) was sent to ten of the author's friends. On the very same day, seven replies were received. Three were messages of a similar nature; four were notes of thanks.

<Example 9>
JESUS enters r Own temples 2day. Lets pray: 'Lord, come w/ d whip 2 cleans me of everythn dat displeases u AMEN'

Such capability of cellphone users (to be senders and not merely receivers of text messages) exemplifies Paul Levinson's "mobile hearth" concept. Levinson (2004) refers to humans becoming *mobile hearths* in the wake of modern media like Internet and certainly the cellphone. Mobile hearths are able to receive and produce messages defying both time and distance. "The result of all these capacities instantly at hand is that the contents of our minds, including ideas, impulses, strategies, become a fingertip away from implementation. In a world of *omni*-communication, thoughts and ideas are easier to enact." (pp. 52-53) With MMS-capable phones gradually abounding in use, saturating the mobile communications cycle with religious content may require more technical know-how e.g. cropping digital images. But with SMS here to stay, it is easier to encourage our young people to become producers of inspiring messages instead of simply receiving them.

SMS and Money

One criticism about cellphone use, however, is the relative high cost of maintaining a unit. Young people especially, like buying accessories to enhance the look of their phones. On a general scale, however, users still complain of expensive call- and texting rates. Subscribers on fixed monthly plans are greatly outnumbered by

pre-paid card users because the latter payment scheme is thought to be more economical. Smart Communications tally 90 percent of its subscriber base to be on pre-paid plans, each spending an average of P10 (0.20 US$) for voice calls and text messages per day. Pre-paid cards are sold at roughly 5.88 US$ or 9.80 US$ denominations. A text message roughly costs 0.02 US$ per send, while voice calls cost about 0.15 US$ per minute.

But while young users appreciate all the benefits of anytime-anywhere communications, 26 percent of the young people surveyed still said maintaining cellphones is expensive. Connectivity comes with a price, and even though "texting" is cheaper than voice calls, the students still manage to restrain themselves in order to save precious "load" (Peso units in pre-paid plans) for more important messages. Nevertheless, mobile phone companies remain on their toes devising products and services that will keep subscribers stuck on their keypads. And religion is one application thought to bring in good business.

In 2001, a multinational firm specializing on wireless technology pioneered a catechism project through SMS. The project evolved in three stages. At first, it was a "religious chatroom" accessible through a four-digit access code. The service was soon discontinued because a few chatters began using lewd language and seeking sexual gratification. The service was likened to Internet chatrooms where visitors play on chance to meet romantic and sexual partners.

By mid-2002, the project took on counseling as its service. Again, it was short-lived because texters with pathological cases joined in. An insider said the counselor was once confronted by an apparent suicidal case. He had to withdraw from the session. The lack of expertise and question of authenticity of cases presented drove proponents to stop the service yet again. By the end of the same year to this day, the service simply sends Biblical quotations to subscribers. In addition to a main "Quote" service, two priests were employed each having their own key-word access with the same four-digit code. Short reflections are sent daily to their own subscriber-base.

A key word sent to the four-digit number is actually the one-time subscription pass to receive quotes on a daily basis at a rate higher than the standard texting rate. Interactivity was compromised with the so-called "push technology" where messages are sent from a single source to a subscriber-base allowing very little feedback. An insider said feedback from subscribers, if any, is stored in the server and does not reach the priest-writers of the reflections. Feedback is used only for marketing purposes and not to establish further contact with subscribers.

In 2003, mobile phone providers and some religious congregations began offering religious SMS services. Some replicated the sending of Biblical quotes while others offered mobile versions of the Rosary and Way of the Cross. The Society of Jesus attempted a counseling service "SEEK 2346." (See Appendix B)

The university survey aimed to find out if the students are aware of these religious SMS services, and whether they subscribe to them. The results show that about four out of ten (43%) are aware of at least one existing service, the most popular being "Quote 2978." Interestingly, only half of that or two out of ten (20%) students actually subscribe to it. And in total, a little over third of the entire sample (38%) subscribe to faith-based texting services.

Table 1: **Religious SMS Service –
Awareness and Subscription**

Service	Aware of	Subscribe to
Quote 2978	43%	20%
Mobile Rosary	18%	6%
Reflect Txt	20%	6%
AMEN 2971	12%	4%
Mobile Way of the Cross	12%	3%
Reflect MMS	7%	3%
SEEK 2346	11%	2%
SEEK 29766	4%	2%
Reuter 2978	4%	1%
Soc 2978	2%	1%

Figure 2:

Do you subscribe to religious SMS services?

