Popes as Public Diplomats: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Vatican's Foreign Engagement and Storytelling

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This study explores the duality of Vatican public relations by contextualizing the papacy as a hybrid political and religious office. It analyzes papal speeches since the Vatican II Council to understand the engagement practices and strategic narratives employed during trips abroad. Descriptive statistics of 1,307 speeches spanning 114 countries were analyzed, while textual analysis was conducted on 120 systematically sampled speeches. Overall, papal rhetoric has changed minimally since 1964, highlighting key Catholic social teaching through narrative continuity. This helps to establish the Vatican's moral legitimacy and build stronger, long-term relationships between publics and Catholicism, as an object of devotion. While its content strategy has changed marginally, the papacy's travel and audience selection tactics have evolved to be more focused on everyday publics and interfaith relationship-building. This personifies the pope as the Vatican's primary public diplomat in the modern era and expands scholarship on storytelling at the intersection of public relations and religion.

Keywords: political public relations, government public relations, public diplomacy, Catholic Church, strategic narratives, religious diplomacy, faith diplomacy

The Catholic Church has perhaps more influence and international brand recognition than any other organization in the world. As head of the Vatican, the pope is both the sovereign head of the Holy See and the theological leader of a faith spanning more than one billion members (Glatz, 2021). The pope is invested with significant influence both politically and religiously. Understanding the papacy's engagement practices abroad offers insight into understanding the pope and the Holy See as public diplomacy actors; that is, those who engage with foreign audiences to curate a positive image and affinity toward the Vatican. It also aids in conceptualizing the Vatican as an international stakeholder in both politics and religion as well as the rhetorical means through which the Catholic Church has used the pope as a public diplomat to engage with a modern and increasingly secular world.

For a centuries-old institution, John Paul II did much to modernize Catholicism and grow its brand exposure in contemporary media ecologies. He was "the Vatican's rock star" (Snyder, 2005, para. 18), "a great global diplomat" (Clafliln, 2005, para. 1), and the "Media Pope" (Bösch, 2020, p. 45). Similar accolades are attributed to Pope Francis: He has been referred to as an "Internet rock star" in *Vogue*, (Ruiz, 2015,

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para. 1) and has appeared on the Top 10 Global Public Diplomacy Actors list multiple times (Amiri, 2015). Francis' papacy is notable as he was the first to pioneer the digitalization of papal-to-public communications, with @Pontifex on Twitter and @Franciscus on Instagram (De Franco, 2020). While seldom acknowledged, however, it was Pope Paul VI, following the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (Vatican II) in 1964, who opened both the papacy and the Vatican to foreign publics (Barbato, 2020).

The theological framework paving the way for popes as public diplomats extends from the Vatican II Council. Recognizing society's shift toward secularization and desires for more meaningful two-way engagement, the Vatican responded with modern outreach and engagement policies to foster mutually beneficial interactions between itself and a broader scope of publics (Weigel, 2022). Five key policies were born out of the council, instructing the Vatican on how to better engage and build long-lasting relationships with the ever-modernizing world, non-Christians, secular states and theocracies of divergent faiths, and lay publics (Hehir, 2016). These policies manifested in, among other things, expanding travel and changing audience-selection tactics. This aligns with the core definitions of public relations practice (Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], 2023). The Vatican's public-engaging shift placed the pope as the religious state's primary public diplomat.

Golan, Arceneaux, and Soule (2018) acknowledge the role Pope Francis has played in navigating the Holy See as a political entity and the Catholic Church as a world faith through recent scandals from sexual abuse to money laundering, fraud, and extortion. What that study lacks, however, is a long-term understanding of how Vatican diplomacy has manifested and evolved since the dawn of the pope as a public diplomat: Paul VI through Francis. This study fills that gap via a longitudinal analysis spanning 1964–2021.

Furthermore, the pope fills a two-part role. He serves as the political head of state for both the Roman Curia (executive bureaucracy) and the Holy See (universal government) of Vatican City as well as the bishop of Rome for the Catholic Church. There are times when the pope is statesman and times when he is clergy. This study explores the fluidity, perhaps better explained as the duality, of the papacy in filling such roles while on foreign trips. The context of the papacy as a public diplomat affords it greater latitude to move back and forth between the two. Overall, this study provides longitudinal insights into the role of public relations by the pope as a function of Vatican diplomacy.

Literature Review

To understand the pope as the Vatican's key public diplomacy actor, one must first understand the context of public relations embedded within public diplomacy. Public relations involves external-facing organizational communications that seek to build long-term, two-way, mutually beneficial relationships with key publics and stakeholders by managing image and reputation as well as public expectations of organizational performance (Botan & Sommerfeldt, 2023). Public diplomacy is the public relations of and for nations in international contexts; that is, how nations build long-lasting relationships with foreign publics while also managing their global image, reputation, and expectations (Arceneaux, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2007).

This politicization of international public relations involves managing a country's image and reputational security in the eyes of foreign audiences (Cull, 2019). Public diplomacy traditionally focuses on

state actors as its primary unit of analysis; Fitzpatrick (2007) adopted a relationship management framework, positioning non-state actors as increasingly managing both national image and reputational security. This can range from corporations to nongovernmental organizations or even diasporas.

For example, Fitzpatrick, White, and Bier (2020) explore the role executives fulfill in building corporate identities, brands, and host-country relationships via multinational corporate communications. Huang (2022) outlines the role the Confucius Institutes play in recontextualizing corporate social responsibility through the promotion of Chinese cultural diplomacy. And Dolea (2022) highlights the role the United Kingdom's Romanian diaspora plays as an independent force of Romanian identity and culture abroad.

Religion has also seen growing attention under this new framework (Golan et al., 2018; Hoesterey, 2020; Liwan, 2021). To that end, the distinction between state and non-state is not always binary. The Vatican offers a unique case for analysis (Conway, 1979; Graham, 1959; Lóránd, 2019; Niessen, 1994).

