Posting the Journey to Juquila: Pilgrimage, Digital Devotion, and Social Media in Mexico

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On December 21, 2012, Candy C. posted "Mañanitas a la Virgen de Juquila," on YouTube (Candy C. 2012). On the surface it is simply another version of the *ranchera* standard, a homage sung at anniversaries and Marian shrines. In this instance, Edelmira del Castillo of Alto Lucero, Veracruz rewrote the lyrics and sings, pairing her tribute with low-resolution photographs. The result is a seven-minute testimonial documenting an intense personal fervor, an alleged miracle, and a bus pilgrimage to a shrine in Oaxaca. Edelmira sings of metaphorical floral offerings and conveys her elation upon visiting Our Lady of Juquila at her basilica.

A YouTube video may not seem like traditional devotion, but Edelmira offers a digital "*ex-voto*:" a votive offering testifying to a miraculous intervention and fervent devotion. This, in other words, is a conventional act in a new medium. Her voice, her story, her *Mañanitas* could remain in cyberspace for decades, maybe centuries, unlike the physical offerings at the shrine that often end up moldering in heaps piled with devotional trash. By May of 2021, Doña Edelmira's online offering tallied 162 thousand views, and inspired 45 supportive comments.

This pious *veracruzana* is not alone. YouTube hosts scores of videos documenting pilgrimages to Juquila. They range from huge groups of cyclists, walkers, and runners, to chartered buses, taxi caravans, and family car trips. Some are primitive, but others reveal careful editing, overdubbed music, and narration. A handful appear patterned on documentaries, music videos, travel shows, and social-media campaigns (e.g., Arrazador11010 2015; Vásquez 2013).

What follows is an analysis of Juquila's recent history on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. This research emerges from Author A's larger historical study of Our Lady of Juquila's devotion, a project that incorporates archival research, oral history, and participant observation. Our focus here encompasses walking, cycling, running relays, as well as vehicular travel to Juquila, a small town in Oaxaca's Southern Sierra. For us, social media's impact on pilgrimage is not an isolated phenomenon. We have witnessed devotees consume, create, and share content before, during, and after their travels. Hence our research tracks devotional promotion, community-building, and expression. We assert that virtual networks, sharing practices, and online communication are now integral to Juquila's pilgrimage. We have identified nearly a dozen distinct types of posts. They include tourism promotion, local celebrations, travelogues (aka vlogs), group communication, personal devotion, event commemoration, DIY documentaries, ex-votos, commerce, and news reports.

From this material we offer several observations and conclusions. First, the advent of social media is creating a rich online repository of devotional expression. In the past, historians rarely found evidence produced by devotees. Eventually this new "archive" will allow us to analyze religious change in greater detail. At present, though, we hazard a preliminary analysis and trace emerging patterns. We also offer considerable description. For some it may seem excessive, but it is important to sketch what devotees are doing online, how they express themselves, and the interconnections between people, groups, and platforms.

Second, we deduce that social media is fueling pilgrimage. Our other research suggests that the post-1950 expansion of Mexico's roads and interstate commerce sparked a stunning expansion of Juquila's pilgrimage (Author A forthcoming). We argue social media is stoking continued growth in the twenty-first century. Its emergence represents a marked infrastructural

improvement, strengthening organizers' ability to communicate, recruit, and marshal resources. Digital tools and platforms also facilitate devotional promotion, official and otherwise. Many more Mexicans can hear about Juquila's miraculous reputation and learn about her pilgrimage. It also creates thicker interlinkages and wider connections (both virtual and face-to-face) between devotees, and offers opportunities for expression, and, thus in-person and online community building.

Third, our findings echo Heidi Campbell's analysis of "networked religion" (Campbell 2012b). Online devotion centered on Juquila does not supplant in-person observance and networks—it augments them. Followers remain active in neighborhoods and parishes, while connected online. Individuals engage other peoples' devout sojourns and share their own. They can learn about, and perhaps join, established pilgrimage groups, or organize their own modeled on those they follow online. In addition, our research shows that devotees draw unabashedly on trends in popular music as well as textual and visual tropes from secular and religious sources.

Fourth, although access to the digital realm does not fundamentally alter practice yet, it disseminates long standing beliefs, narrative practices, histories, and activities to "friends" and "followers." In other words, social media diversifies and amplifies testimonial opportunities. Supplicants continue to bring flowers, candles, *milagros* (votive tokens), cash, and clay depictions of their requests to Juquila. They still publicize their devotion by displaying Juquila souvenirs in their businesses, homes, and vehicles, as well as on their bodies (e.g., scapulars, t-shirts, and hats). But now they also post video clips, selfies, and texts documenting their shrine visits and celebrating their pilgrimage group. Virtual versions of traditional practices are emerging too.

Finally, social media facilitates creative responses to new challenges. For example, amid pandemic disruptions local entrepreneurs on social media began leaving floral arrangements and messages at the shrine for devotees unable to travel. Crucially, this paid, proxy devotion service includes uploading photographed offerings and devout messages on the town's promotional Facebook page—a page that boasts 196 thousand followers (Conoce Juquila 2022). Likewise, a Facebook group emerged to "replace" Juquila's virus-shuttered votive chapel, encouraging individuals to upload photographed offerings and pious requests, "leaving" them for the Virgin on social media (El Pedimento Virtual, 2021).

The Scholarly Backdrop

As hinted above, researching "digital religion" leads immediately to Heidi Campbell (Campbell 2012a; Campbell 2013; Campbell and Vitullo 2016). As Campbell points out, scholars of religion, as well as leaders of denominations, began debating the topic on the heels of the internet's inception. Could virtual religion replace traditional worship? Would a digitally savvy laity bypass religious authority? Some scholars joined virtual communities and interviewed participants, and others analyzed online textual content. Simultaneously, institutions embraced new technologies, and online communication became crucial for many denominations (Campbell 2012a). By the early 2000s, the coexistence of face-to-face and virtual spheres was the norm, and this sparked a more nuanced debate in the 2010s. Research revealed that users do not separate religious and secular activities in the digital realm, and no great authority crisis materialized. Virtual connections generally bolster pre-existing identities and offer users a digital community alongside preexisting face-to-face analogues.

These observations, in turn, brought an increased focus on practitioners, which coincides with a shift among scholars towards "lived religion," the study of how religion "works" for

believers, its role in daily life, and how individuals "use" religion amid mundane activities, social and spiritual (Ammerman 2021). It is in this context that Campbell emphasizes "networked religion," meaning integration within wider realms of interaction and the constant re-mixing of ideas and practices from distinct spheres (Campbell 2012a).

