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EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESTORING THE HARMONY AND DIGNITY OF
THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL
MEDIA.

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ABSTRACT

In spite of social media's positive contributions to the Christian family, the rapid acceleration in the technological field of social communications, has the ability to progressively alter the time-honoured family values and traditions. This study explores opportunities for restoring the harmony and the dignity of the Trinidadian Christian family in this age of social media. The study was driven by the current impacts of social media on the Trinidadian Christian families. Even though social media have brought people together, many are unknowingly losing the cherished family values of past generations. Social media present new ways of reimagining relationships in Trinidadian Christian families. This study finds that the Christian family can retain harmony and dignity in this age of social media and the rapid acceleration of technology. As social media have come to stay, a healthy approach is desirable in order to preserve the values and traditions that have always defined Trinidadian Christian families.

Key Words: Trinidad and Tobago, Social Media, Christian Family, Face-to-face, Restoration, Communitarian.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid acceleration in the sphere of digital communication have brought enormous benefits to Trinidadian Christian families. Without doubt, in this time of the pandemic, Facebook and WhatsApp messages have served to reduce the effects of isolation. Family members with a little technological skill, can easily make contact through these platforms and other applications. The communication gap is being significantly bridged.

Social media is described as “a computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities” (Dollarhide 1). With its ability to share content in a rapid manner, it has become one of the most favoured means of interaction. As a means of communication and social interaction, social media have affected in positive and negative ways family relationships.

But these same means of communication, (because of people’s high dependence on them) have also had a disruptive effect on how families operate. Social media applications have become addictive. Their excessive use has contributed to disharmony within the Christian household. The survey conducted in the course of this work, suggests that in some households, family members are now more connected to their devices than to their family members.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, harmony is the “agreement of ideas, feelings, or actions, or a pleasing combination of different parts.” In the context of this work, harmony can be described as the acceptance and upholding of those ideals, beliefs and traditions that help to shape and nurture our families, religion, and society. Reflecting on this theme, in a *General Audience*, of 12 August, 2020, Francis stated that “the harmony created by God asks that we look at others, the needs of others, the problems of others, in communion.” In the context of this work social media usage seem to prevent some family members from being sensitive to the needs of

others within the family. Dignity is “the quality of a person that makes him or her deserving of respect, sometimes shown in behavior or appearance” (Cambridge). Marks of dignity within the family include valuing the elderly, eating together, kindness, respect, and hard work.

Rationale

This study aims at exploring opportunities for restoring harmony and the dignity of the Christian family in Trinidad and Tobago in this age of social media. The Christian family has come under direct attack through social media platforms. While social media have improved people’s lives in Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean and other parts of the world, the need for people to find a proper balance between their use can hardly be doubted. It is hoped this thesis will also serve as a tool of influence and instruction for the Church, family and society and encourage these institutions to take a critical approach to social media content.

Thesis statement

Undoubtedly, in Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world, social media have contributed to the weakened state of Christian family life, but the present environment in Trinidad and Tobago with its particular problems, presents particular opportunities for reimagining and renewing this institution.

Parameters

This study is focused on how Trinidad and Tobago Christian Families use social media, but its findings will aid the reflection of those who face similar challenges in other parts of the world. The insights presented in the work are drawn from the responses to survey questions and interviews. In many instances they reflect the personal perceptions and opinions of individuals living within particular Christian families.

Objectives of the study

This work is primarily intended to explore opportunities for restoring the harmony and dignity of the Christian Family in Trinidad and Tobago in this age of social media. Other objectives include: to assess the effects of social media usage on the modern Trinidadian Christian family, to examine social media usage through the lens of Catholic teachings on social communication.

Methodology

Interviews from social media users provided first-hand information. These were conducted through phone calls, video calls and face-to-face meetings, bringing to light the daily advantages and challenges being experienced in families as a result of this digital technology.

Another significant source of information was an online survey sent to 108 members of Catholic families in various parts of Trinidad and Tobago. The majority of the participants came from Arouca, Tacarigua, and from the Surrey and Lopinot communities of Holy Trinity Parish. The questionnaire was randomly sent to people of different age groups.

The collected data were examined in terms of regularity, percentage, and consequences of social media usage. Participants shared about their daily experiences on how the internet and social media have affected or influenced their family life. All the participants acknowledged that the internet and social media have posed both positive and negative experiences in their respective families. Books, pastoral letters, encyclicals, videos, and articles from newspapers provided additional insights to the work.

Chapter Outline

This study consists of three chapters. Chapter one, the Literature Review, considers the views of various authors and institutions within and outside the Catholic Church on social communications, the media and family. In the second chapter, the present realities of social media in Christian families are highlighted. This chapter primarily depends on the examined responses from the questionnaire and interviews. Among the social media platforms discussed are Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and YouTube.

The third Chapter explores opportunities that can lead to a restoration of the harmony and dignity of the Trinidadian Christian family. This is aided by insights from interviews, books, articles, videos, talks, pastoral letters and encyclicals. This chapter also answers the question; how can the harmony and the dignity of the Christian Family be achieved?