Where religious organizations are largely non-state actors, the Vatican is a one-of-a-kind dual organization, with Vatican City hosting the Roman Curia and Holy See as well as the Catholic Church. The Holy See, established by the bureaucracy of the Roman Curia, enjoys political sovereignty as a state actor. The Catholic Church, or the religious congregation of the Vatican, comprises 17% of the global population (Glatz, 2021). As head of the Vatican, the pope is simultaneously a democratically elected head of state and a theocratic leader to one of the largest faiths on the planet. This raises questions about the lenses through which the Vatican, and its public diplomacy efforts, should be studied.

The dual function of the papacy as a political and religious office is highlighted in former speaker John Boehner's recounting of the negotiations to bring Pope Francis before Congress in 2015. The Republican leadership would not allow a papal address were he to speak as the head of the Catholic Church. In a change of optics, however, he could address Congress as the head of the Vatican, a political state (American Jesuit Review, 2019). This highlights the duality, or what Troy (2018) calls hybridity, of the pope within the Vatican's foreign engagement. While this nexus is referenced here as Vatican diplomacy, prior research has used Popecraft (Rau, 2015), papal diplomacy (De Franco, 2020), Holy See diplomacy (Troy, 2018), and Holy See foreign policy (Cahill, 2017).

Vatican II Council

Though Catholicism was founded on social egalitarianism, the establishment of the Vatican as a European world power distanced the papacy from the public. Both it and the Roman Curia were elevated to aristocracy, and thus focused engagement on monarchies and high society (Collins, 2009). Likewise, papal travel was largely nonexistent. For the first 500 years following the establishment of Rome as the head of Catholicism, no pope willingly left the city (Thomas, 2007). It was not until another 500 years later that Pope Urban II traveled through Europe to support the First Crusade (Lewis, 1984).

Even more recently, papal engagement outside the Vatican has been rare. Following the loss of the papal states during the Italian unification, relations between the papacy and the Italian government were bitter. Rejecting Italian citizenship and opposing optics to the contrary, no pope left Vatican City or appeared

in St. Peter's Square for 59 years. This span is referred to as the prisoner in the Vatican (Collins, 2020). While hostilities with the Italian state resolved in 1929, it would be another 35 years before the first pope left Vatican City.

While the role and visibility of the modern papacy have been associated with Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis, the dawn of the pope as the Vatican's key public diplomacy tool began in 1964 following the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. Recognizing the growing divide between itself and the modern world, Pope John XXIII convened the council to modernize the Vatican's outreach and public engagement. "I expect a little fresh air from it. . . . We must shake off the imperial dust that has accumulated on the throne of St. Peter" (Mursell, 2020, p. 7). Following Pope John XXIII's death, Vatican II was administered by Pope Paul VI.

Several policies were adopted from the council, with five designed to foster a more open and publicly engaging Vatican (Hehir, 2016). The first, the Decree on the Media of Social Communication (*Inter mirifica)* directed the Vatican to use more forms of mass media (press, movies, television, etc.) to better engage publics in social spaces. The second, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), and third, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*) mandated how the Vatican was to turn outward and engage more with publics across the globe, specifically non-Christians.

Fourth, the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*) articulated Vatican policy for increased engagement with secular states as well as theocracies of other faiths. Fifth, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam actuositatem*) outlined a means by which the Vatican would engage with lay publics, as opposed to the clergy, to carry out the Catholic faith and social teachings. Taken in stride, these five policy adoptions illustrate a proactive attempt by the Vatican to engage in more modern and effective relationship building with a wider and more diverse set of publics and stakeholders.

Pope Paul VI actively pioneered the role of the Vatican's first public diplomat. He became the first pope to leave Rome in a century, the first ever to fly, and the first to visit the Holy Land since St. Peter (Barbato, 2020). From a soft power perspective, foreign trips constitute effective ways of engaging with global audiences beyond the walls of Vatican City. It is the "key instrument for mobilizing masses, spreading messages, and shaping public Catholic identities" (Barbato, 2020, p. 525). Chong (2010) asserts that small states like the Vatican are ideal for engaging in virtual enlargement, that is, expanded influence beyond the limits of its geographic territory. One means for using a small state's soft power is through the communication of strategic narratives while on state visits.

Strategic Narratives

In seeking influence through attraction, public diplomacy actors apply strategic communications to craft colorful, emotional, and moving stories that resonate with foreign audiences. This merges both verbal rhetoric with nonverbal, symbolic contexts embedded in rituals. Actors build packages of scripted messages that are designed to both resonate with audiences and outperform competing narratives. Such stories are what Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2017) refer to as strategic narratives.

Strategic narratives are storytelling tactics for populating discursive narrative arcs that contain *agents* (characters), *scenes* (environments), *acts* (conflict or action), *agency* (tools or behavior), and *purpose* (resolutions or goals; Miskimmon et al., 2017). This creates a shared perception or interpretation of reality that motivates behavior in strategically desirable ways. This is done by illustrating a collective past, a perceived present, and an emotionally charged (positive or negative) future. That is, strategic narratives bind time, creating shared meaning to guide attitudes and behaviors (Miskimmon et al., 2017).

A component of strategic narratives, going to the foundation of eliciting attitudinal or behavioral changes, is the implication of values, that is, belief systems, within storytelling. Based on value propositions, audience attitudes and behaviors are not modified by *what* an actor does or *how* they do it; instead, audiences are best influenced by *why* they do it (Straker & Nusem, 2019). Effectively communicating what an actor believes can be a formidable soft power tool in achieving public diplomacy goals. For an institution like the Vatican, which is largely built on moral authority, communicating its value structures through strategic narratives is vital for establishing its legitimacy (Price, 2014).

The Vatican, however, does more than just communicate Catholic values. It tries to build relationships between the faith and the faithful. Morehouse (2021) provides evidence of the role religious organizations play in cultivating relationships between publics and an object of devotion. This can range from specific religions (Catholicism) to religious figures (Jesus Christ), texts (Bible), or artifacts (Shroud of Turin). This study suggests the pope as a public diplomat serves a twofold purpose. The first is to establish the Vatican's moral legitimacy by managing the organization's image, reputation, and public expectations of behavior. It also, however, involves a theological component—helping publics to discover and experience the Catholic faith. It does so by sharing strategic narratives that communicate value systems at the heart of Catholicism, enumerated in Catholic social teaching.

