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# **DIGITAL:** **THE FLAG OF FREEDOM IN 2020**

How digital empowered Filipinos to continue life even during quarantine

# DIGITAL: THE FLAG OF FREEDOM IN 2020

## An Independence Day Special Report

**12 June 1898. Kawit, Cavite.**

When Emilio Aguinaldo first waved the Philippine Flag and declared to the world that from then on, Filipinos would govern themselves, freedom wasn't exactly ringing from island to island in the archipelago. History tells us that skirmishes against the Spanish were still ongoing. Spain and America were playing a wild round of piñata, and the Philippines was part of the prizes.

Yet, Aguinaldo and the revolutionaries declared independence. Against overwhelming odds from within his own government and overseas, they waved the flag.

**June 2020. Manila.**

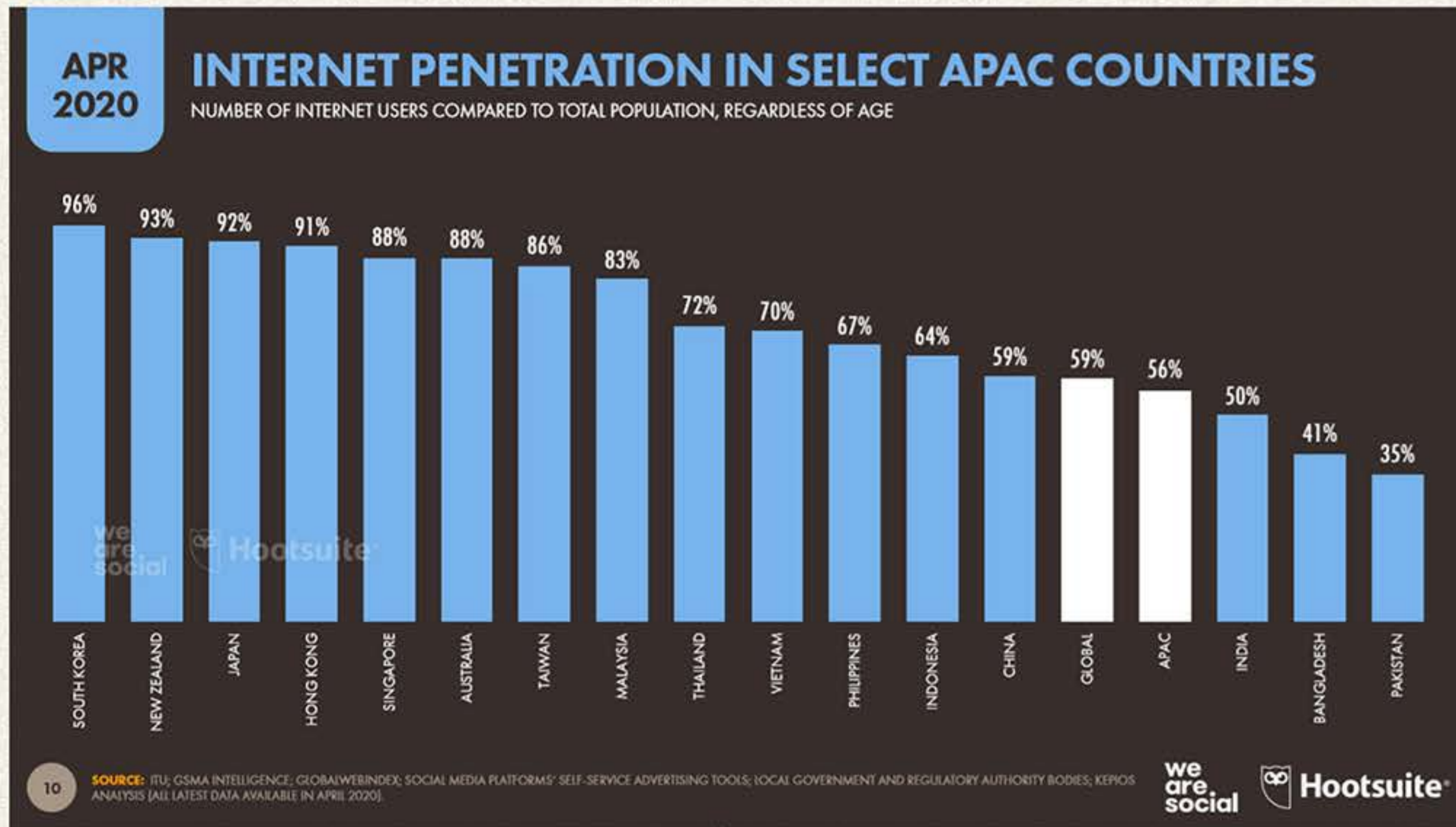
The covid-19 virus is wreaking havoc on the world. In the Philippines, as of this writing, the number of infected has reached 18,000. Recoveries though, have thankfully been outracing deaths. Metro Manila residents are beginning to climb out of the more-than-two-month-long Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), and into what is being called the "General Community Quarantine" (GCQ). Some restrictions on openings of stores, offices, transport and general mobility of people have been slightly lifted in the hopes of boosting the economy.

The specter of fear still hangs over Metro Manila and other key cities in the Philippines. Some restrictions remain: face masks, social distancing, the curfew. Some restrictions are self-imposed: some still don't want to risk going out, some prefer to not eat out, some still conduct their businesses without physical contact if it can be helped. Call it trauma, or a lingering sense of doubt, some are still anxious. Filipinos, once a highly sociable, touchy-feely people are now learning to work, learn and even say "Hi!" from a distance.