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Aetatis Novae, a 1992 Vatican document on Social Communications, written well before the age of social media, acknowledges that “the use of new media gives rise to what some speak of as new languages, and has given birth to new possibilities for the mission of the Church as well as to new pastoral problems.”

Aetatis offers suggestions and recommendations on how to live as Christians in this rapidly changing age of social communication. The document aims to “encourage the pastors and people of the Church to deepen their understanding of issues relating to communications and media, and to translate their understanding into practical policies and workable programs” (3).

In the “*New Ways of Being Church in a Digital Milieu*” the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) in its 2010 pastoral letter acknowledges the important role media play in evangelization. This document is addressed to all the faithful and people of good will of the whole Caribbean territory. The insights on social communication as highlighted in the document offer significant suggestions that can benefit the Christian family.

The former Archbishop of Port of Spain, Joseph Harris, in his pastoral letter, *Return to Hospitality*, invites Trinbagonians to return to the values which sustained their forefathers and which have the potential to sustain them (3). The letter is an invitation to return to hospitality which for a long time defined the Trinbagonians. The Archbishop recalls that “hospitality was a common practice in our culture before affluence and competition replaced generosity” (4).

The Archbishop acknowledges the influence of social media in family life. He observes the “mindless entertainment mediated by the selfie and Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, even in the presence of family or friends” (5). In this case, he sees social media as having a harmful

influence on the hospitable nature of Trinbagonian families. The insights presented in his document provide suggestions for the restoration of the harmony and the dignity of the family.

In his book, *Psychological, Social, and Cultural Aspects of Internet Addiction*, Bozoglan Bahadir investigates the addictive nature of the internet, which displays itself in “the inability to resist the desire to use it, loss of the importance of time spent without being connected to it, extreme nervousness and aggression when deprived of it, and increased deterioration of one’s business, social, and family life” (110).

In her book, *Alone Together Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle argues that people are progressively operating without face-to-face interaction. She argues that “mobile technology has made each of us ‘pauseable’. Our face-to-face conversations are routinely interrupted by incoming calls and text messages” (161), and that “networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone” (154).

Turkle acknowledges the positive impact of social media. But, she also notices that the very same means of social communication that have brought people closer to their gadgets have also driven them away from one another. This is the kind of challenge being experienced by some Trinidadian Christian families. The devices have become inseparable companions.

In *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, Deborah Chambers acknowledges both the positive and negative contributions of social networks to the family and society. She points out that “social network sites are said to be increasing the number of friends that people have and strengthening ties between families,

especially those separated by migration. Yet, at the same time, new media technologies are being blamed for a decrease in close ‘genuine’ bonds” (2).

Chambers observes that “there is a concern that digital media is creating a dysfunctional society in which past tight-knit communities are being fragmented and gradually taken over by more dispersed social network” (3). She would want to ask Mark Zuckerberg: Has the “vision of a more connected world transformed into a more alienating scenario with people interacting with their screens and disregarding the people around them?” (2). This question highlights the present reality of social media.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PRESENT REALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHRISTIAN FAMILIES OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Although the family is the smallest institution in the world, it is one of the strongest pillars of any functioning nation. According to Chayko, “something is an institution when it is foundational, functional, long-lasting, large in scale, and systemic when it has been around a long time and it seems like it may always be” (170). The family is the power house that sometimes determines the present and future possibilities of any society. It is so powerful that when the duties expected of it are not properly disposed, the negative effects are felt by the whole society. Developments in the social means of communication exert both positive and negative impacts on this institution. The survey findings in this chapter reveal how the Trinidadian Christian family has been affected by these rapid advancements in the social means of communication. The chapter also presents responses from the online survey and the interviews.

Research Findings from the Online Survey

Of the 108 persons, who participated in the online survey, the overwhelming majority (63.2 %) were women and 35.8 % were men. Participation was fairly evenly spread among four age groups: 12-15, 16-21, 22-35, 36-50, and 51 plus. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were the more popular forms of social media among those polled.

According to the Caribbean trends on social media visits, “throughout the first half of 2020, Facebook accounted for 44.61 per cent of social media site visits in Trinidad and Tobago. It was followed by Pinterest and Instagram at nearly 25.4 percent and 14.64 percent respectively. Trinidad and Tobago was one of the countries with the most Instagram users in the Caribbean.”

However, this is slightly different to the online survey findings of this work in which WhatsApp appears to be the widely used social media application followed by Facebook and Instagram.