Pilgrimage represents one piece of this puzzle. Virtual travel represents an old practice. For example, the Way of the Cross entails an imagined walk through legendary locations associated with the Passion. A handful of scholars examine digital pilgrimage. Connie Hill-Smith (2011) scrutinizes "cyberpilgrimage," and virtual reality occurrences structured for individuals who seek a simulated pilgrimage experience, and she asserts they find virtual trips worthwhile. A Juquila cyberpilgrimage has not materialized, but the Archdiocese of Oaxaca held a Covid-inspired, virtual novena during Juquila's festival in 2020 (Rodríguez 2020).

Other studies offer insights related to pilgrimage and social media. For example, Nadia Caidi et al. (2018) examine selfie posting during the Hajj, a practice pilgrims sustain despite authorities' disapproval. They note that individuals find documenting their journeys through self-portraits a core part of their experience. The images (and associated text) document their feelings, stoke interactions, and dramatize progress. They also attract followers. The authors also note that pilgrims tend to frame these images to avoid visual evidence of materialism or social inequality, arguing that a collective notion of what is appropriate to share remains in force. Caidi (2019; and 2020) goes further elsewhere, analyzing selfies and social media as part of a larger "information landscape" accessed by Muslim pilgrims before, during, and after their journey. She describes would-be pilgrims accessing materials from online and offline sources, deploying ideas and narratives secured through personal networks, and incorporating embodied experiences and emotions from their own pilgrimage. As she points out, social media expands and

complicates the task facing some pilgrims, causing fear that incorrect information could ruin their special sacred experience. Hence, some avoid or ignore content that does not conform to received understandings.

Another circle of discussion anchored in anthropological scholarship employs the concept of "mediatization" to describe the ubiquity of media logics, including in religion (Loustau et al. 2022). Catholicism, these scholars suggest, is particularly apt for mediatization approaches. Dogma on priestly mediation and saintly intercession, the performative nature of many practices, and the enduring emphasis on images and objects as conduits of grace, bolster a culture of intermediation. From this perspective, what is new is the current level of media saturation. For many individuals, engaging a nearly constant stream of religious messages alongside others represents the norm. Scholars, therefore, speak of integration— the intertwining of digital religious practice and daily life. Religious institutions, in turn, now depend on digital technologies, and value lay content creation as it can magnify orthodox messaging.

A final sphere of debate centers on the nature of pilgrimage and its relationship to tourism—or the melding of devotional practices, understandings of travel, and commercialization processes. Scholars argue that the closer they scrutinize these phenomena the more difficult it becomes to separate them (Badone and Roseman 2004). Both represent realms of consumption, as well as meaning and identity construction amid movement over landscapes imbued with significance. In addition, ideas about spiritual places and life-changing travel experiences animate both spheres (Chemin 2012). This step should not be understood as a "demotion" of pilgrimage. Scholars no longer view it as an isolated practice. Instead, they analyze it alongside secular travel, embodied experience, information consumption, and everyday religion (Coleman and Mitchell 2001; Mesaritou et al. 2020). More recently,

researchers have begun examining pilgrimage as a quintessentially connective practice extending complex threads of "articulation" between devotional actions, ideas, and institutions and a wide spectrum of religious and secular spaces, processes, and cultural forms (Coleman 2022).

The blurring of spheres, we must stress, is not a byproduct of new technologies and twenty-first-century capitalism. Anthropologist Ian Reader (2014) maintains that pilgrimage and commerce have remained mutually constitutive across eras and cultures. Building and renovating shrines to attract devotees, competing with other devotions/locations, selling souvenirs, and maintaining trade fairs and transportation networks has been integral for centuries. In addition, evidence shows that commercial actors and shrine promoters (both historically and in the present day) embrace technological change and new media developments as they respond to market signals (Thomases 2019).

Juquila's devotion has experienced only episodic official promotional efforts, but in the last decade a concerted, top-down marketing campaign has taken shape. Church officials staged a Vatican approved coronation of the 400-year-old image in 2014, which they promoted online. In the same year, the Oaxacan state tourism ministry began marketing "La Ruta de la Fe" (Route of Faith), a new, trademarked itinerary following the established pilgrimage route (Comunicación Social del Gobierno 2015). Subsequently, federal officials named Juquila a "Pueblo Mágico" in 2020, a recognition that brings government oversight regarding the town's appearance (Milenio Digital and Rodríguez 2020). As we discuss in this essay, devotee actions and devotional promotion are also part of this process.

An Eclectic Methodology

To better understand the role that social media plays in pilgrimage, we analyze posts related to the Virgin of Juquila on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook because devotees prefer

these platforms, as evidenced by the quantity of posts as well as the large number of groups and users. The analysis of social media posts represents a kind of descriptive ethnography (Tsuria 2020). We also utilize digital tools to facilitate data collection, but we do so idiosyncratically because each platform features unique policies: Instagram and YouTube permit web scrapers (coding programs that extract and process information), but Facebook does not. But even in the first two instances, our analysis of expression, sentiment, and communication, necessitates manual collection and analysis.

In the case of Instagram, our data emerged from a mixture of manual searches and digital compilation facilitated by a web scraper. Ours is a command-line application written in Python that locates and downloads requested information. In this instance, Author B modified a template scraper to compile data based on the hashtags used by Juquila pilgrims, including username, URL, caption, comments, and likes for each post. The hashtags include #virgendejuquila, #santacatarinajuquila, #rutadelafe, and #vivejuquila. Each one netted hundreds of posts, requiring that we analyze individual posts and sort them into distinct categories.

Like Instagram, web scrapers for YouTube are common and modifiable. YouTube users, however, rarely use hashtags. Instead, title searches serve as the best means of accessing pilgrim content. Thus, our data from YouTube emerged mostly from keyword searches and tracking individuals who post frequently. Terms like "peregrinación Juquila" (pilgrimage Juquila) and "viaje Juquila" (trip Juquila) netted the most results: lists of videos by pilgrimage groups, Juquila tourism advertisements, personal travelogues, and individual testimonials. In addition, news clips and official Catholic Church videos surfaced as well (e.g., TVBus Noticias Null 2019).

Facebook's data policy forced us to depend on manual data collection. The site is extremely popular among pilgrims. They can create separate communities using Facebook

groups, and share prayers, pictures of pilgrimage, and live-streamed novenas. In addition, there are not only written posts by individuals, but institutional pages, groups, video posts, and picture posts. We relied on keyword searches. We then compiled our findings in an excel file, documenting interactions (likes, comments, follows) for the user, group, page, or post, as well as the URL. We also categorized videos (devotional, organized group, tourism, etc…).

