

DIGITAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE ENGAGEMENT AMONG BUDDHIST NUNS IN HO CHI MINH CITY: A CASE STUDY OF QUAN AM MONASTERY AND PHUOC VIEN PAGODA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the ways religious organizations engage with communities and mobilize social resources. In Vietnam, Buddhist institutions have increasingly adopted social media platforms to support charitable activities, strengthen community networks, and disseminate religious values. Despite this growing trend, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how Buddhist nuns employ digital communication tools to facilitate social welfare initiatives. Addressing this gap, the present study explores the role of social media in supporting charitable and community-oriented activities conducted by Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City.

Using a qualitative case-study approach, the research focuses on two representative Buddhist institutions: Quan Am Monastery and Phuoc Vien Pagoda. The study analyzes publicly accessible communication materials published between 2023 and 2025 on Facebook fanpages, Zalo communication networks, and YouTube channels associated with these institutions. The findings indicate that social media functions not only as a communication medium but also as a mechanism for building trust, coordinating volunteers, mobilizing donations, and expanding networks of social support. At Phuoc Vien Pagoda, digital platforms facilitate the organization of regular food distribution and gift-giving programs for disadvantaged individuals during full-moon and new-moon observances. At Quan Am Monastery, online communication supports environmentally conscious charitable initiatives, including the distribution of vegetarian noodle meals without the use of plastic bags, thereby integrating social welfare with ecological responsibility.

The study argues that digital communication has become an important component of contemporary Buddhist social engagement. By connecting religious values with technological practices, Buddhist nuns contribute to the development of community-based welfare networks

while simultaneously responding to broader processes of digital transformation in Vietnamese society. The article contributes to the growing scholarship on religion and media by highlighting the intersection of religious communication, social capital, and social welfare in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords: Buddhist Nuns; Social Welfare; Religious Communication; Social Capital

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become an integral part of contemporary social life, reshaping communication practices across political, economic, cultural, and religious spheres. The increasing accessibility of social media platforms has generated new opportunities for religious organizations to communicate with followers, disseminate values, and engage in community service. Rather than serving merely as technological tools, digital platforms increasingly function as social environments in which religious identities, relationships, and activities are negotiated and reconstructed.

Within the Vietnamese context, Buddhism has historically maintained a close relationship with social welfare activities. Throughout different historical periods, Buddhist institutions have participated in educational initiatives, healthcare services, disaster relief efforts, and charitable programs aimed at supporting vulnerable populations. These activities reflect the Buddhist principle of compassion (*karuṇā*), which encourages engagement with social issues and the alleviation of human suffering. In contemporary society, the expansion of digital communication technologies has created new possibilities for Buddhist organizations to extend these activities beyond traditional geographical boundaries.

Among various Buddhist communities, the contribution of Buddhist nuns deserves particular scholarly attention. Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have long been involved in charitable work, educational programs, and community development initiatives. However, studies examining the relationship between Buddhist nuns, digital communication, and social welfare remain limited. Existing research has primarily focused on doctrinal teachings, historical developments, or institutional structures, while the role of digital media in facilitating contemporary forms of Buddhist social engagement has received comparatively little attention.

The growing presence of Buddhist institutions on social media raises important questions regarding the transformation of religious communication in the digital era. Social media platforms enable religious actors to communicate directly with diverse audiences, coordinate charitable activities, and construct public narratives surrounding social engagement. At the same time, these platforms introduce new challenges related to information management, institutional credibility, and digital ethics. Understanding how Buddhist nuns navigate these opportunities and

challenges can provide valuable insights into broader processes of religious adaptation within digitally mediated societies.

This article examines the role of social media in supporting social welfare activities conducted by Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City. Focusing on Quan Am Monastery and Phuoc Vien Pagoda, the study investigates how digital communication platforms contribute to resource mobilization, volunteer coordination, public engagement, and trust-building. The analysis is guided by three research questions:

1. How do Buddhist nuns utilize digital communication platforms to support social welfare activities?
2. In what ways does social media reshape traditional forms of Buddhist charitable engagement?
3. What opportunities and challenges emerge from the increasing digitalization of Buddhist social welfare activities?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the fields of Religious Communication Studies, Digital Religion, and Vietnamese Buddhist Studies. More broadly, it highlights the ways in which religious organizations adapt to changing communication environments while maintaining commitments to compassion, community service, and social responsibility.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Religion and Digital Communication

The relationship between religion and communication has attracted increasing scholarly attention during the past two decades. The emergence of digital technologies has transformed the ways religious communities communicate, organize activities, and interact with broader society. Scholars have argued that digital media should not be viewed merely as communication tools but as environments that shape religious practices and institutional dynamics.