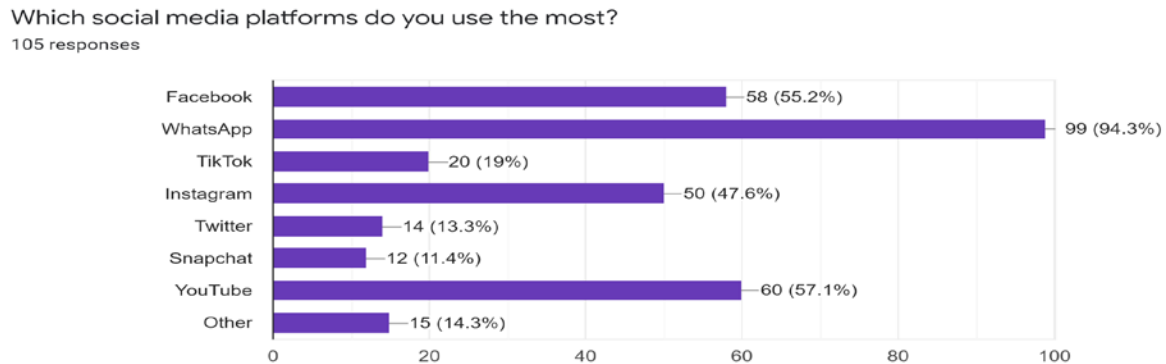


Figure 1

It was discovered that an overwhelming majority of people in Christian families are spending more than two hours on online media daily. The survey revealed that 30.5% of social media users spent one to two hours each day, 35.2% spent three to five hours and 28.6% spent five hours and above on social media. The least amount of time spent online was five to 30 minutes each day.

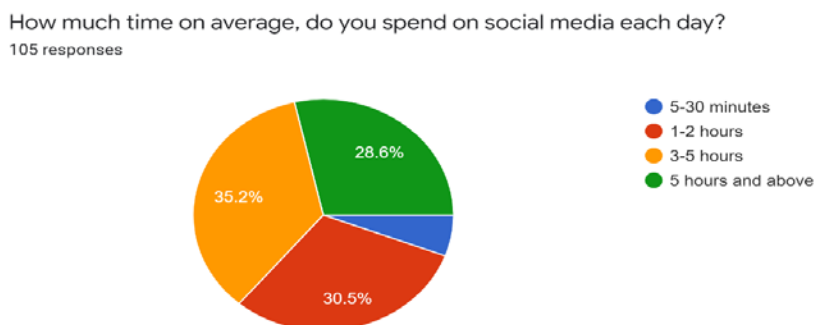


Figure 2

The survey revealed that 23.6% of the participants do not keep their phones on them all the time. But, 33% of the respondents held that sometimes they have their mobile devices with them and the remaining 43.4% affirmed that they have their phones all the time with them. The respondents were asked about the amount of time and days they can manage to break from social media, 4.9% held that they can never break from social media. Some 26.2% held that they could break for three to five hours. Another 28.2% said they can manage to break for one to three days, while 13.6% of the participants held that they could break for one hour.

Do you think children are viewing inappropriate content on social media?
105 responses

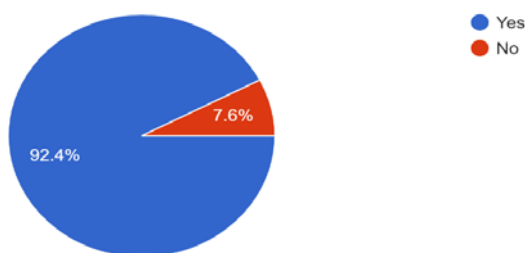


Figure 3

Participants were also asked whether they think children are viewing inappropriate content on social media, the data revealed that the overwhelming majority (92.4%) agreed that children seem to have access to inappropriate content on the online media. This survey found that out of the 108 participants, 57.1% held that social media have not influenced their behaviour while the 42.9% agreed that social media seem to have influenced their behaviour in one way or the other.

For how long can you manage to break from social media usage?
103 responses

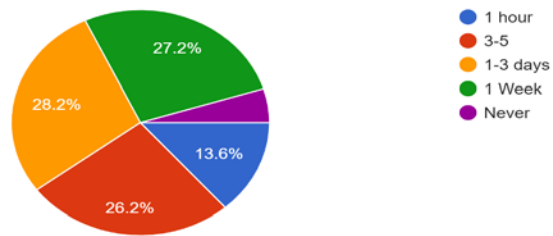


Figure 4

A question was posed about the use of social media applications during family meals, lunch and supper. It was revealed that 63.2% use these media during meals, while the remaining 36.8% said they did not use social media during meals. In addition, some 71.7% indicated that family members do not complain about their preoccupation with their phones while 28.3% acknowledged that their family members raise some complaints.

Do you use social media during meals (breakfast, lunch, or supper)?
106 responses

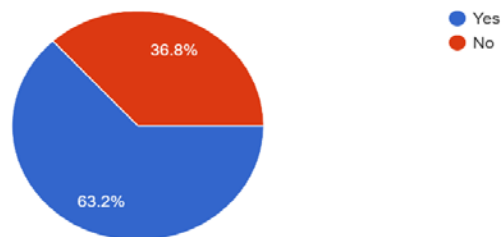


Figure 5

Additionally, the respondents were asked if social media are leading to the breakdown of family life, the majority of them (79.4%) agreed that social media have indeed become a leading

factor in the breakdowns of marriage in Trinidad and Tobago. The remaining 20.6%, however, were not convinced that it led to such breakdowns.