Still, it is difficult to gain a "big-picture" understanding. Thankfully, as part of Tubular Labs' "Tubular for Good Program," we were able to gain greater insight into video sharing related to pilgrimage. Tubular Labs (Tubular) specializes in video analytics, and hence their tools are helpful when examining YouTube and Facebook. Unfortunately, because Instagram mostly features still photographs, Tubular's data for the platform is limited. It is also important to highlight that the output depends on what is entered into the site's search bar, where we searched across platforms using keywords, hashtags, and specific usernames. Although it is impossible to locate all Juquila-related content, Tubular's software allows greater data collection and presents it in an accessible, comparative format. Other limitations remain: Tubular's data for Facebook begins in 2015, while data for YouTube is available beginning in 2019. Hence, we can compare trends in uploads and engagement between these platforms, only over the past few years. These searches confirm, however, that Facebook represents the most popular pilgrim platform (See Figure 1). Through Tubular's software and manual data collection, we were able to gather and analyze large quantities of data regarding the role of Juquila pilgrimage on social media.
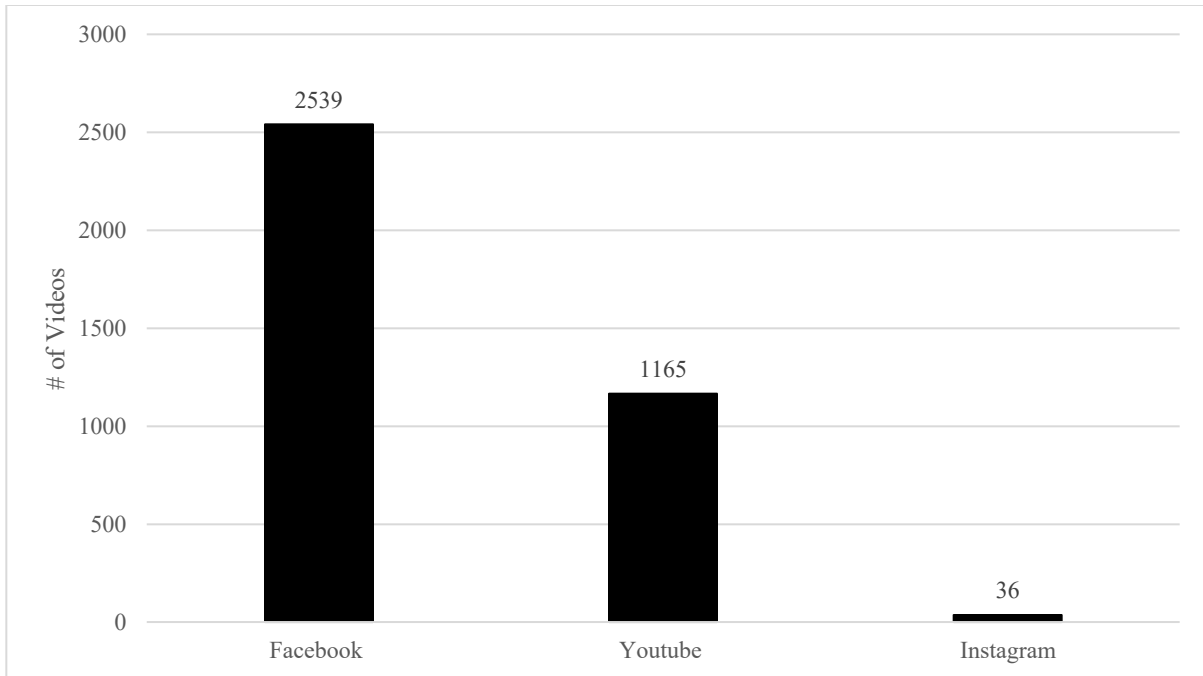
Figure 1. Tubular Labs - Videos Posted with 'Virgen de Juquila' Keywords on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, 2019-2022.

Facebook

Understanding present-day pilgrimage in Mexico is impossible without engaging Facebook. We have identified four kinds of group pages on the platform: official sites (like the shrine's page), prayer groups, virtual votive spaces, and pilgrimage group pages. Scrutiny reveals considerable overlap, but their functions remain distinct. We acknowledge that some virtual spaces may fade as the pandemic recedes, but for organized pilgrimage groups, Facebook is central to Juquila's devotion. Organizers typically create a group on the platform to facilitate communication, recruit participants, celebrate trips to the shrine, and coordinate tasks. In addition, just as pilgrimage itself brings together the personal and communal, pages often function as support networks.

Facebook evinces a unique hub-like quality. Within group pages, virtual votive spaces, and Juquila prayer groups, members share content from YouTube and Tik Tok. Pages frequently provide links to Instagram sites too. We also note the sharing of Juquila promotional material generated by tourism promoters, share-bait, and a variety of religious content.

From a different perspective, it also showcases the "networked" nature of present-day devotion. Devotees can scroll and click from one digital space to another at any time or place. As they do, they offer prayers, devout emojis, and supportive comments. They share and follow links to religious music videos, ponder religious images, and enjoy clips from other pilgrimages. They also upload their own content.

The most strictly devotional are the Juquila prayer groups. With evocative names like "Virgen de Juquila en Ti Confío" (2022), "Comunidad Virgen de Juquila en Facebook," (2022), and "Pedido de Oraciones en comunidad a la 'Virgen de Juquila'" (2022), they attract individuals' appeals for intercession and prayers, as well as testimonials. The idea is not only to communicate with Juquila, but to inspire supportive supplications from others. In general, these groups emerged in the last five years and succeed in attracting members (5,554; 516; and 28,431 followers, respectively, as of January 2022). They often provide rules and promise to block violators. For example, Virgen de Juquila en Ti Confio bans political commentary, sales pitches, images unrelated to Juquila, photographs of saints featuring money, and posts promising good fortune if shared widely.

In terms of content, posts reproduce the practices devotees sustained at Catholic shrines for generations. The difference is the possibility of sustained interaction. Many ask others to pray for family members. Some re-post videos of Masses and novenas originating on the shrine's page (Santuario de la Inmaculada 2022). Devotees also share music videos (e.g., Andrade 2021).

Many posts attest to Juquilita's support (e.g., in raising children), or attribute a healthy pregnancy to her intervention (Ramírez 2021). Comments are usually positive, praising the posters, calling on Juquila to bless them, or deploying the praying emoji or typing "Amen." Comments also include requests for information about road conditions and shrine accessibility.