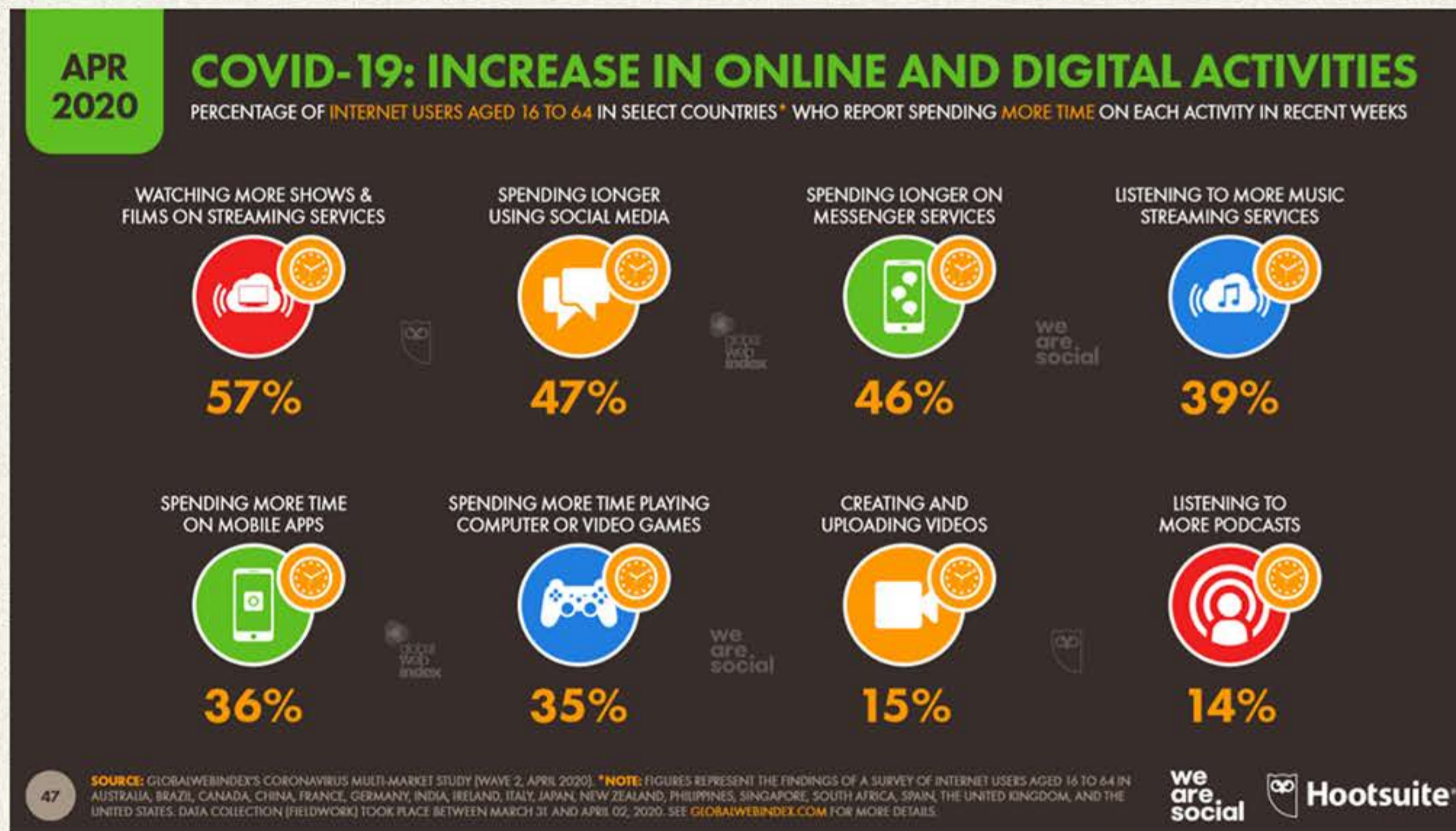
And yet, despite months of checkpoints and restrictions, how did Filipino families persist? What allowed them, like Aguinaldo, more than a hundred years ago, to wave a flag of freedom against a sinister threat? The **power of digital**.



According to a study by We Are Social, the Philippines has seen an increase in internet penetration by 10% from last year. It now sits at 67% well above both the global (59%) and APAC(56%) average.



Moreover, with Filipinos now stuck at home, there has been a significant increase in online and digital activities across the board.



This is probably why despite restrictions and hardships, many Filipinos and their families used their trademark diskarte by choosing digital as their primary means to circumvent all sorts of hindrances.

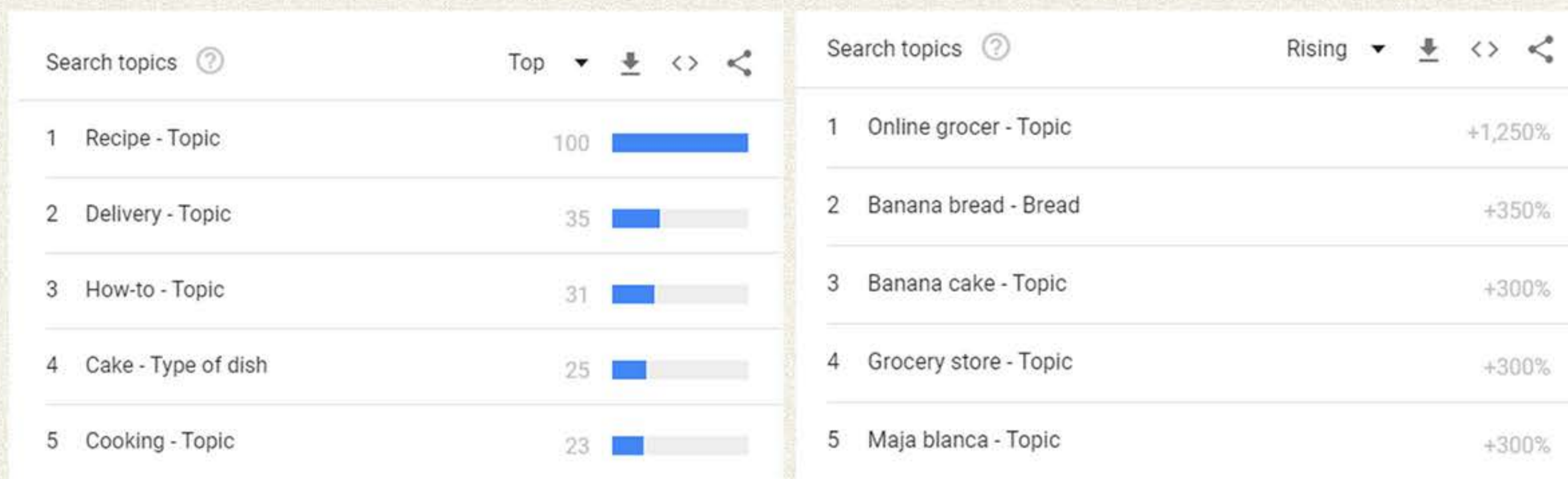
Using AdSpark Intelligence, AdSpark found four key areas as examples of how Filipinos harnessed the power of digital to overcome difficulties.



With the ECQ's limitations, among the very few permitted reasons for Filipinos to exit their household were for essential things such as food, medicine, and vitamins. However, essential trips became an arduous task since stores often suffer from low supplies or even running out of stock. Add to that the underlying fear of going out due to the anxiety of contracting COVID-19 and bringing it home.

Even if there was a plethora of risks and limitations with getting essential items, Filipinos knew that no matter what, they still needed their food and medicine.

During the two months of ECQ, the 2nd most searched topic was food delivery, and among the highest searched queries were online grocers.