38%   62%   NO   YES
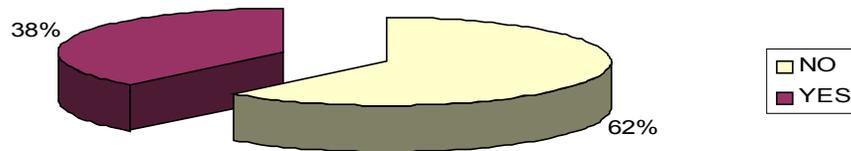
Those who knew of "Quote 2978" and other religious SMS services, but are not active subscribers, must have learned about the service through word-of-mouth or through advertising. One of the priests employed to write spiritual reflections maintains a column in a major daily newspaper. It is likely that the service was learned through one of the columns. But the students have aborted their subscription for one of the reasons given below. (Table 2) These are the top-six reasons for disliking religious SMS services. Among other reasons, the students are not so appreciative of "one-way" communication where quotes are simply sent to them (12%). A small number (5% - not shown in the table) also said "cellphone is *not* for religion." Although the total percentage is given here, male and female responses were separately tabulated and found to actually have no difference. Male and female students share the same views about religious SMS services.

Table 2: **"What I *don't* like about religious SMS services …"**

Expensive	18%
Passive	13%
Too "catholic"	13%
Logos (downloadable graphics as accessory)	12%
Boring	12%
One-way form of communication	**12%**

Subscribers of religious SMS, meanwhile, gave their reasons for liking the service. In addition to the list in Table 3, the students also said they like religious wallpapers (16% - not shown in the table), similar to logos, which they can download and display on their cellphone monitors. Ringtones with religious flavor are another favorite (16%), which again can be downloaded and used as melody for incoming calls or texts. A few of the students (13%) cited the fact that religious messages are not only inspiring, they give some form of "entertainment" as well (13%).

Table 3: **"What I like about religious SMS services …"**

Inspiring	36%
Prayer guides	28%
Relaxing	25%
Deepens faith	21%
Logos	18%

SEX and SMS

Hard-core material has infiltrated the cellphone in text form or graphic image. Third generation cellphones are able to run video clips extracted from pornographic films or produced at home. Two film actors caused quite a stir in mid-2004 when clips of their sex video circulated among cellphone users. A few informants of this research received copies of those clips showing illicit acts. Parents and educators were alarmed, and so were the NGOs involved in children and media issues.

A majority of the university students surveyed (59%), however, maintain they do *not* enjoy trading erotic material via MMS. One reason is the fact that third generation cellphones or "MMS-capable" cellphones have not saturated the Philippine-market just yet. A little over half of the respondents (53%) are using MMS-capable cellphones and only 40% have mobile access to the Internet. A stronger influence is likely that the students remain grounded on Catholic teachings. While Filipinos try to embrace modernity they are still conservative consumers of media violence and pornography. But there is another finding in the survey that is quite revealing.

The two major mobile phone providers have so-called "mobile chat" service accessible through numeric codes ("2323" for Globe and "888" for Smart subscribers). Like Internet chatrooms, mobile chatrooms allow subscribers to forge relationships even illicit relationships with strangers. "Cyber sex" is a reality not only in the Internet but in cellphones as well. In some cases, "sex on phone" ("SOP" or sex talk) and "sex on text" ("SOT") consummate in actual physical contact following the parties' first meeting or after they have "eye-balled" (termed as "sex eye-ball" or "SEB").

The survey did show that three out of ten (34%) university students – almost equal to religious SMS subscribers (38%) – participate in mobile chat services. The reasons for "liking" secular chatrooms listed in Table 4 suggest that young Filipinos are seeking some form of diversion from everyday routine. One reason, however, seeks to gratify the need to relate with others and integrate better in society ("Helps me win new friends," 35%).

Table 4: **"What I like about mobile chat services …"**

Entertaining	39%
Eases boredom	36%
Helps to win new friends	**35%**
Acquaints me with people with same interests like mine	30%
Relaxes me, and Helps me win acquaintances	24%

Students with no interest in mobile chat services say it is "expensive." (Table 5) Chatters who lie about their true identity are a nuisance, as well as vulgar and overly sexual lingo. Thirty-one percent say they would not engage in conversations like that. Three out of ten (29%), meanwhile say mobile chatting is a "waste of time."

Table 5: **"What I *don't* like about mobile chat services …"**

Expensive	43%
Lies communicated	36%
Vulgar language	31%
Waste of time	29%
Vulgar nicknames	18%

However, almost all mobile chat subscribers have "eyeballed" with strangers and a majority of them even said they derive pleasure from eyeballing. Some have found new friends and regular textmates.