As we would expect, prayer groups are also virtual spaces where individuals seek support. For example, in August 2021, a devotee from Tlapa, Guerrero posted a photograph of the stone image of Juquila at the Pedimento (a votive chapel) and requested that the Virgin halt her aunt's cancer. In doing so, she conjures a digital Pedimento. In the 51 comments that follow, she receives an outpouring of encouragement and prayers. Midway through the comments, however, she notes that her aunt has died. Condolences follow (Arllet 2021).

Not surprisingly, during the same year a cyber chapel appeared on Facebook, called "El Pedimento Virtual de la Virgen de Juquila (oficial)" (2021). Citing the tradition of making clay models of votive requests and leaving these items at the chapel, the group stresses that the pandemic-inspired closure of the Pedimento inspired the establishment of a virtual chapel. It invites devotees to make their offerings at home and share pictures of them, *"With the faith of all of us, very soon the Virgin will grant your request."*

In sum, devotees are making use of the opportunities social media offers— virtual space, networked communication, content sharing, and community. The virtual Pedimento, however, remains public and lacks restrictions. As a result, religious content appear alongside posts unrelated to Juquila's devotion. These range from images promoting obscure folk saints and new age counselors, to videos of alleged occult happenings, and online raffles.

We also located pages dedicated to Juquila's devotion in the US; for example, "Virgen de Juquila en Greensboro" (2017), which recreates the Juquila experience for immigrant devotees.

With nearly 800 followers it promotes group Rosaries in private homes and provides updates on the construction of a Juquila chapel in North Carolina. It also shares posts recounting the legendary history of the Oaxacan image. Finally, this page promotes rituals in members' homes and a large celebration on the eve of Juquila's feast day (December 8).

The Facebook pages maintained by individual pilgrimage groups represent yet another genre. Some elect to set their page up as a "public group" with members, while others create a profile as if their pilgrimage page was an individual with "friends." They can vary greatly. For example, market vendors in Oaxaca that organize an annual walking trip to Juquila, maintain a group with 66 members (Caminando Juntos 2022). In contrast, large cycling groups located in the state of Puebla employ the personal profile approach and list nearly 5,000 friends (e.g., Peregrinación Ciclista Nuestra Señora 2022). In contrast to prayer groups, most "members" and "friends" know each other personally.

On the surface, there are three functions of these pages, communication among organizers, information dissemination to participants and supporters, and the celebration of the group's annual journey. In this realm the advent of social media represents an extraordinary advance. Many groups travel to the shrine between mid-November and mid-December; and thus a few months prior, leaders announce meetings and issue invitations for new participants. Often the latter include pictures of happy devotees in previous years, and snapshots taken at the shrine. Comments added to these posts often express eagerness to make the journey and include salutations naming friends as well as praise for the Virgin (e.g., Peregrinacion a Pie 2017). In addition, posts discuss task delegation: for example, the making of flyers, ordering t-shirts, and meal planning. Among larger groups, organizers produce posters in hard copy and digital formats, announcing the itinerary and naming sponsors. Rendered in the same showy style as

announcements for village festivals, organizers put them up all over town, and upload a digital version on the group's Facebook page (Peregrinación Ciclista Nuestra Señora 2018). In addition, organizers often acknowledge donors with photographs and laudatory captions. By design shoutouts appear in the feeds of members/friends. Often groups show off their custom hats and t-shirts and reveal the makeup of the organizing committee for the following year (e.g., Peregrinación Ciclista Santa Catarina 2019). Finally, these pages also serve as sharing platforms. Many uploads include several pictures and clips; and members and organizers post them both during the pilgrimage and afterward, essentially creating online photo essays (e.g., Peregrinación Santiago Miahuatlán 2022).

It bears mentioning that the number of members and friends surpasses the participants each year. In part, this is because some pilgrims only take part intermittently, and still others are merely supportive family and friends. Among larger groups, which can reach 200-600 pilgrims and dozens of support vehicles, kitchen crews, medical staff, and mechanics, the communal resonance of these groups is noteworthy. The complex logistics required to sustain endeavors of this size for 30-50 years makes these groups important local institutions. Thus, not only are their social media circles large, but the Masses marking the start and end of each sojourn fill parish churches with pilgrims and local supporters. There is also a kind of uncoordinated, tag-along tradition connected to large pilgrimages. Often family members and friends travel to Juquila independently to join the cyclists and walkers when they arrive at the shrine. In a sense, these ancillary mobilizations represent parallel affiliated pilgrimages.

As we mentioned, mutual aid dimensions are important. The bonds forged amid journeys to shrines likely attracted pilgrims historically. Social media accentuates this dynamic. In fact,

group pages can serve as message boards, rallying their members to comfort other members. It is also true that immigrants beyond Mexico stay in touch through the group's page.

On the most basic level, members post blessings invoking Juquila on religious holidays. It is common to see birthday greetings, invitations to in-person events, and posts announcing important life events. Individuals sometimes share posts from prayer group pages, and recitations of the Rosary and Masses on Facebook live (e.g., Caminando Juntos 2022). In addition, posts announcing the passing of a family member are common. Naturally, members offer condolences in the comments.

Groups are especially attentive when a member dies. Posts often show the departed during trips to the shrine, typically superimposing their image over dramatic mountain landscapes alongside a picture of the Virgin of Juquila (e.g., Peregrinación Santiago Miahuatlán 2018). Many members offer their sympathies and testify to years of comradery. They also post animated memes depicting angels, black ribbons, and crying emojis.

YouTube

Examining clips posted by Juquila's followers on YouTube represents a different kind of archeology. On one level, the videos simply revisit a venerable tradition, the narration of pious travel. However, new technological tools offer Juquila's followers new opportunities for creative expression.

There is a seasonal quality to video posting. Our Tubular searches reveal that Juquila-related video posting and viewing spike each November and December, coinciding with the peak pilgrimage season centered on the weeks before and after Juquila's official feast day, December 8 (See Figure 2). At these seasonal moments, YouTube postings frequently surpass Facebook videos. Tubular data for videos explicitly depicting pilgrimages reveals the dampening impact of

the Covid-19 pandemic, which decreased shrine visitation in 2020 and 2021. We expect it to return to pre-pandemic levels in the coming years.
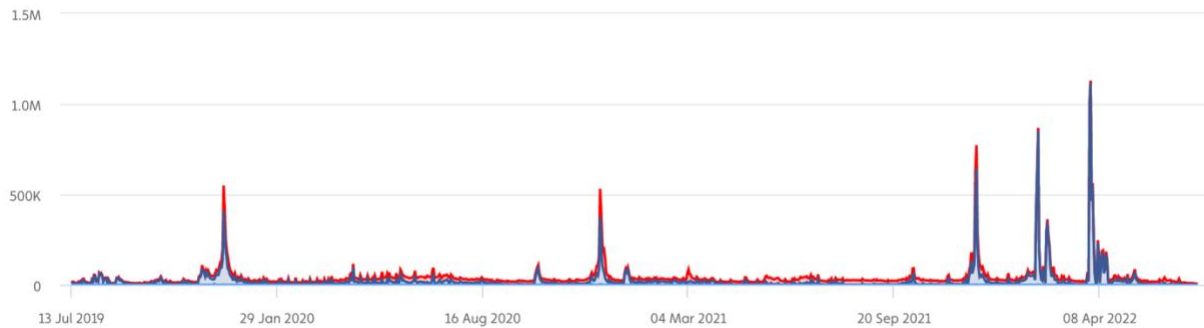

Figure 2. Tubular Labs – Video views for 'Virgen de Juquila,' searches, 2019-2022. Red signifies YouTube videos, and blue indicates Facebook videos.