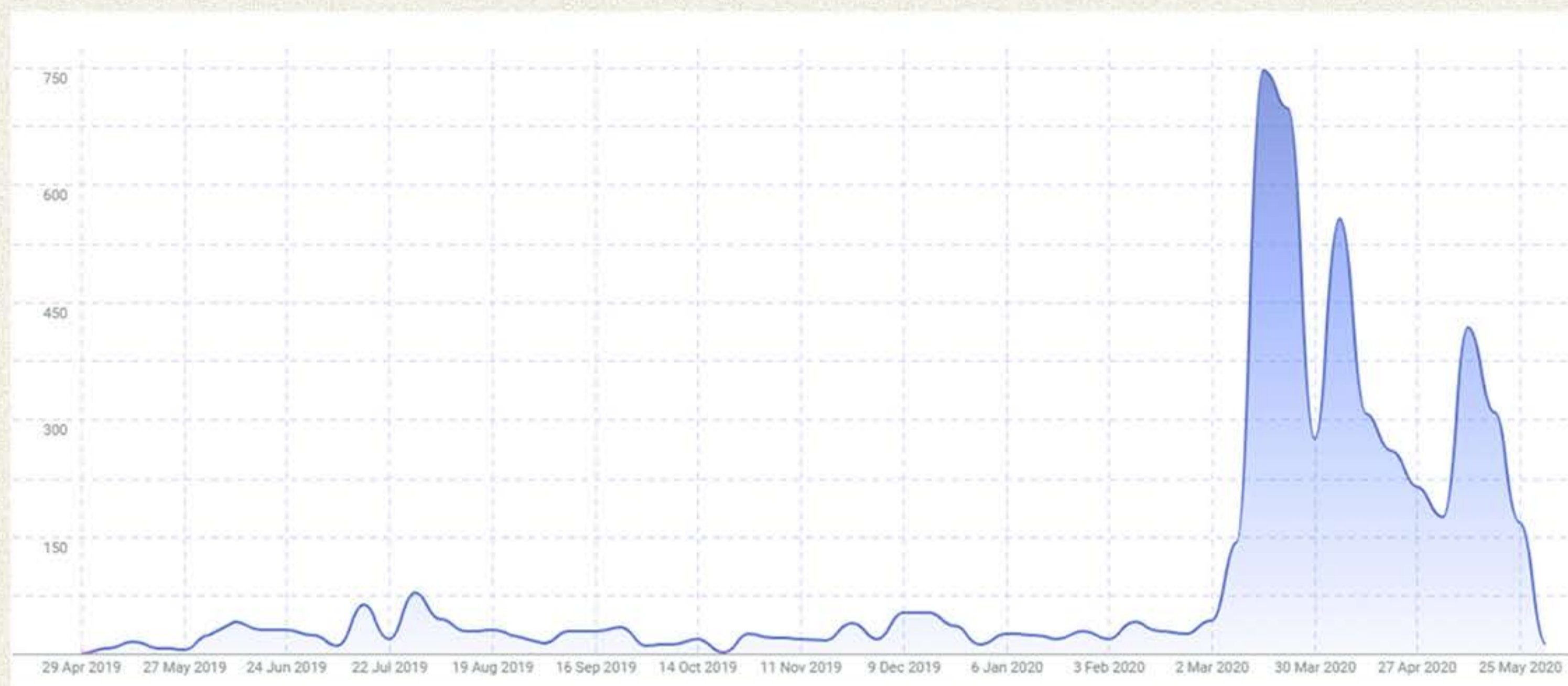
Top 5 (left) and Top 5 Rising (right) search topics for Food and Health Category (March 15-May 30)

Jane (name changed at her request), 36, who takes care of her two immunocompromised parents said her neighborhood created a Viber group where one person is in touch with a wholesale marketplace, and all the groceries of her neighborhood are purchased by him.

*“Around a month ago, I found someone who could buy vegetables and other groceries straight from Nepa Q mart, wholesale so padamihan siya. It works perfectly for us because we are six (6) people in total. It’s very convenient because all we do is message him, he’ll leave it at our doorstep and we Gcash the payment, all without having to go outside nor touching anything.”*

Another essential for Filipinos is healthcare needs. Just because health clinics and hospitals are predominantly used for testing and treating COVID-19 patients, doesn't mean the attention needed for non-COVID health concerns just disappeared. Despite facing the insurmountable task to shift a very traditional face-to-face practice such as consulting and diagnosing, Filipino healthcare workers were able to utilize digital channels to improve their reach through services like telehealth.

Online conversations regarding telehealth and online medical consultations received its peak during the start of the ECQ and have been steadily talked about in the duration of the quarantine.



*Talkwalker Mentions over time for Telehealth services*

Mika (name changed at her request), is currently raising her 3-month-old daughter in these challenging times. She mentioned that she has had to delay getting the newborn vaccines for her baby because of the fear of visiting hospitals. She knows she eventually has to and decided that the only time she will ever bring her baby to the hospital is for the vaccine shots, not even the monthly baby check-ups most mothers have.

*"I am very lucky because my pediatrician is my friend, so she is always accessible through Viber. My friends who are also moms mostly consult through telehealth services or Zoom calls with their pediatricians to avoid ever setting foot in a hospital."*