Usually when chatters become textmates, the exchanges move from safe topics like weather, politics, or "NASL" ("name, age, sex and location") to more intimate "STATS" (looks and bodily statistics), and "TRIP" (sexual preferences). The survey also found that one of out ten in the sample (11%) had physical sexual encounters with a chatmate. A few informants also admitted having engaged in the mobile version of "online" or virtual sex where text exchanges loaded with sexual references culminate in masturbation of the chatters.

Given the Church teachings on pre-marital sex and the sanctity of body and marriage, this statistic could be alarming for parents, the Church, and the schools. What can we make out of this finding? SMS certainly allows such sexual adventure. But what are young Filipinos really looking for? The other survey results could prove a point.

SMS and Relationships

Beside secular chatrooms, the students also avail of other services offered by mobile phone service providers. More than half of the sample (57%) participates in radio and TV surveys using their cellphones. They consider this a worthwhile activity because some sort benefit is at stake. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) also participate in promotions aired over radio and television, again because of the chance to gain something in exchange for the effort. This shows that young people generally are willing to trade both time and money when some form of gratification is foreseen.

The study also shows that young people's search for emotional boost is sought through SMS. When asked to rank different categories of forwarded messages according to preference, the top five choices were

"Friendship," "Love," "Jokes," "Life and living," and "Feast Day greetings." The first two choices underline a certain need among young people today, which remain constant across both genders in the study. Young Filipino men and women seek relationships beyond familial boundaries. They need to *relate* with others, perhaps in a romantic way as Ben-ze'ev suggests in "Love Online: Emotions on the Internet" where he says, "a sizeable proportion of SMS users choose SMS for asking someone out on a date" (2004, p.16). But there are others, perhaps more in the Philippines as Pertierra affirms, who are seeking relationships that could bring a sense of direction, belonging-ness and integration in their lives.

Ling (2004) cites several past studies that confirm such need among young people. He says: "The experience with other peers is essential. On the one hand, children's relationships to adults provide a sense of an ordered social reality. At the same time, the peer group provides them with the sense that they can modify social interactions. Thus, these relationships provide mutual meaning." (Yonniss, 1980, etc.)

Table 6: **Favorite categories of forwarded messages**

Friendship	89%
Love	85%
Personal jokes	62%
Life and living	56%
Feast Day greetings	48%

Table 7: **Most disliked categories of forwarded messages**

Advocacy	86%
Promotions (of products and services)	85%
Showbiz (Entertainment news)	82%
Political	71%
Sex	66%

The point in all this discussion is that while mobile phones offer better and increased *connectivity* – certainly for one-way communication from distant and at times anonymous senders – receivers in the other end, and young users in general, are seeking something more. They are seeking a *connection*. "Connectivity" and "connection" have been distinguished quite clearly by theology professor John P. Jewell as one that involves technical means (connectivity); in this case, the cellphone. The other (connection) has something to do with relation and relationship, the building blocks of community (2004, pp. 15-25).

Jewell, a pastoral worker and an information technology expert, made such distinction to shed light to the use of new media, particularly the Internet, in Church ministry. Articles have been written about the technology as if it is the final solution to all that hinders the task of proclamation or religion propagation. Its utility is found in the ability to deliver messages far beyond the reaches of the pulpit or the limited broadcasts of electronic media. Jewell proposes that pastors regard the Internet, and other new media like the cellphone, as bringing to fore new ways of communication and not exclusively as *the* only means to communicate lest he warns of the danger of *imposing* the technology instead of *integrating* it in ministry. Rather than exhausting ways of doing pastoral and ministerial work online, it could be beneficial to think of new ways of being religious and expressing faith. (ibid.)

The cellular phone proves to be an effective conduit of Biblical and inspirational texts. In the Philippines, catechism has found a special niche in the texting market. But fostering relational exchanges rather than one-way transmission of religious texts may have a better impact and could elevate the whole enterprise of religion propagation to another, more significant level.

Lay leaders have expressed concern over the youth's increasing patronage to Internet chatrooms like <www.friendster.com>, <www.adultfinder.com>, Yahoo! Messenger, and other match-finding websites. Indeed, a growing number of Filipino youngsters are getting hooked to these services opening doors to sexual adventures or mis-adventures. Mobile phone giant Globe Telecom has recently introduced a mobile version of <www.friendster.com> and Yahoo! Messenger with exactly the same dynamics as its online versions. As a consequence, the Church is called upon to devise new and creative ways of communicating with its most valued sector, the young. However, the existing religious SMS services prove a little less effective as far as providing what young people are actually looking for. Sending one time quotes could be inspiring, and assisting young people develop Scripture-reading habits. Certainly, these quotes are useful reminders of liturgical feast days as well. But what the youth needs evidently is sharing, connecting, relating with other people.