Do you think social media are leading to the breakdown of family life?
102 responses

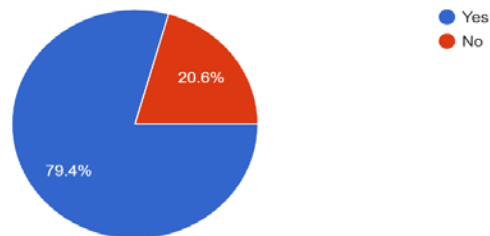


Figure 6

On whether social media have caused them to spend less time (than before) with their family and friends, 33.3% of the respondents acknowledged that social media have caused them to spend less time with family and friends. Some 66.7% of the respondents held that social media have not caused them to spend less time with their family and friends. Moreover, 49% percent of the respondents also revealed that physical family interaction in the age of social media is enjoyable, while the other 51% held that it was more enjoyable before the advent of social media.

Additionally, on whether they talk with family members, friends and visitors while at the same time using social media, 68.6% of the respondents affirmed that they use social media while at the same time interacting with people.

Do you talk with your family members, friends, and visitors while at the same time using social media?

105 responses

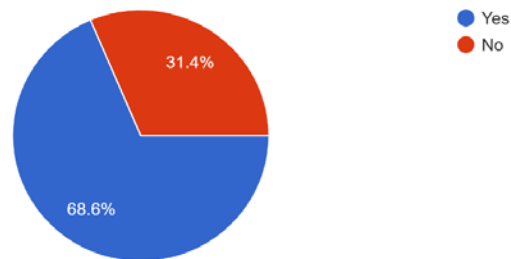


Figure 7

On whether social media have made physical interaction difficult in Christian families, 57.7% of the participants held that it has not made physical interaction difficult while 42.3% affirmed that in some way family interaction in the age of social media has become difficult. Some 43.3% held that there is no balance in social media usage in their families while 56.7% said that there is balance in social media usage in their family.

Do you enjoy physical family interaction in the age of social media or was physical family interaction more enjoyable before social media came into being?

104 responses

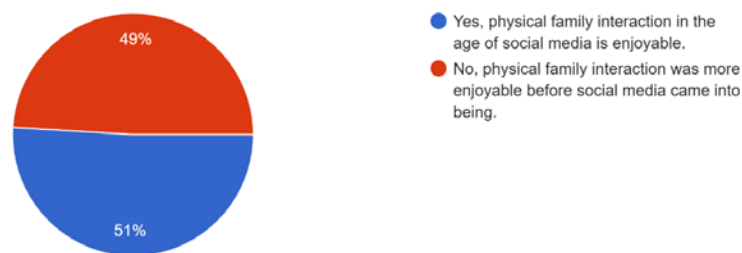


Figure 8

Some respondents of the survey revealed that social media applications have brought together family members living in different geographical areas. As regards whether social media have improved family ties, 18.3% of the respondents agreed, 47.1% remained neutral, 19.2% disagreed, 8.7% strongly agreed while the remaining 6.7% strongly disagreed.

18. Social Media have improved family ties
104 responses

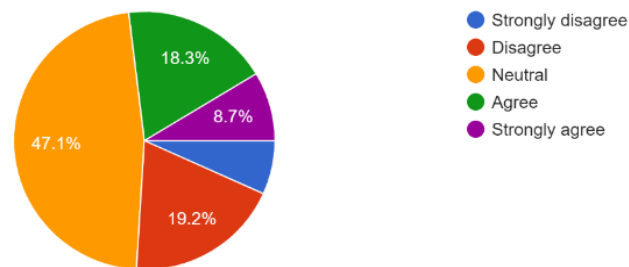


Figure 9

In addition, 47.6% held that their use of social media do not affect how they fulfil their household duties, while 32.4% held that social media affect their fulfilment of household duties. Some 11.4% held that it negatively affects the fulfilment of duties and the remaining 8.6% said that it affects them positively.

Specific Interviews

Interviews were done face-to-face, by phone calls, and video calls. The participants revealed how the dignity and the harmony of the Trinidadian Christian family is being affected by preoccupation with social media. Due to the sensitive nature of the shared information, the identities of some participants are not shared.

Tricia Syms heads the Archdiocesan Family Life Commission of the Archdiocese of Port of Spain. She has been involved in a number of workshops and programmes on marriage enrichment and marriage preparation, in ministry to hurting marriages, the separated, divorced and widowed, as well as sessions on parenting. She expressed the view that social media have led people in some families to go seeking on these platforms for the kind of emotional support and intimacy they might have more appropriately found among family members. She said social media usage was one of the leading factors in marriage break-down as the time of face-to-face communication was slowly diminishing in some families.

According to Syms, parents in some families have left social media to be the teacher of their children. As a result of this, it was almost impossible to control and monitor the content for their children. She found it most unfortunate that “some parents do not know what their children are watching on these media platforms.” Nevertheless, Syms asserted that social media provides learning tools for children. She said frequent usage of these media platforms necessarily requires frequent monitoring.