The concept of digital religion has been developed to explain how religious beliefs, identities, and communities are increasingly mediated through online platforms. Digital communication enables religious actors to transcend geographical limitations and establish new forms of interaction among followers, volunteers, and supporters. Through websites, social networking platforms, livestreaming services, and online discussion forums, religious organizations can reach audiences that would otherwise remain inaccessible through conventional face-to-face communication.

Research conducted in various cultural contexts demonstrates that social media has become an important channel for religious institutions seeking to maintain relevance in rapidly changing societies. Digital communication supports the dissemination of religious teachings, facilitates community engagement, and enables the organization of social and charitable activities. Consequently, digital media has become deeply integrated into contemporary religious life.

2.2. Social Media and Social Welfare Activities

Social welfare activities increasingly rely on communication networks capable of mobilizing resources efficiently and rapidly. In recent years, social media has emerged as a crucial mechanism for connecting donors, volunteers, beneficiaries, and community organizations. Unlike traditional communication channels, social media allows information to circulate instantly across large networks of users.

Studies have shown that digital platforms contribute to charitable initiatives by enhancing public awareness, increasing transparency, and encouraging participation. Visual content, storytelling strategies, and real-time updates often strengthen public trust and motivate individuals to contribute financial or material support. These communication practices are particularly significant in contexts where community-based organizations depend heavily on voluntary participation.

Within religious communities, social media serves multiple functions simultaneously. It operates as a platform for communication, coordination, accountability, and relationship-building. Religious organizations frequently utilize digital platforms to share information regarding ongoing projects, report outcomes, and maintain long-term engagement with supporters.

2.3. Buddhist Charity and Contemporary Social Engagement

The tradition of charitable engagement occupies a central position within Buddhist ethical thought. Compassion, generosity, and concern for the welfare of others have long been regarded as essential aspects of Buddhist practice. Throughout Asia, Buddhist institutions have historically participated in education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and disaster relief activities.

In Vietnam, Buddhist social engagement has evolved alongside broader social and economic transformations. Monasteries, temples, and religious organizations continue to provide various forms of assistance to disadvantaged communities. Contemporary Buddhist charity increasingly incorporates professional management practices and collaborative partnerships with local communities.

Recent developments indicate that digital communication technologies are becoming integrated into these charitable activities. Social media platforms facilitate communication between religious institutions and community members while simultaneously increasing the visibility of charitable initiatives. Nevertheless, empirical research focusing specifically on Buddhist nuns and their use of digital communication remains limited. This study seeks to address that gap by examining two representative cases in Ho Chi Minh City.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Mediatization of Religion

This study draws primarily upon the theory of Mediatization of Religion proposed by Hjarvard (2008). The theory suggests that media has become increasingly influential in shaping religious communication, religious practices, and institutional structures. Religious organizations are not simply users of media technologies; rather, they operate within communication environments governed by media logics.

From this perspective, social media platforms influence how charitable activities are represented, communicated, and interpreted by the public. Images, videos, and narratives become important mechanisms through which religious institutions construct visibility and engage audiences. Consequently, social welfare activities are increasingly communicated through digital formats that emphasize accessibility, interaction, and public participation.

The theory provides a useful framework for understanding how Buddhist nuns adapt traditional charitable practices to contemporary communication environments while maintaining religious values and institutional identities.

3.2. Social Capital Theory

The study also employs Social Capital Theory to explain how digital communication contributes to resource mobilization. According to Putnam (2000), social capital consists of networks, trust, and norms that facilitate cooperation among individuals and groups.

Two dimensions of social capital are particularly relevant. Bonding social capital refers to relationships among individuals who share similar identities, values, or affiliations. Bridging social capital refers to connections that link different social groups and expand access to new resources.

In the context of Buddhist charitable activities, social media facilitates both forms of social capital. Existing supporters maintain strong relationships through communication networks such as Zalo groups, while Facebook and YouTube enable institutions to reach broader audiences

beyond immediate religious communities. The expansion of these networks contributes to the mobilization of volunteers, donations, and community support.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the relationship between social media and social welfare activities conducted by Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City.

Two Buddhist institutions were selected as case studies: Quan Am Monastery and Phuoc Vien Pagoda. Both institutions are recognized for their ongoing charitable activities and active use of digital communication platforms. The selection of these cases allows for an examination of how different forms of charitable engagement are communicated and organized through digital media.

The study focuses on communication materials published between 2023 and 2025. Data sources include publicly accessible content from Facebook fanpages, YouTube channels, and digital communication activities associated with Zalo networks. These materials include photographs, videos, event announcements, activity reports, and public interactions related to social welfare initiatives.

Summarizes the corpus analyzed in this study. A total of 30 Facebook posts, 10 YouTube videos, and 50 Zalo-based announcements published between January 2023 and December 2025 were reviewed. These materials were selected because they directly documented charitable activities, volunteer engagement, resource mobilization, and environmental initiatives associated with Quan Am Monastery and Phuoc Vien Pagoda.