It is important to acknowledge the wider matrix of material on the platform because Juquila's followers avidly share this content. Comments reveal that many pilgrims enjoy tourism videos where our Lady of Juquila presides over an enchanted landscape, salt-of-the-earth people, centering calm, primordial fervor, and sublime grace. This material emerges from an established patterns of marketing Oaxaca as an archetypal, authentic space. But Juquila promotional videos target religious Mexicans, not foreign tourists. They peddle a dreamy, vaguely devout, cultural nationalism, which frames pilgrimage in a warm, golden glow (e.g., Oaxaca Bonito 2016). We never hear devotees' voices: they are spoken for—typically by a soothing, male narrator. We contemplate the actors portraying devotees from a distance, and they are conventionally attractive in prayerful contemplation and cheerful exertion. In addition, locals along the way share traditions and local delicacies. A process of homogenizing and stereotyping is taking place, but it is of the sort that many Mexicans applaud. Pilgrims, like blanket weavers, distillers of mezcal, and indigenous dancers, appear as exemplars of Mexico's primordial essence.

In short, various realms of content creation are in conversation. But this phenomenon also points to another issue: Juquila's devotees are "connected." As their YouTube posts reveal, and as new tools emerge, their videos increasingly exhibit higher production values. For example, in 2021, drone footage began to appear in pilgrim videos (Videograpix 2019). This represents the logical extension of deeper patterns evident in the long history of pilgrimage. Just as devotees and promoters embraced advancements in previous eras— e.g., trains, photography, paved highways, print media, and bus tours—they adopt technologies that allow them to travel more efficiently and safely (Reader 2014).

The earliest pilgrimage videos on YouTube date from about 2008. Unsurprisingly, they are unsophisticated: often featuring brief montages of grainy photographs, jittery video, rudimentary transitions, and minimalist captioning. Typically, these filmmakers merely added music to a slide show. We refer to this as the music-video approach (e.g., Giovanni Miguel 2008). Still, epic narrative peeks through.

The small indigenous town of Guelavia, Oaxaca's 2009 pilgrimage clip offers a good example (Maple 2011). It begins with a title shot celebrating the town's 24th annual trip to the shrine. Paired with a 1980s English-language ballad ("Right Here Waiting" by Richard Marx) images show the group ambling through valleys and forests, interspersed with tourist-like snapshots: resting friends, shared meals, and alpine vistas. The lyrics are irrelevant, but the melody and vocals suffuse the video with melodramatic longing. Close to the end, group pictures tacitly announce, "We made it… together." The final frame states, "*Saludos a los radicados en USA*" (Greetings to those living in the USA). This dynamic predates YouTube. For decades Mexicans have filmed festivals to share with distant friends and relatives. YouTube simply makes this easier.

A wider sampling reveals cultural variations. For example, distinctly indigenous communities often include traditional dance groups and village bands. Thus, a video from Tlahuitoltepec focuses on their brass ensemble while dancers in plumed outfits perform at the basilica in Juquila (Reycondoy 2008).

Between 2013 to 2015, longer, more elaborate videos became common. By this time some large pilgrimage groups were posting videos after each year's journey. Many of them reveal the hallmarks of novice filmmaking, overlong runtimes, and haphazard transitions. Others clearly sought out technical expertise, which is readily available in Mexico, to produce polished videos. In fact, it is common to find YouTube channels where digital entrepreneurs post pilgrimage videos alongside clips of town festivals, *quinceañeras*, and sporting events (e.g., Playa Turisloco 2018).

Some clips issue calls for new members, but others simply tell a group's story, showcasing camaraderie and struggle. Visual style, plotting, composition, and musical accompaniment suggest a DIY marketing tool kit inspired by news media, documentary film, advertising, reality television, social media, and music videos. Innovation isn't the point. As historian Antonio Rubial writes (2001), pious genres foreground "the exemplary," embrace formulas, and stick to conventions. In other words, pilgrimage posts meet longstanding expectations for how devout narratives should unfold, look, and sound. These clips, nonetheless, reveal a stunning democratization of pilgrim narrative; thirty years ago, devotees could not disseminate their own stories easily.

The structure and ethos remain traditional, charting episodic progress through a symbolic landscape and featuring perseverance, fellowship, solidarity, piety at emblematic locations, and a festive, votive spirit. As has long been true of pious display, competition between groups

emerges in the attention lavished on meals, decorative practices, and the musical groups hired to enliven the experience.

Tepeaca, Puebla's cycling group offers a good example in its 1 hour and 24-minute video chronicling their 2014 trip to Juquila (Arrazador11010 2014). Featuring an all-male cast of riders, it captures the fiesta-on-wheels character typical of large groups using a music-video-montage framework. Tapping different genres (*ranchera*, praise pop, *mariachi*, and *norteño*), they chain together clips featuring riders with a series of songs, most of which include Juquila-related lyrics. One song narrates the official legend of the Virgin of Juquila. Amid the climatic final climb to Juquila, riders accompanied by the group's mobile truck-altars battle fatigue and sore limbs to the evangelical power pop of Miel San Marcos and singer Christine D'Clario's "*No hay lugar más alto*." The chorus repeats the simple paradox, "There is no higher place…. than being at your feet," echoing a commonly phrased votive promise among pilgrims: to "…*llegar a tus plantas*." Tepeaca's video then moves still deeper into ecumenical territory, ending with an Evangelical folk hymn by Fuente de Agua Viva in a Mayan language, which is not spoken in Puebla. It may represent an attempt to add a sheen of authenticity via indigenous cultural nationalism, or perhaps an appropriation of music deemed sacred even if only vaguely understood.