The principles of Catholic social teaching include the following seven themes: (1) life and dignity of the human person, (2) calls to family, community, and participation, (3) human rights and responsibilities, (4) options for the poor and vulnerable, (5) the dignity of work and the rights of workers, (6) solidarity, and (7) care for God's creation (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). These are the moral value propositions that are likely embedded within papal strategic narratives, representing Vatican diplomacy more broadly.

Exploring these strategic narratives, this study advances scholarship on Vatican diplomacy in three ways. First, the study offers a longitudinal analysis, studying papal foreign engagement from 1964 to 2021. Second, this study focuses beyond the soft power of a single pope to understand the papacy as a living, organic institution evolving across four bishops of Rome: Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Third, the study uses a multidisciplinary approach to understand papal foreign engagement in terms of the political versus religious capacities of the office. Based on this distinction, the study explores shifts in papal travel, audience selection, and rhetoric.

The scope of the papacy presents a unique fluidity that allows the pope to shift between religious and political capacities, most often blurred somewhere between the two (American Jesuit Review, 2019). Still yet, there are times when clear demarcations are necessary to ensure access and exposure (Goldstein,

2008). While Vatican diplomacy may be welcomed in Catholic-heavy countries like Poland, Cuba, or the Philippines, it must rebrand its outreach when engaging with secular governments like the United States, China, and Russia, or societies of divergent religions, such as Israel, Pakistan, or India. While foreign trips have grown alongside the increasing personalization of the papacy (Thomson, 2018), there is merit in understanding how papal audience selection has shifted over time, given the increasingly public-facing nature of Vatican diplomacy. As such, this article asks the following research questions:

RQ1:   How has papal foreign engagement evolved in audience selection between 1964 and 2021?

RQ2:   How has papal engagement ranged geographically between 1964 and 2021?

While research on individual popes is not uncommon (Golan et al., 2018), minimal work has analyzed institutional papal rhetoric across time. Pope Francis' creation of @Pontifex and @Franciscus has been the focus of scholarly research (De Franco, 2020), yet such study has been contextually limited to his papacy alone. Strategic narratives' multilayered framework for discursive engagement is a viable conceptual tool for studying papal storytelling (Miskimmon et al., 2017). As such, this article asks another research question:

RQ3:   How has papal rhetoric, via strategic narratives, evolved between 1964 and 2021?

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis to identify strategic narratives used in Vatican diplomacy between 1964 and 2021. This involves analyzing primary data for informational cues conveying either manifest or latent meaning in the textual form. It allows scholars to identify, catalog, and map rhetoric within public diplomacy (Golan et al., 2018; Huang & Wang, 2022; Manfredi-Sánchez & Smith, 2022). Such an approach offers an exploratory look at the storytelling components of the papacy's discursive content strategy.

Applying a qualitative method offers an inductive lens for identifying the narrative themes and patterns woven throughout papal discourse. Since strategic narratives are fluid constructs using explicit and implicit communication devices in overlapping stories (Miskimmon et al., 2017), they are highly complex and, at times, elusive phenomena to grasp. Textual analyses allow for a greater and more nuanced understanding of Vatican diplomacy (Lin, 2012). Furthermore, and specific to public diplomacy and international communication, using an inductive approach provides a more receptive methodology for the nuances of cross-cultural understanding (Arceneaux & Bier, 2021).

Textual analyses also offer an approach for extrapolating "the interpretation of a reality in a message" (Bier, Park, & Palenchar, 2018, p. 160). Strategic narratives are tool sets that create the stories organizations seek to share; investigating these stories in this context allows for a window of understanding into the mediated realities popes have tried to create as a function of Vatican diplomacy. Textual analysis is apt for exploring, mapping, and cataloging these discursive realities (Chandra & Shang, 2019).

Data Collection and Sampling

Data were collected from the Vatican's digital archives (Vatican Digital Archives, 2022). Spanning the state visits and ecclesiastical missions from the papacy of Paul VI to that of Francis, that is, 1964–2021, $N = 1{,}307$ speeches spanning 114 countries were collected. The unit of analysis is each individual speech delivered by the pope. The speeches were coded for geographic location and primary audience, while a subsample was coded for strategic narratives. This allowed for a preliminary understanding of the collected data field. For example, the more repetitive and/or consistent an identified narrative was, the more likely it was to be identified as an intentional strategic narrative.

For geographic location and primary audience, the entire data set ($N = 1{,}307$) was analyzed based on speech titles and metadata tags in the Vatican archives. Conversely, a subsample of the data set ($n = 120$) was analyzed for strategic narratives, comprising 30 speeches from each pope selected through systematic random sampling. These were identified by every nth datapoint evenly dispersing 30 speeches across each respective pope's total. While this number follows Golan et al.'s (2018) method, it was reaffirmed here when it reached saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

While coding location and primary audience were manifest variables, the speeches themselves were considerably longer, with an $M = 4{,}840$ word count per speech. In addition, strategic narratives tend to present intermixing levels of both latent and manifest stories. The speeches heavily displayed literary devices such as imagery, metaphor, anecdote, and other such items, thus needing extensive unpacking and interpretation. This required careful analysis and multiple rounds of comparison; as such, the full data set was not practical as a means for analyzing strategic narratives.

Thematic Coding

Coding addressed one of three capacities: The audience, location, and strategic narratives embedded within a speech. Codes for classifying the target audiences of a speech were developed inductively and identified based on the heading of each speech as published in the Vatican's digital archives. These codes included the Catholic clergy, diplomatic corps, political elites, non-Catholic denominations, the news media, and the public broadly defined.

Catholic clergy was identified in speeches delivered to members of the clergy: cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and seminarians. Diplomatic corps were identified in speeches delivered to diplomats or at embassies and consulates in a host country. Political elites were identified in speeches delivered to royalty, heads of state, congressional or parliamentarian bodies, or elected representative officials of regional or local governments. Non-Catholic denominations were identified in any speeches delivered to official representatives of faiths spanning Protestant Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and so on, or organized lay groups of such faiths. The news media were identified in speeches delivered to members of the press. Lastly, the public was distinguished by means of speeches delivered in overt, publicly accessible venues. These often took place at schools, universities, hospitals, public monuments, large-venue arenas, community centers, and prisons and correctional facilities, among others.