Counseling and help sites such as <metoyou.com> and <homestead.com/quietroom/CGC.html> in Singapore, as well as <befrienders.org.my> in Kuala Lumpur are models where appropriate, if not similar, mobile versions can be derived from. (See Table 8) A group of young Christian webmasters in Europe gathered in a forum in Cluj, northern Romania in late 2004 and planned an online forum that will be open for young people's questions about their faith. This is in recognition of the need for building relationships online as more and more young Europeans are going online. Jacob's Ladder website at <www.dejacobsladders.nl> is not all-positive about the Christian faith but nonetheless, it remains open for interaction and dialogue especially among young people troubled with their faith and life in general. These examples offer clues as to what may be fitting the needs of young Filipinos.

Table 8: **Sample Help Sites**

Metoyou, Singapore	http://metoyou.org.sg
Child Guidance Clinic, Singapore	www.homestead.com/quietroom/CGC.html
Samaritans of Singapore	www.samaritans.org.sg
Befrienders Kuala Lumpur	www.befrienders.org.my
Samaritans of Thailand	www.geocities.com/samaritansthai
Befrienders International	www.befrienders.org

(Source: "Readers' Digest," April 2005, p. 45)

Conclusion

In this study it became clear that SMS is effective in forging and maintaining relationships. The technology also lends itself for religious purposes. Inspiring quotes can give the necessary boost to texters and encourage faith deepening. The study also reveals that young Filipinos today are seeking relationships with other people. This need is spurred by loneliness brought about by the modernizing and increasingly individualistic world. The youth needs some grounding in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Such relationship-seeking might be considered an intrinsic characteristic of the youth culture today.

Without discounting the importance of existing religious SMS services, this paper proposes a complementary SMS ministry with specific user needs served right at the core. Like online faith communities in the Internet, communities of texters based on Christian values can also be found. John Paul II said in

today's Church ministry "it is not enough to use modern means of communication to communicate the Gospel message." Rather, ways should be found to "integrate that message into the new culture created by modern means of communication." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37c) SMS faith communities – where texters can openly interact, dialogue and share – can be more integral to today's youth culture.

While experts are grinding their creative mills on the next SMS ministry, they might also look for ways to improve Church services offline or those occurring outside technologies, where the faithful are met face-to-face. People might get so enticed to visit Church after next inspiring text message, only to be disappointed with a different scenario inside the hallowed grounds.

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Appendix A.1 – **WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH YOUR CELLPHONE ***

1. Consult it like a dictionary (Smart ZED service). Just type WHAT IS <term to be defined> and send to 288.

2. Get domestic and international flight schedules (Smart ZED service). For domestic flights, type DOMFLIGHT or DOMFLT <carrier> <origin> <destination> and send to 288. For international flights, type INTLFLIGHT or INTLFLT <carrier> <origin> <destination> and send to 288.

3. Be updated about the traffic situation in Metro Manila (Globe InfoText service). To receive the latest traffic covering the stretch of Edsa, type NISCAR EDSA and send to 2333.

4. Search for old friends and classmates (Globe InfoText service), send ALUMNI to 2343 to register and be part of a virtual directory.

5. If you are an SSS member, you can get information on your salary loan status by keying in SSS SALSTAT <SSS number> <birthdate1 (mmddyyyy)> <birthdate2 (mmddyyyy)> and send to 2931.

6. Find a love match (Smart ZED service). Type MATCH P (for personal) <birthdate1 (mmddyyyy)> <birthdate2 (mmddyyyy)> and send to 288.

7. Get Tarot readings based on your birthday (Smart ZED service). Type ON TAROT <mm/dd/yy> and send to 288.

8. Know the latest events and city guides for a place you intend to visit (Globe InfoText service). Type CNNTRVLAMSTERDAM and send to 2333.

9. Locate a particular restaurant (Globe InfoText service). Type FINDME RESTAURANT <name of restaurant> and send to 2333. For Smart ZED, type WIN RESTAURANT and send to 288 to get location of available restaurants in your neighborhood.

10. Play a game in GameChannel. Register by sending G REG <username of choice> and send to 2359. Once registered, you can start playing every Tuesday and Thursday from 6 to 7 pm on IBC Channel 13.