Roxanne, a single mother of one and a parishioner of Holy Trinity Parish held that the modern-day media applications have facilitated family entertainment through the sharing of videos, cartoons, and pictures. She believed this kind of activity has helped Trinidadian Christian families create treasurable moments by strengthening their family bonds. This conforms to Robert Zheng’s point that “some social applications afford the creation of new social ties, based on shared interests and motives, others maintain, support and expand existing social ties” (16).

According to Parbatee, a parishioner of St Theresa Catholic Church, her children's preoccupation with the digital media has made it difficult for them to fulfil household duties. Sometimes her daughters cook while at the same time using their mobile devices. And her children and other relatives often have their eyes fixed on their gadgets while engaged in important conversations.

On a positive note, she sees social media as a good source of knowledge and information. Parbatee and her husband are both diabetic. Social media have helped them both to gain some knowledge about their illness. They follow social media pages that have topics on issues related to their health condition. An example of such an educative Facebook page is the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago.

Patricia, a housewife and a mother of three, said one of the challenges she faced as a parent in this social media environment is on how to control its usage in her family. She noted that sometimes her husband would switch off the Wi-Fi so that everyone could gather around the dining table as a family. She said she had to reprimand her children on several occasions for using their mobile devices in church, school and family gatherings.

In another interview, Brandon, a parishioner of the Santa Rosa Parish, shared how the bullying of his young brother on social media became an issue of major concern in his family. He said that online negative comments on his brother's Facebook posts led to depression until he intervened and challenged the bullies. This is in keeping with Jonathan Bishop's comment that "whilst at one-point children would only get bullied outside of the home, such as at school or after school clubs, now as a result of Internet technologies they can be bullied even from the presumed security of their family setting" (31).

Interview from the Focus Group

The focus group was composed of six adults from different Catholic families living in Trinidad and Tobago. The main objective here was to have a face-to-face discussion of their social media experiences within their respective families.

Social media platforms have been of profound significance during the pandemic period. Participants agreed that social media have connected them with fellow Christians. Rohan said Christian families throughout Trinidad and Tobago have WhatsApp and Facebook groups that are helping them share daily Mass readings, communication from the Archdiocese and other pertinent parish issues.

Nonetheless, two participants admitted that social media have led to shopping addiction. They said social media networks are now flooded with advertisements of attractive clothes, gadgets, shoes and even cars. With a promise of delivery of the purchased items, online shopping has become a convenient way of purchasing items.

When asked whether children have access to inappropriate content on these media platforms, all participants in the focus group agreed that children were indeed viewing inappropriate content on social media. Joseph reported during the interview that his son learnt cusswords and the use of obscenities on these media platforms. He too suggested that children's continuous online presence requires frequent parental supervision.

All participants acknowledged that it has become extremely difficult to monitor online behaviours of their children. Three of the participants held that they have found their children watching adult content on their gadgets several times. One mother tearfully recounted her shock

at finding nude pictures of her two teen daughters with their boyfriends taken at an undisclosed location. These experiences reveal how deeply social media have affected some families.

Brief Analysis of the Online Survey and Interviews

The online survey and the interviews helped to reveal the extent to which social media have impacted Trinidadian Christian family. The data was examined in terms of regularity and the consequences of the excessive use of these media on the harmony and dignity of the Trinidadian Christian family.

The survey and the interviews revealed that social media present a mixed blessing for the family. One undeniable benefit is the ability to connect family members and friends in different geographical locations. Social media have also become a major source of information. However, some of these benefits come at a cost. As revealed by the survey and the interviews, more time is being spent online than with family and friends who are physically present. It has also been shown that social media have permitted young people to have access to inappropriate content.

Additionally, the survey and the interviews revealed that social network sites have the ability to alter long-held family values and traditions. As people continue to be more connected on social media, not only locally but also internationally, foreign influences start to affect the existing local cultural values and traditions.

In his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), Benedict XVI pointed out certain dangers to this cultural interconnectedness. The first danger is cultural eclecticism whereby “cultures are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable. This easily yields to a relativism that does not serve true

intercultural dialogues. The other danger is cultural levelling and indiscriminate acceptance of types of conduct and life-styles” (26).

The survey and the interviews have also revealed that as Trinidadian Christian families continue to be part of the global village, social media and the internet have the ability to exploit the family and the society by distorting reality. According to Thomas Eriksen “Trinidadian internet could be understood as the product of Trinidad itself, just as the contemporary culture of Trinidad is becoming a product of, amongst other things, its relationship with the internet” (54).

The global village as created by social media and the internet seem to make it easier for the family, especially children to have access to exploitative content. However, these findings demonstrate that not all has been lost. Trinidadian Christians continue to have a strong sense of belonging to their families. The online survey and the interviews inform this study of the gaps that need to be filled in the process of maintaining the dignity and harmony of Trinidadian Christian families.