In addition to digital content analysis, the study draws selectively upon interview materials collected during broader fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2025. Only illustrative quotations are included in this article to contextualize findings derived from publicly accessible communication materials.

The analytical process involved three stages. First, communication materials were collected and categorized according to platform type and thematic content. Second, recurring communication patterns related to charitable activities, community engagement, environmental awareness, and resource mobilization were identified. Third, the findings were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Mediatization of Religion and Social Capital Theory.

Rather than measuring quantitative outcomes, the study aims to understand how digital communication practices contribute to the organization and representation of Buddhist charitable activities. This qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for exploring the cultural and religious dimensions of communication processes within contemporary Vietnamese society.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Phuoc Vien Pagoda: Digital Communication and Community-Based Charity

The analysis of communication activities conducted by Phuoc Vien Pagoda between 2023 and 2025 indicates that social media has become an important mechanism for maintaining and expanding charitable engagement within local communities. The pagoda regularly organizes charitable programs, particularly the distribution of free meals and gift packages for individuals facing economic hardship during full-moon and new-moon observances.

Facebook serves as the primary platform through which these activities are communicated to the public. Announcements regarding upcoming events, volunteer recruitment, and reports on completed programs are frequently shared through the pagoda's fanpage. Rather than focusing exclusively on fundraising, communication content often emphasizes community participation and collective responsibility. This approach reflects a communication strategy that prioritizes social solidarity over institutional promotion.

The findings of this study suggest that social media should be understood not merely as a communication tool but as a participatory space through which Buddhist institutions cultivate social engagement. In the cases examined, digital platforms enabled supporters to contribute not only financial resources but also time, skills, and social connections. This finding highlights the evolving role of religious communication in facilitating community participation within contemporary Vietnamese society.

This observation is consistent with comments provided by participants involved in charitable activities. One nun explained that Facebook has become an effective channel for informing community members about upcoming programs and encouraging broader participation. As she noted, "Many volunteers first learned about our charitable activities through Facebook and later became regular participants" (Interview PV01, June 2025).

Similarly, a long-term volunteer emphasized that digital communication helped maintain connections among supporters, particularly those who could not regularly visit the pagoda in person (Interview PV02, July 2025).

From the perspective of Social Capital Theory, the communication practices observed at Phuoc Vien Pagoda facilitate both bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Long-term devotees maintain existing relationships through repeated participation in charitable activities, while new supporters encounter the institution through online communication channels. Consequently, social media functions as a bridge connecting diverse social groups around shared humanitarian goals.

Another significant aspect concerns transparency and accountability. Public updates documenting charitable activities contribute to the development of trust between the institution and its supporters. Photographs, activity summaries, and follow-up reports allow community members to observe how resources are utilized. This visibility strengthens confidence in the institution and encourages continued participation.

The case of Phuoc Vien Pagoda demonstrates that digital communication is not merely an auxiliary tool but an integral component of contemporary Buddhist charitable practice. Communication activities support the organization of social welfare initiatives while simultaneously reinforcing relationships among community members.

5.2. Quan Am Monastery: Environmental Responsibility and Digital Storytelling

The communication activities of Quan Am Monastery reveal a distinctive model of religious social engagement that combines charitable service with environmental awareness. Among the monastery's regular community programs is the distribution of vegetarian noodle meals prepared without the use of plastic bags. Participants are encouraged to bring reusable containers or utilize environmentally friendly alternatives.

Although the practical action itself may appear relatively simple, its broader significance emerges through digital communication. Facebook posts, photographs, and video content transform routine charitable activities into public narratives about responsible consumption, environmental stewardship, and Buddhist ethics.

This communication strategy reflects an important development within contemporary Buddhist social engagement. Traditional charitable activities are no longer presented solely as acts of compassion toward disadvantaged individuals. Instead, they are increasingly framed within broader discussions concerning sustainable lifestyles and collective responsibility toward the natural environment.

Interview data further suggest that environmental awareness has become an important component of charitable engagement. According to one volunteer, social media posts promoting reusable containers encouraged participants to reduce their reliance on single-use plastic products during food distribution activities (Interview QA01, August 2025). A Buddhist nun associated with Quan Am Monastery also noted that environmental messages were intentionally integrated into charitable communication in order to connect Buddhist compassion with everyday ecological practices (Interview QA02, August 2025).

YouTube content associated with the monastery further reinforces this approach. Video materials documenting food preparation, volunteer participation, and community interactions provide

audiences with visual narratives that emphasize cooperation and environmental consciousness. Through these representations, charitable activities become educational experiences that communicate values as well as services.

From the perspective of Mediatization of Religion, digital media facilitates the translation of religious values into forms that are accessible to contemporary audiences. Compassion is communicated not only through doctrinal teachings but through visible social practices that resonate with current concerns regarding environmental sustainability.