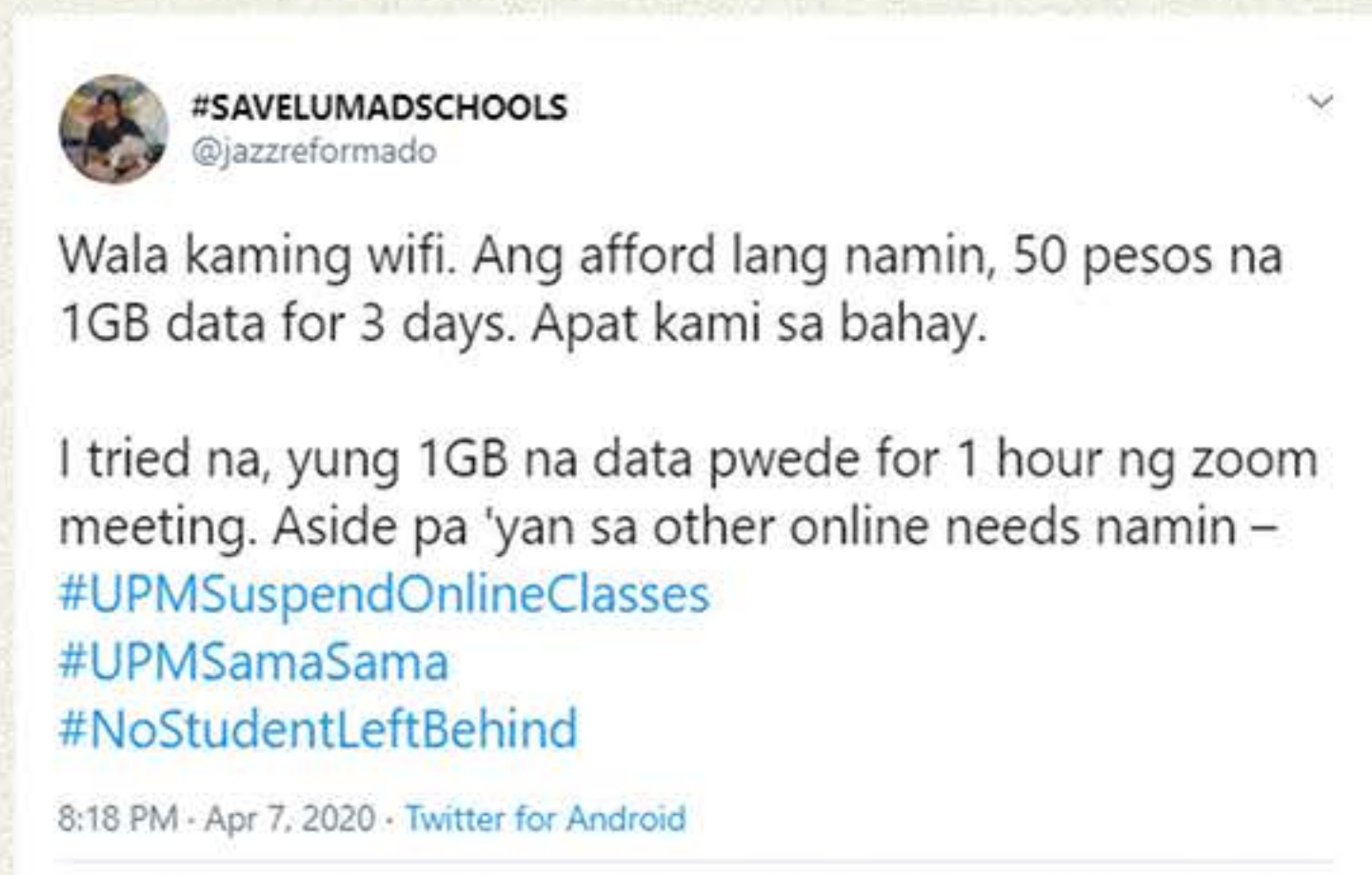
When ECQ was first announced last March, most schools in Metro Manila were in the middle of their final semester of the academic year. In the minority were schools that decided to just call it a year. Many others would attempt to complete the necessary requirements via online means.

However, the transition from traditional education to e-learning/distance education was not a smooth one for all. There are two major roadblocks for distance education to properly work in the Philippines. First, schools in the country find it very difficult to deliver the same quality education online. The sudden shift in the past three months could be too rapid for the system.

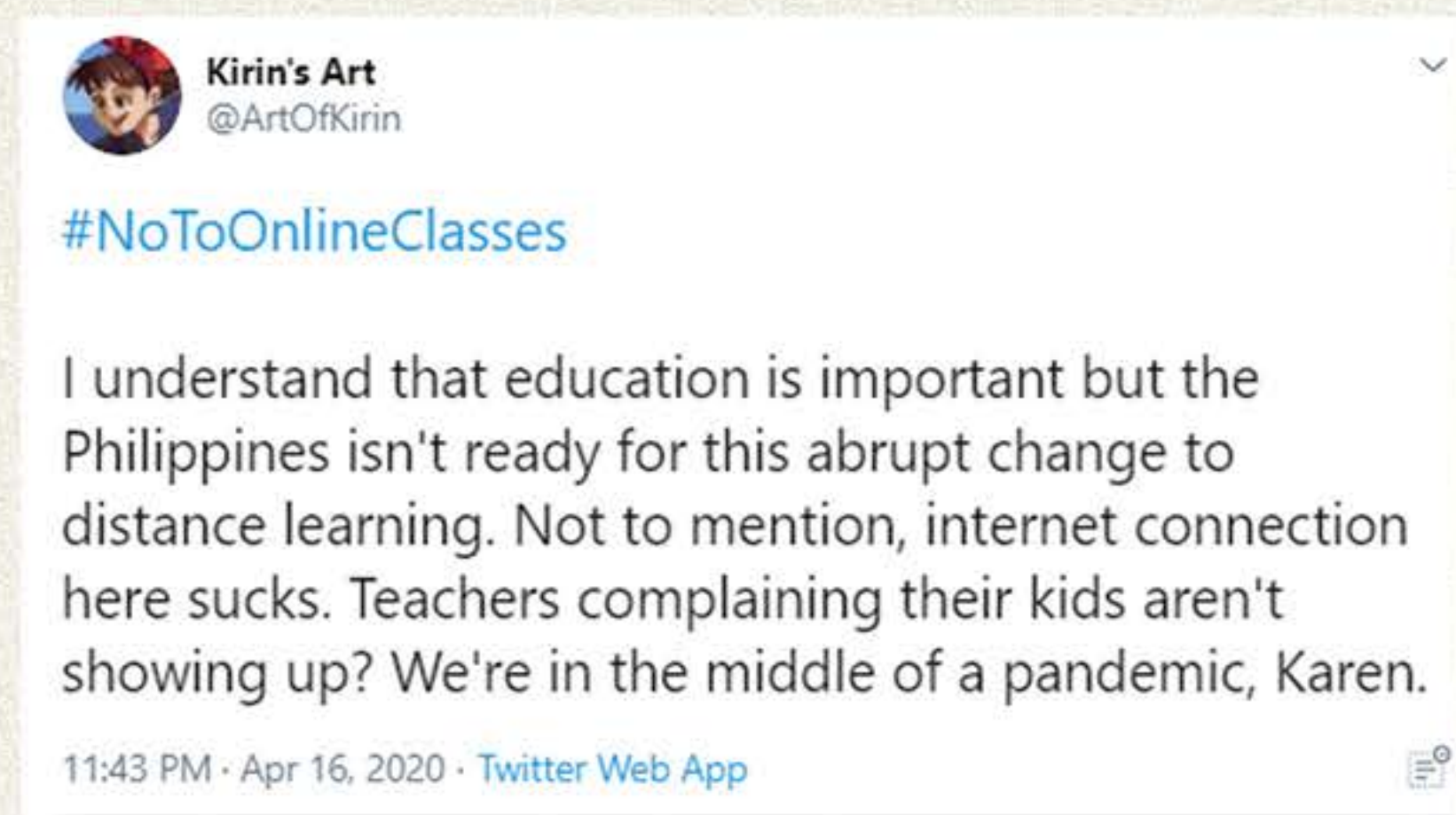
Student groups also voiced their difficulties. In a position paper submitted to CHED, Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP) and Students' Rights and Welfare Philippines (STRAW PH) argued both students and teachers are not ready for online classes, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The screenshot shows the top portion of a Rappler article. At the top left is the Rappler logo, which consists of a stylized 'R' inside a circle followed by the word 'RAPPLER'. Below the logo is the article title: 'Students of top 4 PH schools urge CHED to suspend online classes'. Underneath the title is a short excerpt: 'While we understand the need for learning to continue, the different circumstances of students across universities are not ideal and conducive for such,' the student governments of ADMU, UP Diliman, DLSU Manila, and UST say in their petition to the Commission on Higher Education. Below the excerpt is the author's name, 'Samantha Bagayas', followed by the publication date 'Published 5:15 PM, March 25, 2020' and the update date 'Updated 12:51 AM, March 27, 2020'.