11. Send hate text messages to your congressmen. This requires knowledge of their cellphone numbers though.

Source: "I, The Investigative Reporting Magazine," vol. ix, no. 4, p. 41.

Appendix A.2 –   **SAMPLE SIM CARD ADD-ONS:**
                   SMS SERVICES AVAILABLE UPON PURCHASE

Mail   Inbox (email)

News   ABS/CBN
                 CNN

Info   Traffic
                        Entertainment
                        Directory
                        Daily Survey
                        Mass Schedules
                        Travel Info
                        Weather
                        Globe Info

Fun   Horoscopes
                        Biorhythm
                        Globe Games
                        Globe Icons
                        Globe Tones
                        Mobile Chat
                        Daily Dose

Money   Banking
                        Stocks
                        Forex Rates

Buy/ Sell   Globe Cards
                        Auctions
                        Special Deals

Others   (activated by typing in a keyword and
                 choosing an access number)

Appendix B – **SAMPLE RELIGIOUS SMS SERVICES ***

Service	Description	Provider	Access
Quote 2978	"Daily Inspirational Quotes" – Spiritual readings, Bible verses and prayer exercises	Private company, Globe Telecom and Manila Archdiocese	Send "QUOTE" to 2978
Mobile Rosary	The Mobile Rosary helps count the beads by providing a visual rosary to follow, moving onto the next bead whenever "Amen" appears and is clicked on the phone. The program also provides passages and images that help the subscribers reflect on the meaning of each mystery.	Smart Communications (also available with Talk n' Text and Addict Mobile subscriptions)	Visit Smart WAP site on the handset, scroll down to select Java Applications and click on Spiritual. The Mobile Rosary and Mobile Way of the Cross is one of the downloadable programs.
Reflect TXT	"REFLECTXT" Daily Reflections is a subscription service that allows the subscriber to download and receive reflections and images on different themes from the Mass on that day.	Smart Communications (also available with Talk n' Text and Addict Mobile subscriptions)	Send "REFLECTXT" or "REFLECTXT NOW" to 352
Amen 2971	Spiritual readings, Bible verses and prayer exercises	Private company, Globe Telecom and Manila Archdiocese	Send "AMEN" to 2971
Mobile Way of the Cross	The Mobile Way of the Cross guides the subscriber through the prayers while presenting appropriate images and passages to help the subscriber meditate on the meaning of each station.	Smart Communications (also available with Talk n' Text and Addict Mobile subscriptions)	Visit Smart WAP site on the handset, scroll down to select Java Applications and click on Spiritual. The Mobile Way of the Cross is one of the downloadable programs.

* *Not an exhaustive list.*

Service	Description	Provider	Access
Reflect MMS	"REFLECTMMS" Daily Reflections is a subscription service that allows the subscriber to download and receive reflections and images on different themes from the Mass on that day.	Smart Communications (also available with Talk n' Text and Addict Mobile subscriptions)	Send "REFLECTMMS" or "REFLECTMMS NOW" to 352
Seek 2346	Seek 2346 offers a variety of services from daily reflections, bible passages and prayer offerings to a wide selection of logos, ringtones, polytones, colored wallpapers, and picture messages. To subscribe, simply text the keyword to 2346: GOOD NEWS — For daily relections in English SAGLIT — For daily reflections in Tagalog BIBLE — For scriptural daily reflections INALDAW — For daily reflections in Ilocano BAGTING — For daily reflections in Cebuano For the following services, text the keyword and your message then send to 2346: PRAY — For prayer requests FEEDBACK — For feedback and counseling	Jesuit Communications	Send "SEEK" to 2346 to access Main Menu
Seek 29766	Main menu of available seek services. Other keywords are: PRAY- for prayer request; GM- for God Matters; DL-Downloads INVYT, REG, FDBK, and INFO Example, text GM and send to 29766	Globe Telecom	Send "SEEK" to 29766

Service	Description	Provider	Access
Reuter 2978	FR REUTER'S PASTORAL TEXT: Personal thoughts and reflections from Fr James B. Reuter, SJ	Private company, Globe Telecoms and Manila Archdiocese	Send "REUTER" to 2978
Soc 2978	BISHOP SOC'S PASTORAL TEXT: Personal thoughts and news from Balanga Diocese Bishop and former Manila Auxiliary Bishop, Socrates Villegas	Private company, Globe Telecom and Manila Archdiocese	Send "SOC" to 2978

Sources:
1. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3663283.stm
2. http://www.jesuits.ph/New%20Web/seek.html
3. http://www.globehandyphone.com.ph/
4. http://www.smart.com.ph/SMART/Value+Added+Services/Advanced+VAS/

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