Locations for speeches were identified as the country in which a given speech was delivered by the pope, as reported in metadata tagged in the Vatican archives. One hundred and fourteen countries were identified, spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and Australia/Oceania. Of note, not all countries visited by the pope since 1964 exist in 2021, however, continent designations remain applicable for geotagging speeches during coding.

Finally, strategic narratives were identified based on the salience of seven themes embedded within Catholic social teaching (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Life and dignity of the human person were identified in speeches advocating for the protection of human life, addressing issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, war, and so on. Call to family, community, and participation was identified in speeches advocating for marriage and the traditional family unit, building communities based on the common good, and helping one's fellow brothers and sisters. Human rights and responsibilities were identified in speeches advocating for the protection of the most basic universal rights: Life, liberty, personal security, and social equality, among others. Options for the poor and vulnerable were identified in speeches advocating for economic egalitarianism and care for the homeless, starving, and otherwise destitute as well as for those with disabilities or challenges that limit their advancement in society.

The dignity of work and the rights of workers were identified in speeches that advocated for the rights of lower classes above the poor homeless. This translates to fair wages, safety of work conditions, the right to unionize, and the right to own private property for all. Solidarity was identified in speeches that advocated for one human family spanning across nations, races, ethnicities, incomes, or ideologies. The core of this theme was the pursuit of justice in the process of peacemaking. Lastly, care for God's creation was identified in speeches that advocated for stewardship of the planet and all its creatures. Environmental preservation, animal protection, and combating climate change are standard components of this theme.

Speeches were analyzed jointly by two coders. They were trained in how to extrapolate location and audience from the archive metadata. They were also trained on the seven themes of Catholic social teaching. A subsample ($n = 25$) was mutually coded with the researcher as part of the training process. Consistent with prior literature (Fürsich, 2009; Golan et al., 2018; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2008), an agreement between the coders was necessary for a strategic narrative to be considered present and coded appropriately. As coding was not conducted independently, traditional measures for intercoder reliability were not applicable. Rather, the number of instances where the coders required the researcher's assistance to reach an agreement were cataloged and used to determine a percent agreement of 0.9. This reflects a collaborative intersubjective agreement between coders (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Intersubjectivity provides both validity and reliability within the context of an inductive methodology (Demetrious, 2021) as an approach to more rigorous qualitative research (Arceneaux & Bier, 2021).

Validity and reliability were additionally supplemented through constant and consistent comparisons of papal speeches. A foundation of qualitative research, the constant comparative method provides a methodological pathway for the creation of new knowledge within the research process (Arceneaux, 2021; Plowman, 2013; Seo, 2014). Continuous analysis, comparison, and revision of understanding provide for a finely nuanced understanding of contextual components within a communicative text, like storytelling and narratives (Belgrave & Seide, 2018).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were run on the full data set (*N* = 1,307) for speech audience and location. Next, the subsample (*n* = 120) of papal speeches was analyzed for the presence and distribution of narrative story arcs as manifested by strategic narratives. This allowed for an inductive, exploratory capacity for understanding papal speeches. The more consistent or salient one of the seven Catholic social teachings was, the more it was classified as an intended, purposeful strategic narrative (Bier et al., 2018). Following analysis, the identified social teachings were assessed for salience across each respective pope's foreign engagement. The researcher then categorized them in terms of the most and second-most salient per pope. These were identified as the primary strategic narrative (most salient), secondary strategic narratives (second-most salient), or tertiary (remaining salience).

Results

RQ1 asked how papal engagement evolved in audience selection between 1964 and 2021. Based on an analysis of the full data set (*N* = 1,307), descriptive statistics report strong evidence for the role of the pope as a public diplomat since 1964, with approximately 53% of speeches targeting the public. In descending order, audience selection proceeded as follows: 21% comprised the Catholic clergy, 11% was political elites, 9% was non-Catholic audiences, 5% was diplomatic corps, and just less than 1% comprised the press. A breakdown by pope is provided in Figure 1.
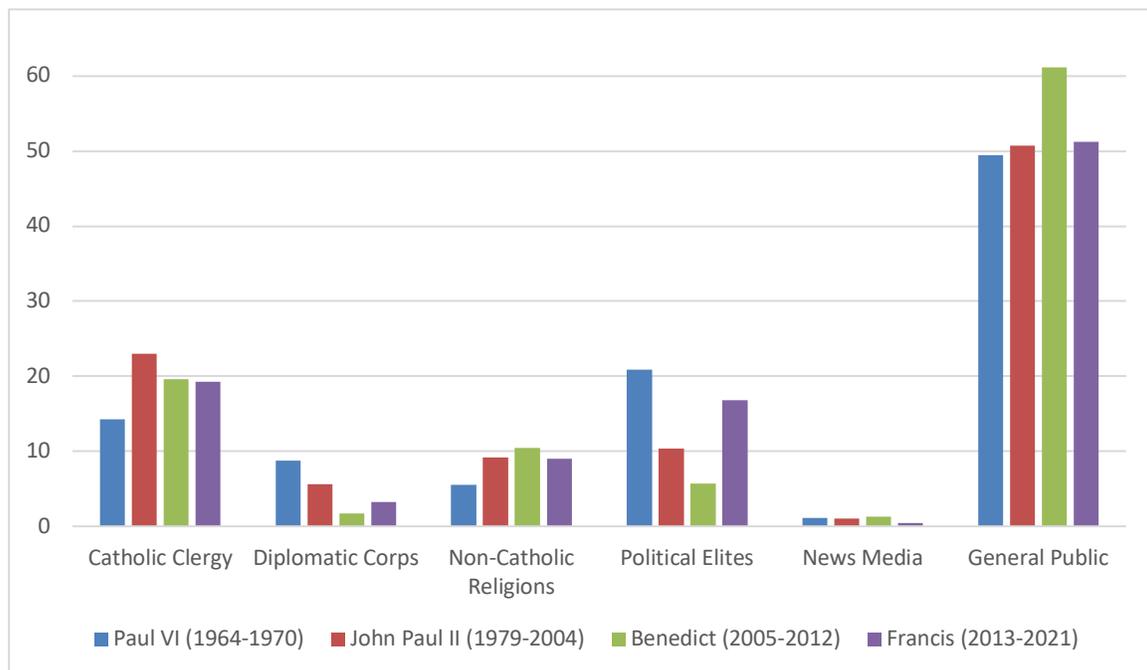

Figure 1. Percentages of papal speeches in terms of target audience.