Taking a different tack, a group from Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, posts multipart documentaries. Calling their event, the "Caminata de Fe" (Walk of Faith) and presenting themselves as a "Peregrino Films," the filmmakers upload polished videos on their YouTube channel. Their ambitious goals first appear in the self-consciously titled "*Documental antropológico…*" from 2014—a ten-part series of short videos featuring the stately masculine voiceover common in radio advertising. It begins by placing Juquila in the context of historical pilgrimages worldwide,

and then offers a melodramatic chronicle of daily progress. The videos are free of background noise and less dependent on the music video approach. In addition, the narrator explains devotional practices (which is rare) thus producing a social-science-style series (Caminatadefe 2015a).

Caminata de la Fe, however, chose a very different strategy the following year's pilgrimage (2015b), posting a single, 52-minute documentary. After a brief introduction, they jettison the male voice over, and opt for a first-person female narrator composed of five different women's testimonies. It remains scripted, but a young woman voices these testimonials as a single account, airing feelings of self-doubt, charting struggle, chronicling an evolving, nuanced appreciation for collective solidarity, voicing a sense of divine companionship, and celebrating spiritual joy and personal fulfillment upon arrival at the shrine. As with others, each day's conditions, details, and challenges provide structure and rhythm, a format that amplifies the self-improvement themes common in pilgrimage (and tourism). Music helps set the mood: soft orchestral pieces accompany introspective moments, ominous strings coincide with cold rain at twilight, and languid mariachi instrumentals provide the soundscape for sunny mountain traverses. If the group was hoping to attract a wider audience, it worked. The 2015 documentary is one of the most viewed Juquila videos on YouTube with over 190 thousand views as of September 2021.

The comments section, of course, provides space for critique too. Occasionally, Protestant commenters criticize image devotion. Some even state that Satan is likely behind any miracles attributed to Juquila. Others seem to relish mocking pilgrims. For example, one troll slanders Juquila in capital letters, "MUÑECA BARBIE…COLOR DE POPO…" – i.e., shit-

colored Barbie doll (Mena 2009). Another refers to her as a disgusting figurine, abhorrent and abominable (Gulaza 2019).

As we stressed at the outset, the videos posted by groups do not provide the full picture. Alongside them, we find videos produced for promotional purposes. Some of these clips mix advertising and devotion. At the upper end of production values, we have the videos produced by the tourism industry. These often reside on YouTube channels, such as Vive Oaxaca, Sobre Tierra Oaxaqueña, and Oaxaca Bonito. They employ drones and slow-motion, time-lapse sequences. Often, they too embrace the music video style, although they almost always choose upbeat electronic music of the kind that accompanies TV series and romantic comedies. They are also fond of the loosely repurposed variation on the quick-cut, falling-in-love montage typical of the latter (Sobre Tierra 2017; Vive Oaxaca 2020). In some instances, these clips copy the pilgrim's episodic narrative style. For example, a video produced by Oaxaca's state government employs a "story" built around an attractive, wide-eyed bourgeois couple enjoying the rustic marvels of Oaxaca guided by the male narrator extolling "millenarian traditions," natural wonders, and the mystical, life-changing powers of the region. Deploying personal-discovery tropes of new age wellness, he purrs, "Take a pilgrimage to yourself." At the end, we see the adorable couple approaching Juquila's altar, heads bowed, floral offerings cradled in their arms, as the narrator declares: "Oaxaca is a journey. Choose your route. The Route of Faith, Juquila" (Oaxaca Bonito 2016). The irony is that the advertisement idealizes the locations along the route to an extent that makes them nearly unrecognizable. It sanitizes the gritty realities of the road to Juquila. It is important, nonetheless, to stress the commonalities with devotee-made videos: in both cases, the message is that Juquila will transform you.

More humble promoters also contribute content. As we would expect, a handful of "influencers" offer Juquila featurettes. These tend to be niche-marketed: vlogs from young couples, a motorcycle enthusiast's road-trip video, bus companies promoting tours, and even a DIY children's travel channel (Chinoax 2014; Madommi 2020; Traketin 2020). In a different vein, a Oaxacan band, offers a music video where they sing and act out their visit to Juquila, devotional purchases, and votive practices (Cronos 2017). At the end, a phone number for bookings appears on screen.

This set of examples may seem transparently instrumental, but, again, the intertwining of devotion and commerce is both common and traditional. Requesting "help in business," increasing sales, and attracting clients were part of votive petitioning long before the advent of the internet.

Official Catholic Church postings are typically unimaginative. For example, they offer overlong videos of low-resolution, live-streamed Masses, or short benedictions from the shrine (Arquidiócesis 2015; Arquidiócesis 2019). Personal requests for miraculous intervention are absent. The church seems to be trying to catch up with an autonomous cultural practice sustained by devotees, inserting itself within a wider cyber-scape of Juquila-related communication. The official church messaging focuses on orthodoxy. It stresses—sometimes literally, sometimes implicitly— "We" (The Church) are the appropriate stewards of the shrine and the authoritative voice on Juquila's devotion. The church's message via rituals and sermons is simple: it encourages devotees to focus their energies on becoming better Catholics, taking part in priest-mediated sacraments, and a full embrace of the Church's moral teachings. Individual votive practice barely appears.

The modest number of views suggest that pilgrims are not very interested in these messages. Devotees participate in orthodox liturgy as it fits within pilgrimage and shrine activities, but they cling to practices centered on personal connections to Juquilita. These require little priestly involvement.

It is important to remember that the church and its ministers rarely play a lead role in group pilgrimages. We know of only one community where a priest founded an annual pilgrimage (Pilgrims of Tonameca 2017). Every so often an individual priest travels with a group to Juquila. For example, Padre Martín Rodríguez, a charming, attractive priest with his own YouTube channel, accompanied his parish's cycling group to Juquila in 2019 and posted videos of his interviews with pilgrims. He teaches through lighthearted dialogues with children that include marking doctrinal errors with a baffled Jesus emoji (Rodríguez 2019a; 2019b).

Mostly, however, Catholic authorities remain at a distance from pilgrimage. The notable exception remains the promotional campaign for Juquila's pontifical coronation on October 8, 2014. Online promotion was only part of this effort. The image received an elaborate makeover, and the archdiocese sent out press releases and posted explanatory guides explaining Juquila's revamped look and more complicated iconography. Posters appeared online and on walls in the state capital, extolling the Virgin's official crowning. Banners also festooned churches in Oaxaca City (Chávez Botello 2014). Many clips of the event featuring the archbishop and a dozen additional prelates reside on YouTube (e.g., Arquidiócesis 2014). Some offer the nearly four-hour spectacle, as it was streamed live (Bypmexico 2014). The most viewed videos of the coronation, however, are shorter highlight videos (e.g., Vive Oaxaca 2014).