The second major issue was the capacity of students to learn in this type of environment: the mental aspect as well as the quarantine which makes it hard for those without wifi to obtain a sufficient workaround such as loading the phone or going to computer shops. They would take their case to social media:

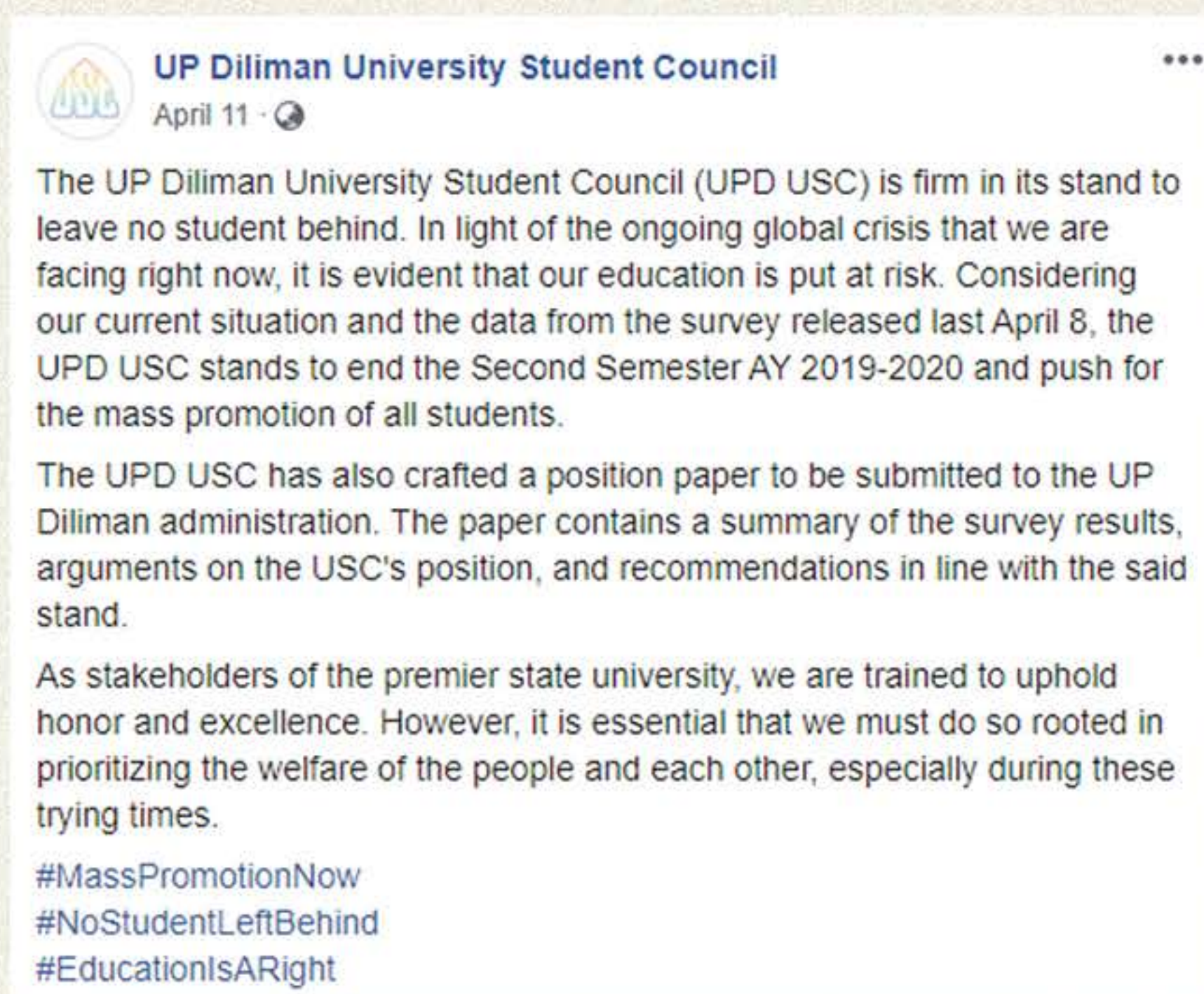


Twitter - April 7, 2020

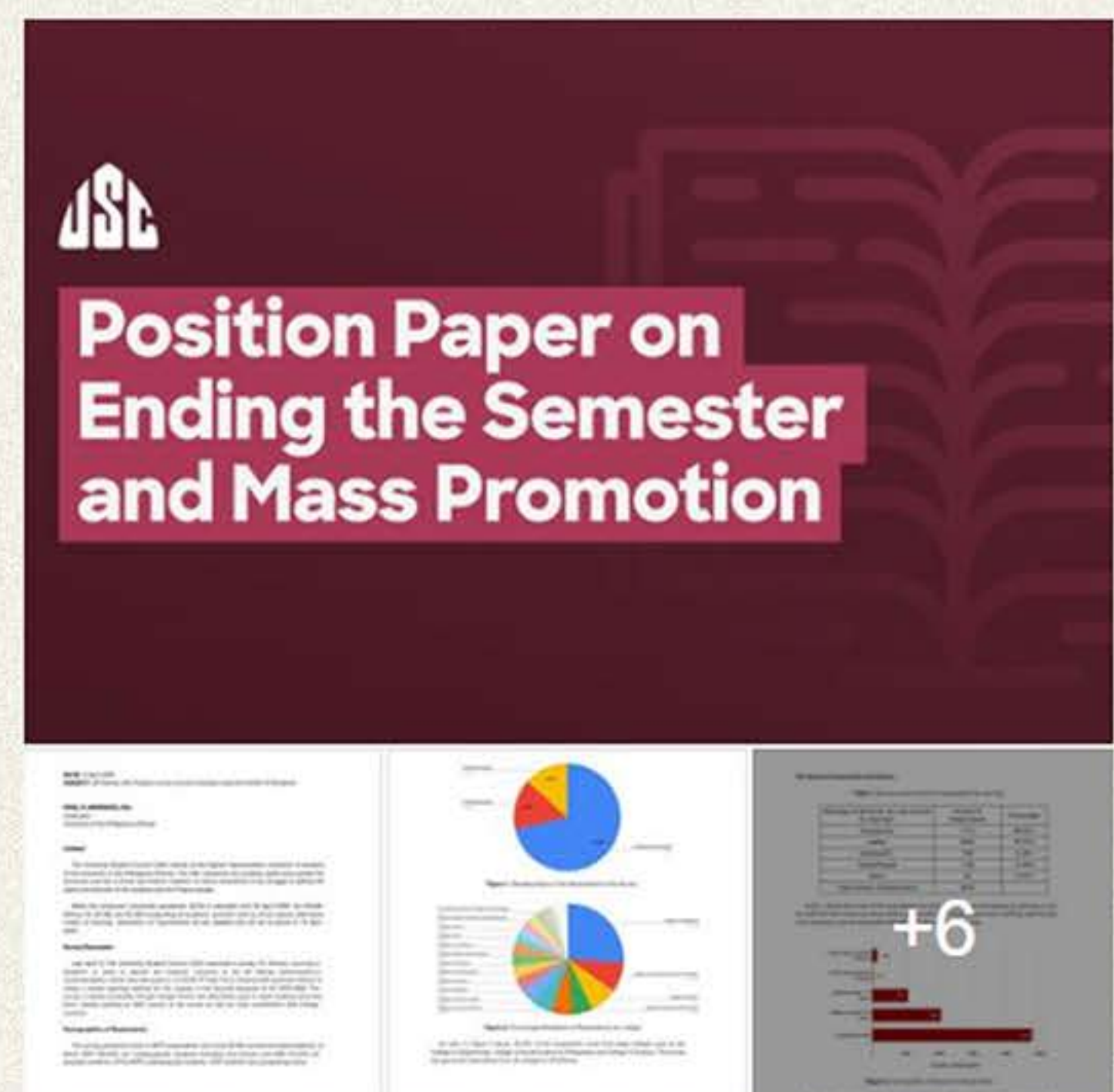


Twitter - April 16, 2020

E-learning and distance education was such a contested topic, that the student council of UP Diliman developed an entire position paper to defend students' rights and advocate for the end of the semester and mass promotion of students.



UP Diliman Student Council Facebook - April 11, 2020



Yet, for those who could have the means to find a way, they still tried their best to make do with the situation: from extending extraordinary support during an extraordinary time to robots in ceremonies.

DepEd tried its best with DepEd Commons, an online service launched in April where teachers can access e-learning training materials. It became the 2nd most searched query during the months of the ECQ.

**Ateneo De Davao**, for example, decided to lend a total of 155 iPads and deliver them to each scholar who needed them. They also provided pocket WiFi to ensure these students had a stable internet connection necessary for daily classes.