The case of Quan Am Monastery therefore illustrates how digital communication enables religious organizations to engage simultaneously with social welfare and ecological issues. This integration aligns with broader international discussions concerning sustainable development and environmental ethics.

5.3. Social Media as a Space for Building Digital Trust Capital

One of the most significant findings emerging from both case studies is the importance of trust in sustaining charitable activities. While financial resources, volunteer participation, and institutional reputation remain essential, digital communication increasingly functions as a mechanism through which trust is established, maintained, and expanded.

The concept of Digital Trust Capital may be useful for understanding this process. Digital Trust Capital refers to the accumulation of credibility, transparency, and social confidence generated through sustained online communication practices. The importance of trust was repeatedly emphasized by participants. One donor remarked that regular updates, photographs, and activity reports shared on social media increased confidence that donations were being used appropriately (Interview D01, September 2025). Such observations suggest that transparency plays a crucial role in sustaining long-term support for charitable initiatives. Unlike traditional forms of trust that depend primarily on face-to-face interaction, digital trust develops through repeated exposure to communication content, visible evidence of activities, and ongoing engagement with online audiences.

In both case studies, Facebook functions as a platform for public visibility. Zalo supports internal coordination among volunteers and supporters. YouTube provides longer-term documentation of activities and preserves institutional narratives. Together, these platforms create an interconnected communication ecosystem that strengthens relationships between religious institutions and community members.

Importantly, trust is not generated automatically through technological use. Rather, it emerges through consistent communication practices that demonstrate organizational responsibility and

social commitment. The visibility provided by digital platforms increases public expectations regarding transparency and accountability. Consequently, successful communication requires not only technical competence but also ethical credibility.

5.4. Opportunities and Challenges in the Digitalization of Buddhist Charity

The increasing integration of social media into Buddhist charitable activities creates both opportunities and challenges. Among the most significant opportunities is the ability to reach broader audiences. Communication technologies allow religious institutions to connect with individuals who may have limited direct contact with Buddhist communities. This expanded reach contributes to the diversification of support networks and increases opportunities for collaborative action.

Digital communication also enhances organizational flexibility. Information can be distributed rapidly, volunteers can be coordinated efficiently, and community responses can be monitored in real time. These capacities are particularly valuable during charitable campaigns that require immediate action.

However, digitalization also introduces new challenges. Religious institutions must navigate concerns regarding misinformation, online impersonation, and communication ethics. The public nature of social media increases exposure to criticism, misunderstanding, and reputational risks. Furthermore, maintaining active digital communication requires time, technical knowledge, and organizational resources that may not always be available.

For Buddhist nuns, an additional challenge involves balancing digital engagement with monastic responsibilities. While communication technologies offer valuable opportunities for social outreach, excessive reliance on digital platforms may create tensions with contemplative practices traditionally associated with monastic life. Effective communication strategies therefore require careful consideration of both practical and spiritual dimensions.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on two Buddhist institutions in Ho Chi Minh City and therefore does not represent the diversity of Buddhist charitable practices across Vietnam. Second, the analysis relies primarily on publicly accessible digital communication materials and does not examine the full range of internal organizational processes associated with charitable activities. Third, the study emphasizes communication practices rather than measuring the direct social impact of welfare initiatives.

Future research may incorporate interviews with Buddhist nuns, volunteers, donors, and beneficiaries in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital communication influences social welfare outcomes. Comparative studies involving other religious traditions or regions of Vietnam may also contribute to a broader understanding of religion and digital transformation in Southeast Asia.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the relationship between digital communication and social welfare activities among Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City through the cases of Quan Am Monastery and Phuoc Vien Pagoda. The findings demonstrate that social media has become an important component of contemporary Buddhist charitable engagement, facilitating communication, coordination, resource mobilization, and community participation.

The analysis reveals that digital platforms perform functions that extend beyond information dissemination. They support the construction of trust, strengthen social networks, and enable religious institutions to engage with broader social concerns. At Phuoc Vien Pagoda, digital communication contributes to community-based charitable programs centered on food distribution and assistance for disadvantaged individuals. At Quan Am Monastery, communication activities connect social welfare initiatives with environmental responsibility, illustrating how Buddhist values can be expressed through contemporary sustainability practices.

The study further suggests that digital communication contributes to the development of what may be described as Digital Trust Capital. Through transparency, visibility, and sustained interaction, religious institutions cultivate confidence among supporters and community members. This process enhances the long-term sustainability of charitable initiatives and strengthens the social role of religious organizations within digitally mediated environments.

More broadly, the experiences of Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City illustrate how religious traditions adapt to technological change while maintaining commitments to compassion, social responsibility, and community service. As digital transformation continues to reshape Vietnamese society, the relationship between religion, communication, and social welfare will remain an important area for future research.

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