It bears mentioning, however, that devotees rarely mention the crowning. According to residents of Juquila, the event proved a disappointment (Cuevas 2016). In truth, coronation

videos (essentially, a very long, elaborate Mass) are dull. They lack the pace, narrative, and a soundtrack like devotee-made clips. YouTubes statistics underscore the contrast: Tlaxiaco's documentary lists 191 thousand views and 902 likes (Caminatadefe 2015b). Meanwhile, the most popular coronation video has only 21 thousand views and 173 likes (Vive Oaxaca 2014).

The church, however, has more impact when individual priests take a personal approach. For example, a priest-YouTuber, Mexico City's Padre José de Jesús Aguilar Valdés (2021), enjoyed considerable success with a Juquila travel video. Like a podcast host, his Juquila segment gained traction because viewers can imagine they know him. As their comments indicate, many "follow" him and appreciate his content. He posts short clips centered on Catholic trivia, live-streamed Masses, self-help topics, and brief answers to doctrinal questions alongside travel videos. On camera he calmly recounts the official history of the image, describes traditions, and visits key landmarks. This post amassed an impressive 645 thousand views by August of 2021, a mere two months after its initial posting.

Instagram

When it comes to digital devotion, Instagram serves a unique purpose. First, its design hampers users' ability to build far-reaching communities unless they can recruit a large, online following. Similarly, even with a public profile, sharing widely requires the use of many hashtags or location tags. Even with many followers and a dozen hashtags, it is nearly impossible for a user to know if they reached their "target" audience. Typically, when a public account features a devotional photo with a Juquila-themed hashtags it only receives a handful of likes and comments. Unlike Facebook and YouTube, Instagram does not utilize key word searches, making it difficult to locate available content for a specific topic. Due to these limitations, Juquila's pilgrims utilize Instagram less for community building, like Facebook, or sharing

montages and travel videos like YouTube. Instead, the platform allows users a space for sharing their experiences with a modest number of followers.

The chronicling of pilgrimages manifests itself in various ways on Instagram. The most common is through the taking and posting of selfies. As we noted earlier, this genre of digital self-representation has become common among pilgrims globally (Caidi et al. 2018). Smartphones allows individuals to incorporate selfies into traditions of devotional testimony and identity construction as they travel. Juquila pilgrims often post a series throughout their journeys. In a sense, they are perfect for demonstrating progress: the subject remains the same, but the backdrop (often recognizable to viewers) changes, and eventually the shrine or Juquila herself is in the frame, so to say. For example, @rafadelsa (2016), posted a low-quality selfie with two other men in March of 2016 as they sat on the side of the road. The post's caption (misspelled in the original) reads, "Pqregriancion juquila #juquilaoaxaca #juquila #wedidit #virgenjuquila". Through this image and the English-language slogan, "we did it," @rafadelsa's four hundred followers learned that Rafa had successfully arrived. Unsurprisingly, devotees most often post selfies on December 8, the Virgin of Juquila's traditional feast day, documenting their presence and often referencing their completion of a personal vow (*manda*). Hence, we see individuals positioned in front of the virgin's flower-covered altar, accompanied by simple captions like "#VirgindeJuquila #Promesas #Gracias" and "Orgullosamente Juquileño" (@soypepe3 2021).

In some ways, selfies are analogous to the shrine souvenirs. But this now ubiquitous form also suggests a degree of expressive innovation. Devotees have long left portraits at the shrine, often paired with requests for miraculous intercession or declarations of gratitude. In the first instance, they often accompany a short text about a personal crisis or problem. Often, they are left on behalf of a loved one or child. Self-portraits are less common, although when devotees

deposit diplomas or licenses they can include a small personal photograph. In the second instance, they often accompany a declaration of thanks for allowing me/us to successfully arrive at the shrine. But these generally do not qualify as "selfies," a picture where the subject is obviously holding the phone at arm's length. Usually what we see at shrines are traditional snapshots. Selfies on Instagram (and Facebook as well) are different. They are not "for Juquila." They inform the devotees' followers, document the poster's participation in a praiseworthy religious act, and underscore belonging to a particular group of pilgrims.

The showcasing of group identity is still more pronounced when devotees upload "conventional" photographs to Instagram. Unlike selfies, which center a single pilgrim, many users share photos of groups, children, or scenic vistas as a way of documenting their trip. These pictures range from vivid, seemingly professional shots to blurry, haphazardly composed images. In nearly all cases, they share similar sentiments: devout gratitude and proud accomplishment. For example, @arthu_oax (2019), a personal account with nearly 3,000 followers, posts only high-quality images of Oaxaca. Alongside a picture of the Virgin of Juquila's sanctuary, a caption states, "Hundreds of faithful followers stand before the Virgin's image to ask for favors or give thanks for the blessings they have received. There is no doubt that faith moves mountains." In this case, the user documents his pious sentiments with evidence of collective devotion. Similarly, some pilgrims share photographs of their children or nieces/nephews as a testament to familial devotion. For example, the account @luisito618 (2021) posted a picture of a small child standing inside the Virgin's sanctuary stating, "We came to give thanks, my nephew Toñito and my family." Likewise, @miangonher (2020) posted several photos of a young man (the user) and a small girl (his niece) in front of the Virgin's shrine. Both posts imply cultural transfer between generations, as young men reveal themselves sharing traditions with

children. The posting of these photos on Instagram simultaneously serves as proof of arrival in Juquila, and a kind of self-presentation as a conduit of Juquila's devotion, and a praiseworthy fomenting of religious customs.

Beyond personal photographs, some devotees on Instagram prefer to share "educational" content. In truth, this is a common practice on Facebook too. Among the most common are retellings, perhaps copied and pasted from elsewhere, of the legendary histories detailing the Virgin's apparitions and miracles. Typically, they appear on Juquila's feast day, December 8. Users, some with only sixty followers, post pictures of the Virgin accompanied by lengthy didactic captions. It is a traditional expression of devotion and gratitude, sharing the image's story and bolstering her reputation. The votive chapel on the outskirts of Juquila offers the same stories in paintings decorating the ceiling. As we've noticed, the desire to educate others on the Virgin of Juquila appears on all platforms and in large and small virtual spaces. In essence, each devotee posting these texts joins the broader promotional campaign; and their Instagram page functions intermittently as a devotional billboard.