The graduating class of 2020 of some schools is another example of Filipinos not allowing the restrictions of the ECQ and COVID-19 to limit what they can achieve. In spite of the rules of social distancing, the students were still able to experience the deeply symbolic event of graduation as best as they could. With the use of robots and video calls, 179 students were allowed to digitally accept their diplomas and experience their graduation the best way they can with the current restrictions.



*Graduating students of the Sen. Renato Cayetano Memorial Science & Technology Highschool received their diplomas through tablets attached to remote-controlled robots.*



Many Filipinos who now had to stay home, also decided to spend their time wisely by hopping on the internet and taking online courses to upskill for their career and their hobbies.

**Paula Dahlia Mendoza went viral** for completing over 20 different online courses in a span of a month from 14 different universities including some Ivy League schools. She said

*"Super-duper tinodo ko na pagiging productive this quarantine season kaya nagpakalango na lang ako sa pag-aaral. Laking advantage sa career growth and development!"*



In terms of online consumption of Filipinos, the majority consumed more career-related training and online classes. Career-related content covered skills that can be executed online such as digital marketing, web programming, and e-marketing.

Others however wanted to learn more about their hobbies such as cooking, sewing, and even playing the guitar. Guitar lessons were in fact so popular that during the ECQ, 2 of the top 5 Youtube searches in the education category were regarding guitar lessons.

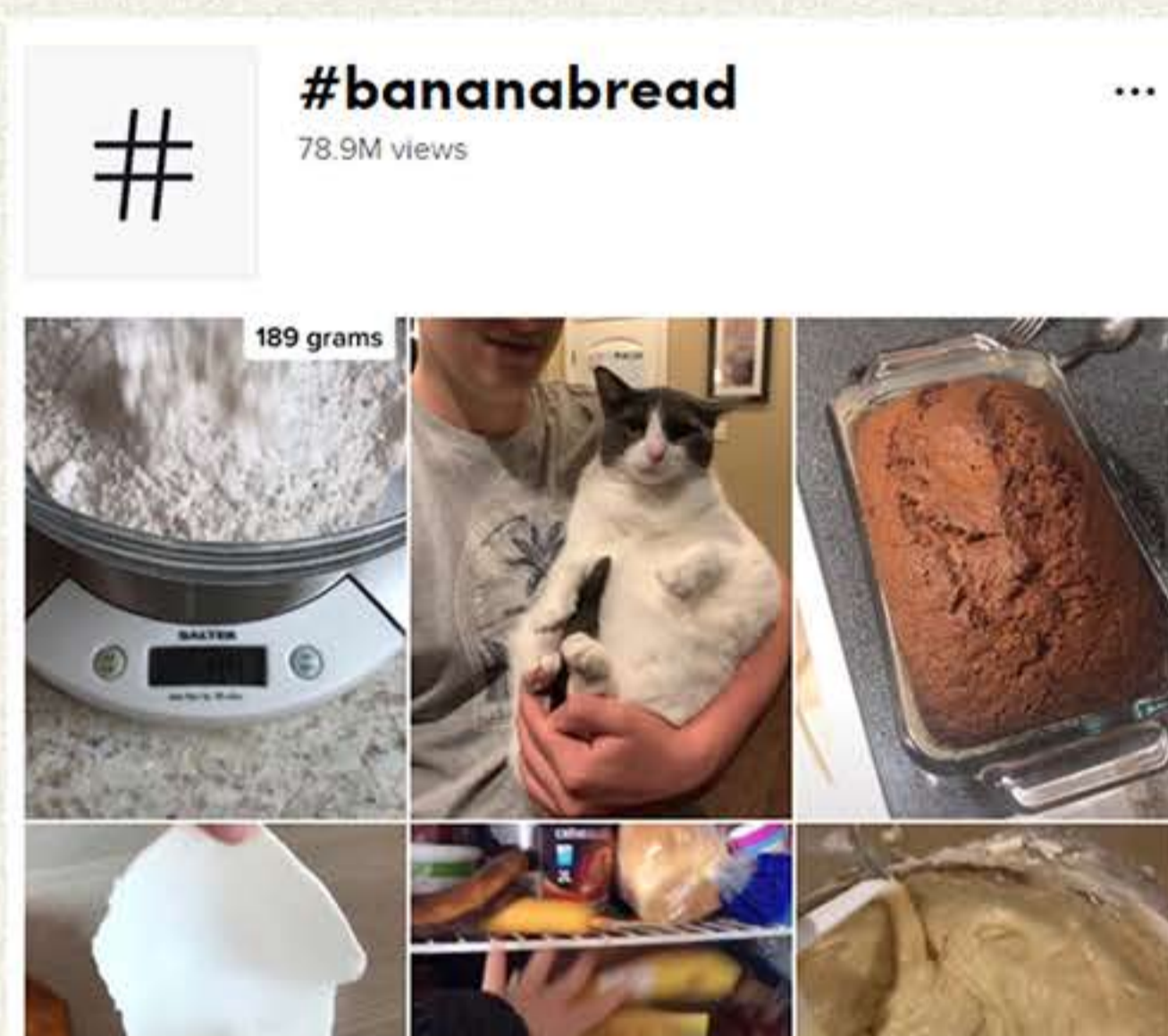
### **Top Types of Content consumed by Filipinos**