CHAPTER THREE: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESTORING THE HARMONY AND THE DIGNITY OF THE TRINIDADIAN CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Social Media Challenges on the Trinidadian Christian Family

The relentless fixation on mobile screens poses severe challenges for the Trinidadian Christian family. The users of these media have not only become consumers of media content, they have also become creators of media content. The Caribbean Bishops assert that “we are no longer simply consumers of media. With a simple digital device, each person is potentially a producer of media” (AEC 7). The users have acquired small and large number of audiences, both young and adults. Hence, the need for a critical approach to every media content.

One of the negative impacts of social media on the Christian family is the diminishing of the human element in social communication. Some people have used it as an easy tool of hurting others as opposed to face-to-face encounter where you experience the effects of your actions on others. Francis comments:

Even as individuals maintain their comfortable consumerist isolation, they can choose a form of constant and febrile bonding that encourages remarkable hostility, insults, abuse, defamation and verbal violence destructive of others, and this with a lack of restraint that could not exist in physical contact without tearing us all apart. Social aggression has found unparalleled room for expansion through computers and mobile devices (44).

As a result of this, respect and dignity within the family in many instances, is absent. John Paul II in his pastoral, letter *Rapid Development*, advocates for the formation of pastoral workers in this area of social communication, and for the education to a mature responsibility of the users and the recipients of the various communications media (2).

Furthermore, John Paul II asserts that, “the modern technologies increase to a remarkable extent the speed, quantity and accessibility of communication, but they above all do not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, heart and heart” (13). Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, writes that digital media “lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication” (43).

The Trinidadian society has traditionally been identified as a communitarian society. Harris asserts that the “Trinidadian society has traditionally prized hospitality from its very origins” (9). It is a society that enjoys and celebrates communitarian activities. However, the rapid acceleration in the social means of communication has created sinkholes threatening to swallow this long-held communitarian aspect. That is why Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti* says that “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers. We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life” (12). He further emphasizes that digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity (43).

In some Trinidadian Christian families, social media have brought the people that are far away closer and the people which are closest have become distant. *Aetatis* states that the media have the ability to “reinforce or override the traditional reference points of religion, culture, and family” (4). As a result of this threat, the need to revisit and strengthen some traditional aspects of Trinidadian culture has become greater than before.

John Paul II also asserts that “everyone should know how to foster an attentive discernment and constant vigilance, developing a healthy critical capacity regarding the persuasive force of the communications media” (13). The persuasive force of social media has made Trinidadians overlook some of its negative effects on their families, including what Harris describes as “lack of attention.” He writes that “so many people in our families, places of work, our neighbourhoods are withering away from lack of attention. The children whom we ignore because we are preoccupied with our favourite program or game...” (8).

If the media content being presented to the family, is consumed without any critical approach, the integrity, harmony and the dignity of the Trinidadian Christian family will continue to be radically jeopardized. This is the challenge that needs to be addressed. *Aetatis* notes that “the pervasive presence of media has led to constant reshaping of culture, values, and attitudes” (3).

Explored Opportunities

In *New Ways* the AEC bishops write that they “cannot help but notice the serious challenges that the rapid changes in technological development are posing to the Caribbean people and, indeed, to people all over the world” (5). As the AEC observed, the Caribbean culture is gradually being altered as result of a lack of a critical approach to the internet and social media content.

Harris emphasizes the significance of upholding the long-held values (such as hospitality) that have sustained the Trinidadian society for a long period of time. He laments that “we blame each other, the police, the home and school but we have refused, as Trinbagonians, to return to the values which sustained our forefathers and which have the potential to sustain us” (3). A

return to hospitality can help the Trinidadian family to reclaim one of the essential aspects of family tradition. This opposes the relentless fixation to mobile screens and lack of sensitivity to the wholistic needs of the family.

Harris suggests that “Sunday celebrated as the Day of the Lord will help us to rediscover the place we can call home, a Father’s House where our welcome is always assured” (6). Sunday gatherings for Christian families can help them enjoy the presence of each family member. It can be a wonderful time of sharing their daily life experiences. This can help to strengthen family ties as there is space for physical emotional support.

Furthermore, Harris writes that “Instead of newer electronic gadgets for our children, can we pool our resources and train more children in the use and care of these technological tools so that more members of the coming generation can be prepared for the coming world?” (10). Social media have come to stay. As a result of this, young people have to be taught how to use them responsibly. John Paul II comments in rapid development that “there is required a management system capable of safeguarding the centrality and dignity of the person, the primacy of the family as the basic unit of society” (10).

The social networks can facilitate the restoration of the harmony and the dignity of the Christian family by connecting family members in different locations. But, this calls for mature usage of media platforms. In addition, Chayko asserts that “connecting online permits a community to persist when its members can no longer meet in physical space or when the community no longer exists geographically” (154). This has been evident in the Covid-19 pandemic. While using these media platforms, the utmost confidentiality of the family must be maintained at all times. This is also why Chayko says that “families should ideally consider how

to balance safety and trust as they develop relational strategies for using digital technologies” (174).