On Instagram we also note important sharing patterns that knit together individual pages and institutional pages connected to religious tourism promotion. There is a network of interactions, and cross postings connect Instagram to Facebook. Although it is no surprise to many scholars of pilgrimage in various parts of the world, Juquila's devotion, to a certain extent, runs on tourism. The most prominent is Conoce Juquila (@conocejuquila on Instagram), which has a strong presence on all major platforms, boasting nearly four thousand followers on Instagram. Through posts devotees, merchants, and the merely curious, can publicize their devotion, market services, or simply explore the "food, culture, and religion" of Juquila. The majority of these posts feature photographed pilgrims, romantic pictures of the shrine and nearby

spaces, images of traditional food preparation, colorful indigenous outfits and folklore, short videos of processions and rituals, and religious iconography. In essence, it offers the standard marketing of Oaxacan tourism with a heavy dose of devotional representation and Catholic imagery mixed in. It is targeted at a particular niche in the market, we could say. As its Instagram and Facebook feeds demonstrate, Conoce Juquila looks good. More importantly, it is very popular with Juquila's followers. Devotees and pilgrimage groups frequently share its posts, usually accompanied by upbeat, even gushy, captions.

Virtual community building certainly occurs on Instagram and has evolved in tandem with tourist promotion as it weaves together the different social media platforms. For example, @juquila_pueblo_magico (2020) is a tourism account and uses the official *"pueblo mágico"* (magic town) designation granted to Juquila in 2020 by the federal government. In earning this status, Juquila joined 132 other Mexican communities recognized for their allegedly unique showcasing of national culture. With slightly over 2000 followers, the Instagram page mostly features a steady stream of pictures of visitors and pilgrims posing in Juquila's plaza. While the page enjoys a fair number of followers, user engagement is limited, suggesting only weak ties unite this group. Instead, the @juquila_pueblo_magico page simply offers a kind of slide show, inviting users to browse images, and share its posts.

Inspiring "shares" is central to its promotional strategy. For example, in August of 2022, one of the largest and oldest cycling pilgrimages to Juquila began to discuss and promote their annual, November trip to the shrine on Facebook with a shared post from @juquila_pueblo_magico's Instagram page (Peregrinación Ciclista de Huixcolotla 2022). It features a blurry snapshot of a road sign stating, "Welcome to Sanctuary STA Catarina Juquila," and a caption, "Each day my trip to Juquila is getting closer," followed by a heart and the

praying hands emoji. In the comments, Facebook friends began inquiring about costs and the itinerary.

Despite instances like this, the contrast with online Facebook communities, where users discuss, plan, and support each other throughout the year and amid stages of pilgrimage, remains sharp. However, it is important to note that these Instagram pages offer a less demanding form of community. In other words, public pages like juquila_pueblo_magico allow followers to participate virtually in the town's festivities by consuming images. In addition, the photographs form part of the information reservoir that devotees can access as they contemplate their own forays to Juquila.

From the many examples of devotional practice and community building observed on Instagram, we can conclude that for hundreds of Juquila pilgrims, it serves as a platform for sharing personal pilgrimage experiences with a smaller, curated audience. Whether it be through selfies, a dad-and-daughter-style snapshots at the shrine, or high-definition pictures of visiting pilgrims congregating in Juquila's plaza, devotees can proudly document their journey and share their feelings with their followers. Sometimes, as we have seen, these images are spread more widely on other Instagram pages, and then other platforms. And these, at times, then spark more intimate exchanges between individual devotees. In other words, looking carefully we can observe Juquilita's network in action.

Conclusion

Scholars of pilgrimage point to its open, adaptable nature, as the key to its remarkable endurance and evolution across centuries. They stress how it functions as a form of engagement with a legendary past, a past that devotees can creatively envision entering while experiencing landscapes and locations understood as sacred. Thus, we see participants deploy storylines, roles,

metaphors, and settings drawn from church teaching, media, folklore, film, and fiction (Chemin 2012). Simultaneously, pilgrimage continually metabolizes new approaches to travel and ritual alongside understandings of identity construction and consumption. Given its surging popularity over the last century, anthropologist Simon Coleman (2022) argues it represents a "great cultural success story."

Our research reveals much about how this extraordinary flexibility remains in play amid the advent, and current ubiquity, of social media. Our examination of pilgrimage-related practices on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram suggests that devotees' creative use of new digital tools and eager embrace of virtual spaces/platforms fuels pilgrimage. It facilitates communication, organization, and promotion while offering new opportunities for expression, mutual support, and community.

Our findings reside at the nexus of new trends in the study of digital religion and innovative approaches to pilgrimage. The key is to focus on how pilgrimage incorporates ritualized and non-ritualized practices and provides "articulation" between behaviors, beliefs, and narrative forms. Pilgrimage is centrally about interrelationships: its practices emerge and grow through associations between activities and institutions. From this perspective, pilgrimage endures because it links processes and structures in wider society and evolves alongside them. It is marked by variety and possibility through its ongoing interplay with, and dependence on, social realms deemed secular, such as political and economic relations (Coleman 2022, 6-9).

Campbell (2012a) is not expressly concerned with pilgrimage, but she inadvertently echoes Coleman. She focuses on how virtual religious experience and practice reframe religion. Her conclusions about "networked religion" overlap with Coleman's understanding of "articulation." Both home in on interconnections between distinct spheres, and the flow of

information, practices, and expressive forms between them. Campbell suggests we attend carefully to how networked communities work, serialized self-fashioning online, shifting contexts of authority, ongoing hybridity, and multisite experienced realities. Our analysis of pilgrimage on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram speaks directly to these issues and details how devotees use each platform and make wider connections.

We reveal that Facebook, given its open, multi-media design, and flexible approach to personal and group formation, is the most important platform regarding Juquila's devotion. It serves the hub for pilgrims, allowing easy sharing from other platforms. There are less posts on YouTube, but its specialization on video hosting offers an ideal space for celebrating, narrating, and promoting trips to the shrine. Hence it offers a unique expressive space for DIY filmmakers. Pilgrims use Instagram least of all because it is less useful to organized groups. Nonetheless, individual devotees seeking a curated space to share with a select group embrace the platform. Our findings also provide a powerful example of how pilgrimage and tourism (as well as pilgrimage and commerce more broadly) intertwine and blur. We discovered an abiding, even freewheeling, openness to borrow, remix and repurpose tropes, music, ritual, visual forms, and narratives structures with little concern for content origin. Even Protestant popular music is fair game.

In sum, we offer a continuity and change argument. Access to smart phones, social media platforms, computers, and software is fueling pilgrimage while reshaping the way devotees communicate and learn about Juquila and her devotion. It is still too early to know if fundamental transformations will emerge. It merely appears that devotees are expanding and enlivening pilgrimage with new tools—tools that are reshaping other realms of social interaction. Perhaps the proverbial table is set for dramatic changes to come.

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