(Skills Category, March 15, 2020 - May 15, 2020)

1. Online Job
2. Web Developer
3. Python (Type of Web Coding)
4. TESDA
5. Side hustle



While some Filipinos wanted to improve their technical skills, others wanted to take this opportunity to learn more about home cooking, and more healthy food. Since food is such an essential commodity due to the limited supply, Filipinos are finding ways to use their limited ingredients in creative ways.



Total TikTok views for #bananabread



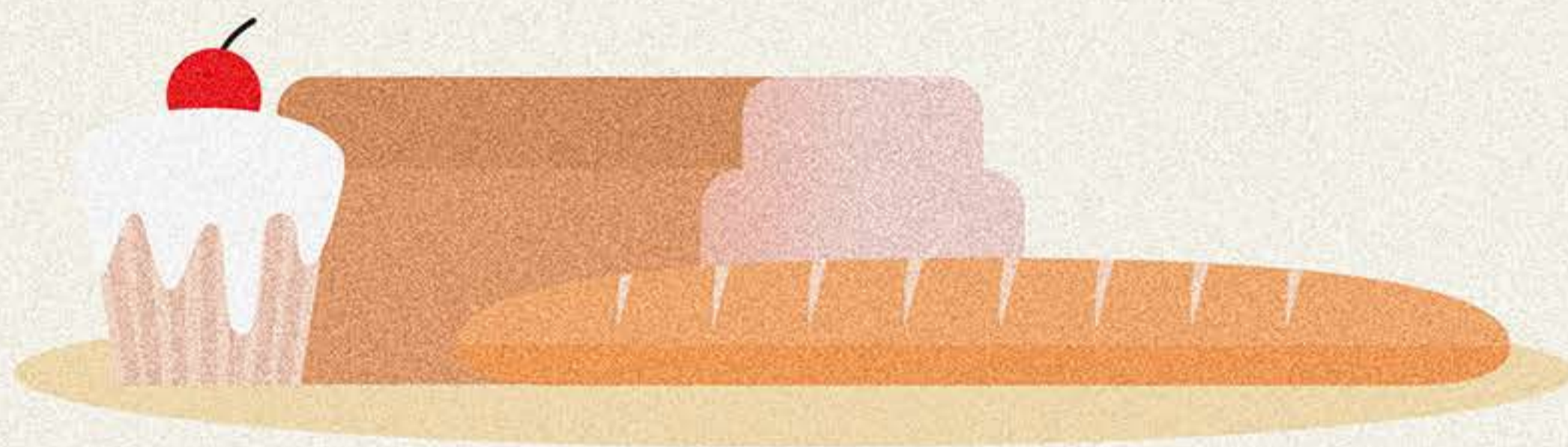
Most viewed TikTok video for #bananabread

One specific example was the newfound fixation over Banana bread. #Bananabread in TikTok alone reached almost 80 million views because of its simple instructions and use of very common ingredients: bananas, flour, sugar, and eggs. This led to banana bread and the ingredients to break into the top 10 searches in the food category in the Philippines.

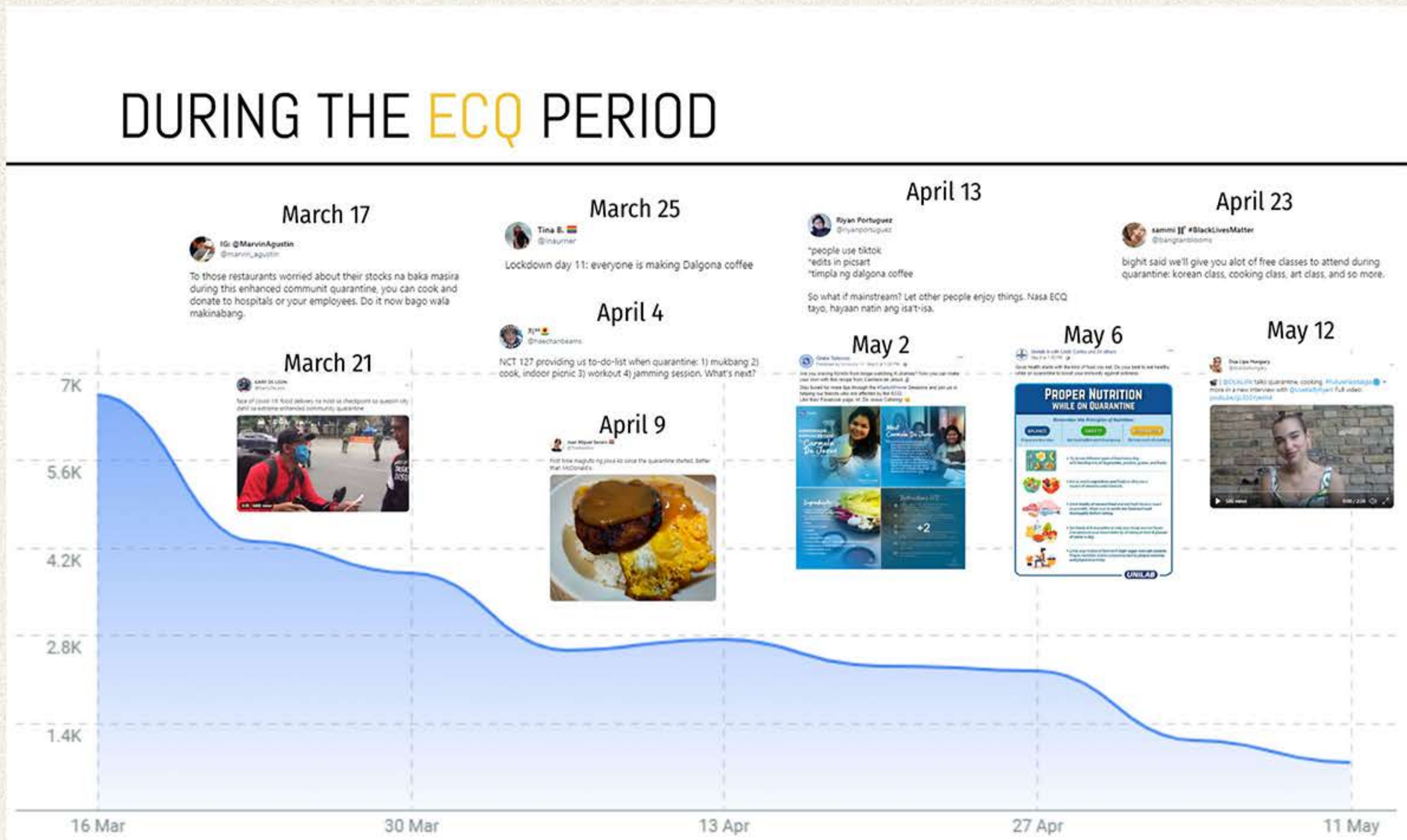
With shopping malls and restaurants closed, Filipinos have been finding ways to entertain their mouths and stomachs by learning how to bake and try new dessert recipes - beyond banana bread. **Among the top 20 search topics** during the months of the ECQ, search topics were dominated by deserts and simple recipes for sweet food and beverages. Dishes and beverages like, banana cake, banana bread, Maja Blanca, Dalgona coffee, Coffee jelly, cookies, and others.