Barry Wellman and Haythornthwaite Caroline assert that the “internet leads to more and better social relationships by creating an additional medium of communication with friends and family, and by enabling the creation of new relationships through Internet interactions” (216). In this case, Christian families should continue to take advantage of social media as a tool for strengthening family ties. Zheng adds that “one of the main attractions of the Internet irrespective of age is the ability to form relationships with other online users. Prolonged contact and communication with each other can form the basis of social support” (35). In today’s globalized world, the media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which in turn can inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all (Francis 205).

Nevertheless, Francis warns that “digital media can also expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation and a gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships” (43). Even though the Trinidadian Christian family has taken advantage of social networks as tools for strengthening family ties, serious caution ought to be taken to avoid the risks highlighted above.

Syms said that “young people who are using social media need to be monitored all the time.” And Wellman and Caroline comments that “the Internet exposes users, especially children, to violence, pornography, and hate groups” (116). Pornography treats people as a means to an end. This clearly affects the dignity of the person and the family. At his general audience, Francis held that “harmony leads you to recognise human dignity, that harmony

created by God, with humanity at the centre.” Pornography disfigures this harmony. Hence, the need for constant monitoring has become greater than before.

When asked about the viewing of inappropriate content on social media, Syms said that parents find it difficult to engage their children on issues of pornography. She proposed the tool “TIME” which stands for; teaching, instructing, monitoring and evaluating. In her view, if parents are not ready to embrace such tools, then, children will continue to learn wrong things from the internet and social media.

Joel Julien reports in the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian* that a “look at statistics on Google Trends for the highest number of Internet searches for pornography per capita in the world, T&T comes first” (15th October 2016). As Christian families continue to use the media, an awareness of the dangers of pornography can help them preserve the dignity of every human person and the family. Failure to do this can lead to undignified treatment of vulnerable groups like children and women. This destroys the needed harmony in the families. This is why Francis, during the *August 12 General Audience*, said “harmony leads you to recognise human dignity, that harmony created by God, with humanity at the centre.”

Christian families need to protect children and adults from exposure to pornography and obscene content on media platforms. Julien adds that “parents who put their children on auto pilot with technology are putting them at risk. A lot of parents do not know this when they buy technology for their children such as tablets and smartphones.” This is also an invitation for the Church, government, cinemas, and all parents to act swiftly in making efforts to protect children from the dangers of consuming such media content.

Chayko notes that “providing strategies for appropriate use and using filtering mechanisms can return some power to parents but at the expense of privacy for family members and possibly even the level of trust given by children to their parents and vice versa” (174). This can still be a lesser evil in safeguarding the dignity of the family while at the same time using these networks.

These media also have also the ability to influence the behavior of children as revealed in one incident which resulted in the death of a nine-year-old boy. Alexander Bruzual reports in the *Daily Express* that “police were told that the young boy may have been trying to partake in the ‘blackout challenge’ on TikTok, by putting a belt around his neck and holding his breath while recording himself on his phone” (26th January 2021). This further re-emphasizes the need for constant monitoring.

According to the survey findings, on average, the more time spent on social media, the less time spent with friends and family. The more time spent on social media, the more time also spent physically alone. Internet use at home sometimes has a strong negative impact on time spent with family. As a way of restoring the harmony and the dignity of the Christian family, Norma¹ suggested that “families should have a safe zone and time within which social media and internet use are not accepted. Once they are in that space, it is understood that they are in a social media unsafe zone.” In this way, members can pay more attention to one another and be physically present in each other’s lives. This is why Turkle asserts that “the ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy (280).

¹ She is a mother of three and retired teacher.

Because of the addictive nature of social media, Lovink suggests that “what is required is a serious reconsideration of media literacy². An important aspect of literacy is the ability to walk away from the screen. You will master the tools not only once you know how to use them, but also once you know when to put them aside” (28). By doing this, the family is assured of preserving its long-held values and dignity. One of the ways in which this can be done is through moderate and appropriate use of the internet or taking a break from social media.

Hanson states that “the best way to control the impact of the media in our lives is to develop high levels of media literacy” (99). Media literacy can help individuals make better decisions on how social media are to be used. Christian parents need to develop high levels of media literacy and transfer these skills to their children, or else, the omnipresence of social media will continue to impart unknown values to the detriment of the younger generations. According to Hanson, the moral dimension of media literacy consists of examining the values of the medium or the message (82).

The tool used to get and share information is as important as the message itself. McLuhan held that “the medium is the message, by which he meant that the method of message transmittal is a central part of the message. He argued that the medium used for transmission can be as important as the message itself” (Hanson 122). As social media continue to exert its influence, part of media literacy involves an awareness of the true nature of these media and attention to content, ethically analyzing it and weighing its positive and negative impacts on the individual, family and society.

² According to Hanson, “the term media literacy refers to people’s understanding of what the media are, how they operate, what messages they are delivering, what roles they play in society, and how audience members respond to media messages” (80).