Pope Benedict XVI targeted 61% of his speeches at the public, as compared with popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Francis, whose public-targeted speeches ranged between 49% and 51%. This suggests Pope Benedict XVI was arguably the Vatican's most "public" diplomat since Vatican II. This is somewhat counterintuitive, not only because of his lack of popularity compared with Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis but also because of his theological stances. Advocating for more conservative dogma, Pope Benedict XVI was accused during his papacy of slowing the reforms established during Vatican II and limiting dialogue with non-Catholics (Pullella, 2013). Findings here suggest that despite his more traditional theological nature, Benedict XVI's papacy and foreign engagement were the pinnacle of the modern pope as the Vatican's leading public diplomat.

Additionally, the capacity of the papacy as an exclusively political or diplomatic actor diminished consistently from popes Paul VI through Benedict. Likewise, speeches to non-Catholic religions increased over time, showing intentional efforts to enact Vatican II's tenet of *Nostra aetate.* This trend changed somewhat during Pope Francis' papacy, which saw a substantial increase in speeches delivered to heads of state and congressional/parliamentarian bodies, enumerating the policy of *Dignitatis humanae*. On a more minimal scale, Pope Francis also increased his addresses to purely diplomatic audiences.

RQ2 asked how papal engagement ranged geographically between 1964 and 2021. Based on analysis of the full data set ($N = 1,307$), descriptive statistics for location also provide evidence for the role of the pope as a public diplomat. At an aggregate, continental level, approximately 34% of the papal speeches were delivered across Europe. In descending order, collective geographic targeting proceeded as follows: 22% in Asia, 17% in North America, 16% in Africa, 6% in South America, and 5% across Australia and Oceania.

Pope Paul VI gave 50% of his speeches during trips to Asia, with a combined 29% delivered across Africa and the south Pacific. He devoted only 14% of his speeches to Europe and North America. In contrast, Pope John Paul II gave 53% of his speeches in Europe and North America, with a combined 36% evenly divided across Africa and Asia. Pope Benedict XVI further favored Europe, delivering 55% of his speeches in the region, as compared with 17% in Asia, 10% in Africa, and 9% in the United States. Lastly, Pope Francis presented a staggered-tier system. He delivered 25% and 24% of his speeches across Europe and Asia, respectively. Unlike any of his predecessors, however, Pope Francis emphasized a public diplomat role in his home of South America, delivering 22% of his speeches across the continent. He then gave 13% of his speeches in Africa and another 13% in North America. A breakdown by continent is provided in Figure 2.
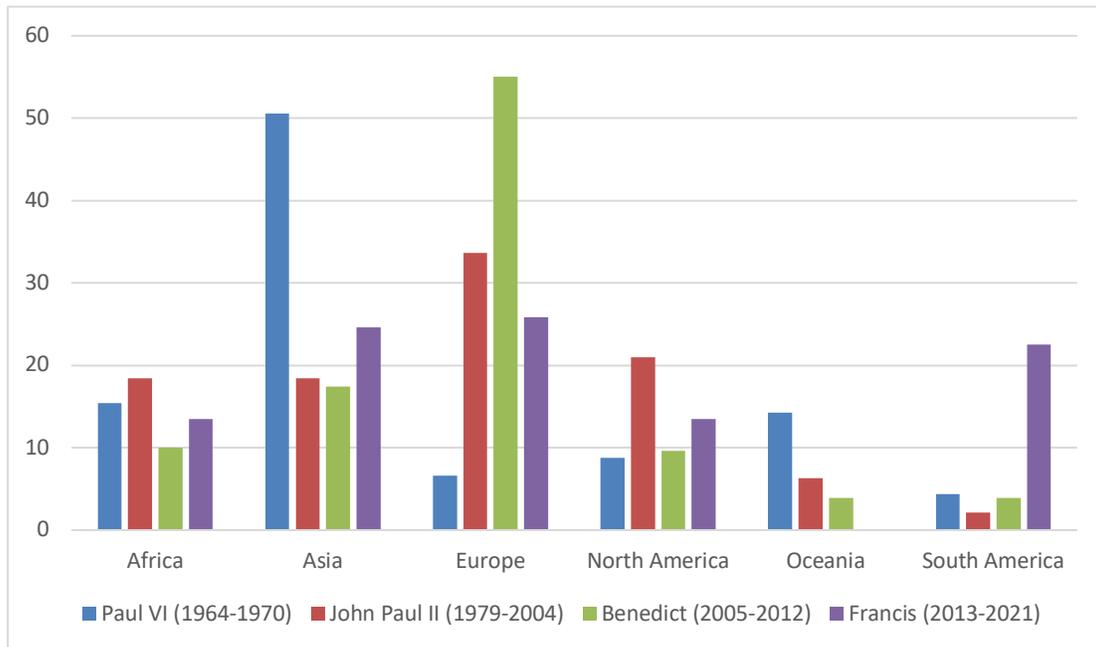
Figure 2. Percentages of papal speeches in terms of region.

While a wider lens suggests the centrality of Europe in papal foreign engagement, a more granular analysis at the country level leads to other conclusions. When looking at each pope's top countries by the number of speeches given, geographic diversity is more evident. Pope Paul VI's most concentrated foreign engagement was in Asia (India, the Philippines, and Indonesia; $n = 38$), while John Paul II concentrated on North America (the United States, Mexico, and Canada; $n = 145$). Likewise, Benedict XVI concentrated on Europe (Germany, Spain, Great Britain, Poland, and Portugal; $n = 84$), while Francis concentrated on South and Central America (Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Panama, Colombia, and Bolivia; $n = 37$).