Search topics <span>?</span>		Rising <span>▼</span>	<span>↓</span>	<span>&lt;&gt;</span>	<span>↗</span>
1	Online grocer - Topic	+1,450%			
2	Glutinous rice - Rice	+500%			
3	Baking powder - Food additive	+350%			
4	Yeast - Fungus	+350%			
5	Banana cake - Topic	+300%			
6	Grocery store - Topic	+250%			
7	Banana bread - Bread	+250%			
8	Sardine - Fish	+250%			
9	Maja blanca - Topic	+250%			
10	Flour - Food	+200%			
11	Quesillo - Topic	+190%			
12	Coronavirus - Virus	+190%			
13	Chocolate chip cookie - Cookie	+190%			
14	Food delivery - Topic	+170%			
15	Oven - Topic	+160%			
16	Puto - Dish	+150%			
17	Coffee jelly - Jelly dessert	+150%			
18	Chocolate cake - Cake	+150%			
19	Dough - Topic	+150%			
20	Pancake - Cake	+140%			

Top 20 search topics for Food and Health Category (March 15-May 30)



They sweeten the quarantine time – both figuratively and literally. They're not just for combating hunger – you'll notice that they're not really essential food items. To be honest, they are frivolities that you might not even think of having on (now forgotten) usual days. But they keep you busy, they jazz up the repertoire, and the distraction keeps one sane.



Online conversations during the ECQ period show Filipinos sharing and posting their food creations and experimenting with different types of recipes they found online. Interestingly, at the beginning of the ECQ, most conversations were about food delivery and online groceries.

However, as time went on and Filipinos began to get used to the ECQ, they began to talk less and less about food delivery, and more about cooking at home and kitchen hacks. Towards the latter parts of ECQ, Filipinos showed hunger to learn more types of recipes and practice new home-cooking techniques. Will we all emerge as accidental chefs?



The economy had to continue to move, and people needed their salaries. However, social distancing, the exponentially more difficult commute, and the necessary restrictions to contain human movement forced workers and companies to go digital. Many companies across the country, especially for work that could be done via online means, shifted to Work From Home. In fact, online conversations regarding Work from Home reached an all-time high when Duterte first announced the ECQ and has been talked about ever since.



Talkwalker Mentions over time for Work from Home

Some businesses and entrepreneurs suddenly found themselves being forced to do the digital pivot in order to meet the new needs.

Pam Cinco, owner of Risa's Chocolates, talked about how digital has become an enabler for her business and is now an integral part of it that can thrive with current restrictions.

*"Business is coping as well as it could possibly be given the limitations. In terms of production given the number of employees and limited supply, we are running at almost the regular rate given the limitations. ... Currently, online delivery is our only channel. Because of ECQ, I was forced to use online delivery and I think it's the future for my business. ... Even when ECQ is lifted and COVID-19 is gone, I will still pursue online delivery as an added service."*

Sam Lara, a former freelance digital artist mentioned that because of the lack of demand, she has had to shift from her creative freelance job to a frozen meat supply.

*"As for my freelancing jobs, there's more clients and income now. But, still not as much as before COVID-19 happened. I needed to shift what I offer, from creative services to food delivery; from fashion retailing to food retailing. ... That way I get to earn a little, be able to help the business of my suppliers, and deliver quality food to my neighbors."*

## NEW CHALLENGES, SAME PINOY INGENUITY NOW ARMED WITH TECHNOLOGY

From ECQ to MECQ to GCQ, and even with the full lift of the quarantine, it will most probably be a long while until Filipinos feel fully free in their own towns and cities.

Jane put it best when she said,

*“As far as my household is concerned, regardless of the lift of [the] lockdown from the government, as long as there is no vaccine we will act as if we are still under ECQ. For us, only the vaccine will allow us to move freely again”.*

But with each iteration of restrictions, Filipinos have iterated as well on how to overcome them. The Filipinos' dogged determination and inventiveness have always been reliable sources of strength. Even in these difficult times, the Filipino people have shown their *diskarte* through the use of technology and online channels.

While it is true that the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and chaotic, one must also remember that Filipinos have endured world wars, dictators, natural calamities, and many other adversities - not least because of our *diskarte*, our finding ways to overcome it.

COVID-19 has been a tough lesson to all Filipinos. It has taught us the importance of the healthcare system, the general need for proper hygiene, and how delicate foundational systems can be. However, in that same light, it has also taught us of the enabling capabilities of digital and how it has been a great equalizer for different facets of our life.

Today, in 2020, digital has become the flag we've flown on our different balconies. Despite restrictions, it has allowed life to persist and for some, even flourish.



## REFERENCES:

Talkwalker

Google Search Trends

We are Social Digital 2020

Philippine Daily Inquirer - **Ateneo de Davao lends iPad units to scholars for online classes**

Rappler - **Students of top 4 PH schools urge CHED to suspend online classes**

### Interviews

Mika (name changed at her request), Mother of 3-month-old baby

Jane (name changed at her request), BPO, Takes care of her 2 immunocompromised senior parents

Pam Lim-Cinco, Owner of Risa's Chocolates