According to Curran, “prior to the wide dissemination of the internet, many ordinary families probably had only one TV and one radio used collectively by many family members. Today, the shared use of media has declined because, in many cases, each family member is equipped with her own gadget” (5). This is leading to self-isolation and gradual dismantling of the communitarian aspect of families. Families can allocate specific times where they take a break from social media and use the time for a family games night, pray together, go for a drive or even just watch a movie together.

In the same way, Galloway states that human beings are social creatures; not built to be alone. Take them away from family and friends they will have a greater chance of depression and mental illness, and a shorter life (149). Francis in the *General Audience* of 12 August 2020, said “the human being, indeed, in his or her personal dignity, is a social being, created in the image of God, One and Triune. We are social beings; we need to live in this social harmony.” This calls for more moments of family togetherness. Watching television as a family appears to be the dominant form of joint media usage. This needs to be encouraged.

One of the important things to consider when using social media is to avoid its manipulative nature. Not all content presented on the internet and social media present the truth entirely. We cannot accept, writes Francis, “a digital world designed to exploit our weaknesses and bring out the worst in people” (205).

This study found that social media usage has become a central feature in most Trinidadian Christian families. One vital observable discovery was that the more the time spent online, the less the time of physical family interactions. As a result of this, those who are physically close are becoming distant while those who are distant are becoming closer.

The study also revealed that social media have helped to bridge the communication gap. Families with distant relatives are now able to easily communicate and discuss their pertinent issues. Online media have become a convenient tool of communication especially during the pandemic period. With its ability to connect people, it is possible to use these new technologies as tools for restoring the harmony and the dignity of the Trinidadian Christian family.

Conclusion

In order for the dignity and the harmony of the family to be restored, this work recommends that Christian families create some boundaries on social media usage. Parents can intervene by having a discussion with their children on the amount of time they spend online, when and where they can use their devices and what time to turn them off. Above all, parents need to be role models by walking the talk.

Online privacy for the whole family ought to be highly considered when using social media. Criminals through fake social media accounts have the ability to exploit the family. Members must be advised to avoid sharing private family matters on social media.

Another recommendation is that lessons on the dangers of pornography and its impact on the family to be taught to Christian families. The Church, state and education institutions are morally obliged to undertake this task. This is because the fruits from a good family benefit the whole nation. The nation is strong as its families are strong.

Despite the enormous influence and the negative effects of social media on the Christian family, family life is still strongly valued by Trinbagonians. The Christian family can still retain its harmony and dignity while at the same time using these media platforms. Since social media

have come to stay, a healthy approach to them is needed to preserve the values and traditions that have always defined Trinidadian Christian families.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Name (Optional): Gender... female...

Age: 12 – 15 ____ 16 – 21 ____ 22 – 35 ____ 36 – 50 ____ 51+

1. How much time on average, do you spend on social media each day?
 - a) 5-30 minutes
 - b) 1-2 hours
 - c) 3-5 hours
 - d) 5 hours and above
2. Which social media platforms do you use the most?
 - a) Facebook
 - b) WhatsApp
 - c) TikTok
 - d) Instagram
 - e) Twitter
 - f) Snapchat
 - g) YouTube
 - h) Other (specify)
3. Do you keep your phone on you all the time?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
4. Do you let your phone interrupt a conversation?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
5. Do you think children are viewing inappropriate content on social media?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
6. Has the social media ever influenced your behavior?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
7. For how long can you manage to break from social media usage?

- a) 3 hours
 - b) 4-5 hours
 - c) 1-3 days
 - d) Week
 - e) Never
 - f) Other
8. Do you use the social media during meals (breakfast, lunch or supper)?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
9. Do your family members complain about your preoccupation with social media?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
10. Do you think social media are leading to the breakdown of family life?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
11. Do you think your use of social media is causing you to spend less time (than before) with family and friends?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
12. Do you enjoy physical family interaction in the age of social media or was physical family interaction more enjoyable before social media came into being?
- a) Yes, physical family interaction in the age of social media is enjoyable.
 - b) No, physical family interaction was more enjoyable before social media came into being.
 - c) Other (specify).
13. Do you talk with your family members, friends and visitors while at the same time using the social media?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
14. Do you think the social media have made physical interaction with your family members in the house difficult?

- a) Yes
- b) No

15. Is there balance in social media usage in your family?

- a) Yes
- b) No

16. Social Media have improved family ties

- a) Agree
- b) Strongly agree
- c) Disagree
- d) Strongly disagree

17. My use of social media affects how I fulfil my household duties

- a) Negatively
- b) Positively
- c) Fairly
- d) It doesn't

Optional: Any suggestions on how family life can be improved in the age of social media are welcome.

Names of respondents

The list below is of some names of respondents who participated in the interviews and the questionnaire. Some respondents asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the information shared.

Tricia Syme	Rohan Seepersad	Brittney Roberts
Louis Mathura	Irma Carter	
Susan Hanock	Krista Gulston	
Pabartee Seegobin	Michelle Burke	
Maria Samad	Richard Khan	
Vicky Franklin	Branon Alexander	