Additionally, most popes' lists of the most concentrated engagements included at least one country from Oceana, while popes Paul VI and John Paul II's included an African nation. This highlights a distinct pattern of transition across popes, with each of the last four popes focusing their foreign engagements across four different continents. A breakdown is provided in Figure 3.
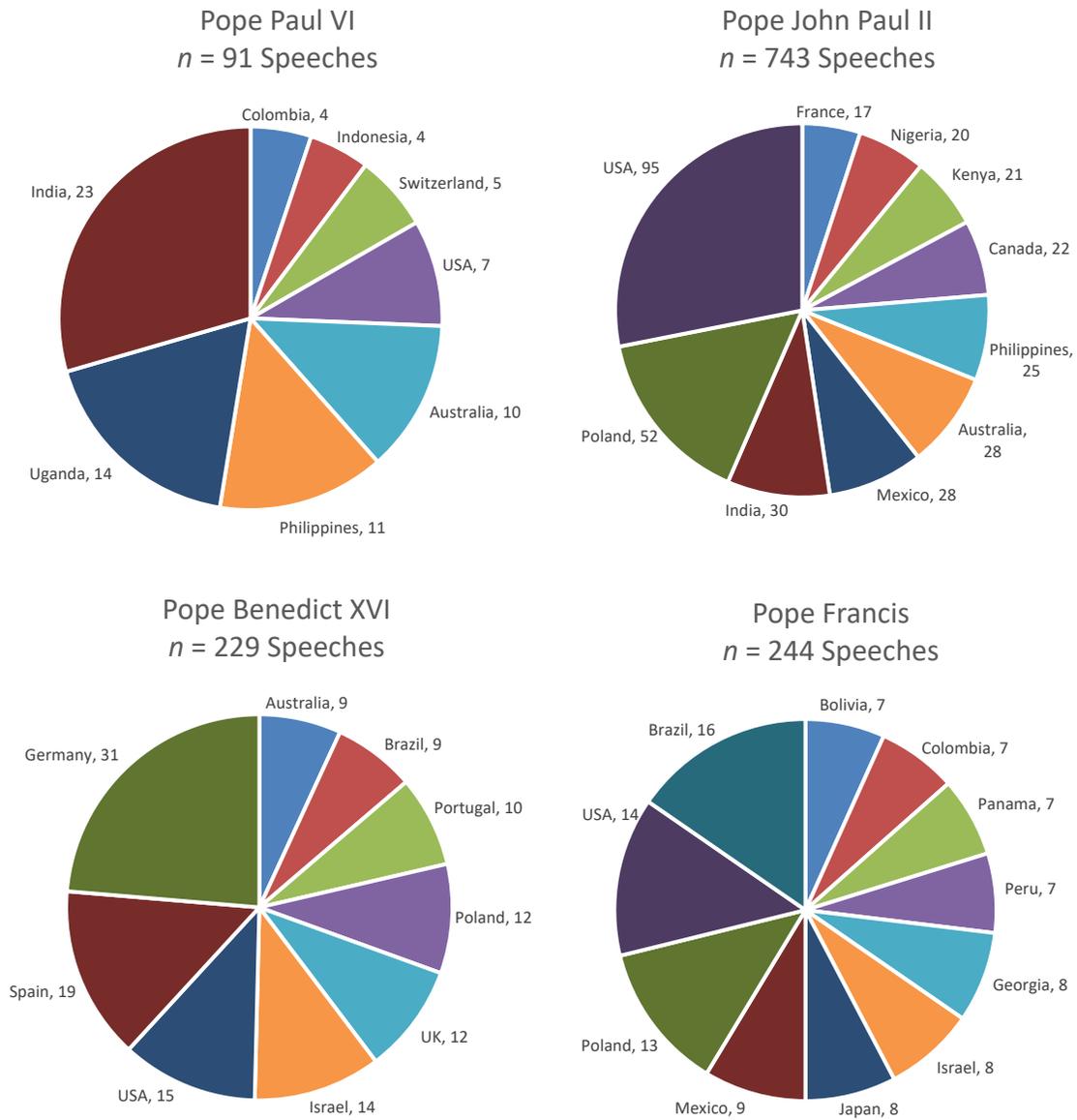
Pope Paul VI
n = 91 Speeches

Pope John Paul II
n = 743 Speeches

Pope Benedict XVI
n = 229 Speeches

Pope Francis
n = 244 Speeches

Figure 3. Top countries by concentration in papal speeches.

While policies emanating from Vatican II stressed global exposure, there are mixed conclusions on the Vatican's success in this area. At a continental level, popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis all favored Europe over other regions of the world, suggesting limitations on the outreach of Vatican diplomacy. Outside of Pope John Paul II, Asia consistently came in second behind Europe, with varying levels of

exposure across North and South America, Africa, and the south Pacific. At the country level, however, each pope concentrated the bulk of their foreign engagement in countries that represented a more diverse geographic makeup, in effect, supporting the concept of Vatican diplomacy outreach. This would seem to suggest that while there were substantive changes in audience selection tactics, there were also variations in the geographic targeting of papal foreign engagement.

RQ3 asked how papal rhetoric, via strategic narratives, evolved between 1964 and 2021. Analysis for this research question was based on a subsample of 120 speeches; 30 speeches across all four papacies were identified through systematic random sampling. The data showed high salience of narratives on the dignity and rights of workers in Pope Paul VI's speeches. Several of his speeches were delivered to labor organizations and workers' unions while on tour in Asia. In these speeches, he equated Catholic values as tantamount to equality in the protection of workers. Pope Paul VI advocated for the dignity of work and the rights of workers. He did this, however, by also making salient the value of life and the dignity of the human. As he suggests, all people contribute to society by serving those around them.

The universality of humanity was also notably salient in Pope Paul VI's speeches. He consistently used plural, inclusive language (we, our, us) when engaging with audiences, and he used broader narratives on the trials facing humanity, in terms of both faith and society alike. Based on the salience of the universality of faith as a saving factor in the modern world, Pope Paul VI created discursive stories by using strategic narratives on caring for God's creation and a call for community participation and cooperation. Through storytelling centered on the rights of lay workers and the dignity of life within egalitarian communities of mutual service, Pope Paul VI embodied *Gaudium et spes* and *Apostolicam actuositatem* by directing everyday lay publics outside the contextual confines of Catholicism to engage in moral behavior in harmony with Christian values.

Pope John Paul II's foreign engagement was defined by strategic narratives surrounding calls to family and community. As he frequently made salient, family is the basic building block of all communities. And as a building block of local communities, families are, in fact, building blocks of society itself. It is by caring for the family at a micro level that we can begin to address and fix societal issues at a macro level.

Beyond addressing the nuclear family as the core building block of both society and faith, Pope John Paul II expanded this to the state level, referencing his broader Polish community as a family. This illustrates intertwining strategic narratives, merging core social values of family and its participation in creating a community with *Dignitatis humanae*, or engaging states themselves in the work of faith and society.

Pope Benedict's foreign engagement was defined by a more traditional commitment to the sanctity and dignity of life. The gift of humanity, the communal race, according to his speeches, have a value that cannot be replaced and he stressed that as such, all efforts have to be made to protect life and ensure the right to life. In building strategic narratives on the value of human life and dignity, Pope Benedict's messages often placed notable salience on universal human rights and responsibilities, advocacy for the poor and vulnerable, and solidarity.

With a more traditional focus on the sanctity and dignity of human life, Pope Benedict's rhetoric did not as overtly enumerate Vatican II policies. Taking into consideration his significant targeting of external, lay public audiences during his foreign trips, however, a more holistic overview would suggest that the pope personified *Gaudium et spes* and *Apostolicam actuositatem* in targeting his rhetoric at these publics.

Foreign engagement by Pope Francis was defined by a salient commitment to family and equality within the community. Like Pope John Paul II, Francis suggested that centralizing attention on the health and well-being of the family unit was the fundamental step needed to tackle all other challenges and pressing issues in society. Pope Francis also spoke about matters beyond the nuclear family, in that he speaks of the construction of inclusive communities as families. Importantly, these communities include components of universal diversity, equity, and inclusion as they constitute participatory social units spanning different races, ethnicities, and religions. Through this construction of larger communal groups that span religious, racial, ethnic, and national barriers, Pope Francis enumerates *Gaudium et spes*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, and *Nostra aetate*. The overall salience of strategic narrative by pope is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Strategic Narratives by Pope.

	Life and Dignity of the Human Person	Call to Family, Community, and Participation	Rights and Responsibilities	Option for the Poor and Vulnerable	The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers	Solidarity	Care for God's Creation
Paul VI	Secondary	Tertiary	Tertiary	Tertiary	Primary	Tertiary	Tertiary
John Paul II	Tertiary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Tertiary	Secondary	Tertiary
Benedict XVI	Primary	Tertiary	Secondary	Secondary	Tertiary	Secondary	Tertiary
Francis I	Tertiary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Tertiary	Secondary	Tertiary

Overall, two metanarratives remained consistent in papal foreign engagement between 1964 and 2021. The first is recognizing the value in life and treating living things with dignity. The second is the role of families and communities within global society. At a more micro level, however, there were variations.

Pope Paul VI emphasized the value and dignity of workers and their inherent rights to unionize to protect their interests. Popes John Paul II and Francis emphasized a tiered system within society: Family builds community, community builds society, and societies build our humanity with faith and morality. And Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the value and dignity of people, advocating for the protection of the right to life, addressing such issues as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and war. Papal rhetoric overall has changed minimally over the last half-century, consistently emphasizing the morality of Catholic social teaching. There have been, however, moderate shifts in how consecutive popes chose to personalize overarching themes through varying strategic narratives. Micro-level similarities were observed between popes Paul VI and Benedict XVI and popes John Paul II and Francis.

Discussion

This article offers a longitudinal analysis of the pope as the Vatican's primary public diplomat. It studies the audiences, destinations, and strategic narratives in the foreign engagements of popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, spanning 1964–2021. Where the Vatican is one of the oldest continually operated organizations in the world, the birth of the modern papacy challenges its more historically conservative and exclusive practices. As such, this article brings a strategic communications lens to bear on the historical practice of public engagement within Vatican diplomacy.

Though popes John Paul II and Francis are the faces of the modern papacy, it was Pope Paul VI who revolutionized the papacy to be the Vatican's leading public diplomat. He was the first pope in more than a century to leave Rome, the first since St. Peter to visit the Holy Land, and the first pope ever to fly. This shift in external Vatican relations is a direct byproduct of policy shifts emerging from the Vatican II Council, convened by Pope John XXIII to modernize the Vatican's outward engagement. Following Pope John XXIII's death, Vatican II was administered by Pope Paul VI. Vatican II produced modern policies for improved relationship building through social communication (*Inter mirifica*) with the peoples across the world (*Gaudium et spes*), lay Catholics (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), non-Christians (*Nostra aetate*), and secular as well as divergent theocratic states (*Dignitatis humanae*).

Understanding Vatican II as the birth of the modern Vatican provides a starting point to study the pope as a public diplomat. That is, this study offers insights into the outreach and engagement practices of the papacy since the conclusion of Vatican II in 1964. Basing this time as the turning point in papal foreign engagement, this study investigates three core areas. First, it looks for patterns in the kinds of audiences the popes spoke to while abroad. Second, it looks for patterns in the geographic delivery of papal speeches to better understand the outreach practices of a global faith. Third, it mines papal speeches for strategic narratives, that is, how the pope uses storytelling to convey Catholic social values and teachings. This papal engagement seeks to establish moral legitimacy by managing the Vatican's image and reputation while also creating relationships between the public and Catholicism.

Primary Insights

This study's primary insight is strong support for the role of the pope as a public diplomat. More directly, since 1964, the papacy has functioned as the Vatican's primary public relations actor on the world stage, communicating with more Catholic lay and non-Catholic audiences across a wider geographic space. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have defined a new kind of papacy, one built on outward engagement with the larger world, which favors long-term, bidirectional relationship building. This mirrors the intent of the Vatican II Council and the personal hopes of Pope John XXIII for de-imperializing the papacy to be a part of a more modern world (Mursell, 2020).

At a public relations level, findings highlight the Vatican's inherent interest in better engaging with the outside world. Where the Roman Curia adopted key policies in Vatican II for outreach, the data show a consistent trend of proactive efforts for implementing such changes for more than half a century. This alignment between the Vatican's intent and behavior makes salient the sincerity and authenticity of its

claims, that it genuinely wishes to evolve alongside society and build better relationships with a broader array of publics.

While some might perceive public relations as having the potential of being unethical and propagandistic, and, as such, in opposition to the Vatican's spiritual and moral nature (Sammons, 2020), evangelization cannot take place if the Vatican is disconnected from the various publics it seeks to evangelize. As Sulkowski, Ignatowski, and Seliga (2022) suggest, the Vatican is in need of new communication practices for image management in the modern world. The public relations strategies adopted from the Vatican II Council and spearheaded by the papacy through international public diplomacy engagement is a critical step in this direction. These changes better position the Vatican to be able to build long-lasting relationships not only with global publics but also between those publics and Catholicism itself as an object of devotion (Morehouse, 2021). This is the untold legacy of the Vatican II Council.

While travel and audience selection tactics are one means the papacy has used to better build long-term relationships with global publics on behalf of the Vatican, another has been through the resolve of its moral identity. For nearly 60 years, papal rhetoric has been built on strategic narratives highlighting Catholic values. The consistency with which the papacy has made salient core Catholic social teaching is a testament to the universal and enduring morality embedded within Catholicism itself.

The rhetorical persistence of moral values emanating from the *One*, *Holy*, *Catholic*, and *Apostolic* church offers a narrative continuity (Heath & Waymer, 2019) that binds the past, present, and future for audiences and increases persuasive impact (Simmons, 2019). By illustrating how Catholic social teachings apply across societal issues spanning countries, cultures, religions, and even decades, the papacy's strategic narratives have spent almost 60 years demonstrating the universal application of Catholic values and the Vatican's moral authority as a dual political-religious state. This is not to ignore the ample list of scandals challenging the moral authority of the Vatican as an infallible organization. Rather, it highlights the immutability of Catholic morality as reminiscent of something more omnipresent in human nature, pushing both the Vatican and humanity alike to be better.

Beyond temporal consistency, the alignment between papal rhetoric and behavior also lends to the Vatican's moral legitimacy. Popes John Paul II and Francis built their strategic narratives around core social teachings that value family and community. While they may have preached this, they also lived such behavior in favoring engagement with their respective home communities. Pope John Paul II consistently traveled to Poland, while Pope Francis emphasized relationship building in Central and South America more than any other pope. Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI stressed German outreach. This creates a narrative coherence (Fisher, 1984) that reinforces trust in the Vatican by showing consistency among papal motivations, behaviors, and Catholicism's value systems. This serves to both improve trust in a Vatican reeling from scandal and demonstrate the efficacy of Catholicism as a faith.

Contributions to Scholarship

This study advances scholarship in public diplomacy, in an internationalized context of public relations, in three ways. First, it offers a longitudinal scope of analysis of Vatican diplomacy, studying papal

foreign engagement over a 57-year span. Second, the study expands the literature beyond the soft power of a single pope to understand the papacy as a centralized, continuous institution, evolving across four popes: Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Third, the study uses an interdisciplinary approach to distinguish papal foreign engagement from the political versus religious capacities of the office. Based on this distinction, the study explores shifts in papal travel, audience selection, and rhetoric.

Furthermore, the study supports Golan et al.'s (2018) findings. Papal messaging tends to be saturated with narratives illustrating (1) universal Catholic identity and values, such as shared responsibility to our communities and earth and (2) calls to action to defend the poor, marginalized, our planet, and life itself. Despite the vast changes in one of society's oldest institutions, the underlying narratives of papal outreach and engagement have remained consistent, offering narrative coherence and continuity to establish moral legitimacy for the Vatican through image and reputation management while also building stronger long-term relationships between the modern world and Catholicism.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers meaningful insights, it presents limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings. While longitudinal trends embedded within descriptive statistics and narrative-mapping approaches based on intersubjective agreement do move knowledge forward, quantitative assessments are needed. A suggestion for future research would be to incorporate a content analysis that would allow for the quantification of storytelling components as well as the capacity for insights based on inferential statistics.

Additionally, this study does not assess the delivery of specific strategic narratives by region of engagement. More to the point, due to the use of systematic random sampling, the dispersion of coded speeches did not reflect the geographic variances present within papal foreign travel. Thus, it was not possible to determine if or how the papacy targeted messages grounded in specific Catholic social teaching by region. A recommendation for future research would be to use a stratified random sample to establish quotas within the speech selection process, which would be more representative of each pope's relative engagement by continent.

A third limitation of the study concerns the exclusivity of identifying strategic narratives within papal rhetoric. More specifically, the seven themes of Catholic social teaching are not mutually exclusive groups. This presented methodological issues for the coders. A recommendation for future research would be to develop more robust narrative categories, based on prior literature, to map the discursive storytelling approaches in papal rhetoric, based on mutually exclusive typologies.

Conclusion

This study explores the nature of the Vatican's international public relations by contextualizing popes as public diplomats following the Vatican II Council. It applies a textual analysis of foreign speeches from 1964 to 2021 to understand the evolving rhetoric and engagement practices during state visits and ecclesiastical missions abroad. Descriptive statistics of 1,307 speeches spanning 114 countries were

analyzed, while textual analysis was conducted on 120 systematically sampled speeches. Findings suggest that papal rhetoric has changed minimally over the last half-century despite increased papal exposure and personalization. Key themes from Catholic social teaching have remained consistent from popes Paul VI to Francis. Next, while papal rhetoric has changed marginally, it has evolved to be more targeted at and focused on everyday publics and interfaith engagement, that is, *public* diplomacy, with reduced engagement with traditional elites. This highlights the role public relations can fulfill in establishing legitimacy for religious organizations while also building meaningful relationships between the public and religion itself.

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