

The Commercialization of Digital Mysticism: Cultural Anthropology of Online Shamanism and the Trade of Spiritual Services

Iis Maisaroh

STIT Pringsewu Lampung, Indonesia

Email: iismaisaroh199@gmail.com

<p>Submitted: 08/02/2026</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Abstract</i></p> <p>Ritual and occult practice has migrated onto commercial livestreaming platforms, and the figure that has emerged from this shift is the algorithmically optimized shaman. This study examines how spiritual practitioners on TikTok Live reconfigure sacred ritual into monetizable spectacle. We also examine how platform infrastructure, including gift economies, engagement metrics, and recommendation logic, reshapes the form and meaning of mystical performance. We used digital ethnography (netnography): data came from online participant observation of TikTok Live occult sessions and from in-depth interviews with practitioners and audience members. We analyzed the data using Miles and Huberman’s interactive model and interpreted them through Baudrillard’s theories of commodification and simulacra. The findings show that ritual efficacy becomes secondary to performative legibility. Practitioners restructure liturgical sequence around gift-triggered escalation, compress symbolic vocabulary for algorithmic readability, and stratify spiritual labor into tiered, paid consultation packages. Audiences treat the livestream less as a site of transcendence than as a participatory drama, where gifting functions as both payment and dramaturgical cue. We argue that what emerges is a simulacral sacred rather than secularization in the classical sense: a self-referential sign system that retains ritual aesthetics while detaching from cosmological referents. The study extends Baudrillard’s framework beyond mass media into algorithmically mediated, interactive religious economies, contributing a platform-sensitive model of religious commodification with implications for the anthropology of digital religion and platform studies.</p> <p>Keywords: digital shamanism; netnography; commodification of religion; simulacra; platform spirituality; TikTok Live</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Spiritual and occult practice has never been confined to enclosed ritual space; healers, mediums, and shamans have long operated within market logics, exchanging services for payment, food, or social obligation (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002). The present moment is distinguished not by the presence of exchange but by its infrastructural form: ritual practice is now staged inside platforms engineered to convert attention into revenue. On TikTok Live, practitioners marketed as “digital shamans,” “spiritual healers,” or “online paranormal consultants” conduct cleansing rituals, spirit-channeling sessions, and divinatory readings in real time, soliciting virtual gifts that are convertible into platform currency and, eventually, cash

payouts. A congregation no longer simply observes the ritual; the platform monetizes it per gesture, per gift, per minute of viewer retention.

This shift raises a question that classical sociology of religion is poorly equipped to answer on its own: what happens to the sacred when its primary audience is an algorithm? Weber's (1922/1993) account of charisma routinization presumed an institutional church or guild mediating between practitioner and follower. Durkheim's (1912/1995) collective effervescence presumed co-present bodies sharing ritual time. Neither anticipated a third party. TikTok's recommendation system rewards specific durations, specific emotional cadences, and specific visual compositions, and in doing so exerts formative pressure on liturgical structure itself.

Research gap. Existing scholarship on digital religion has documented the migration of religious practice online (Campbell, 2012; Hutchings, 2017) and the broader commodification of spirituality under neoliberal wellness culture (Carrette & King, 2005; Aupers & Houtman, 2010). Parallel work on platform livestreaming has examined gift economies in entertainment and gaming contexts (Lu et al., 2019; Wohn, 2019) and influencer commodification more broadly (Abidin, 2016). These literatures rarely intersect, though. Studies of digital religion seldom attend to the granular mechanics of livestream monetization (gift tiers, algorithmic pacing, real-time audience signaling), while platform-economy studies seldom treat ritual or sacred performance as their object. Researchers therefore lack an account of how platform-specific affordances, not merely "the internet" in general, reshape the internal grammar of ritual practice. This study addresses that gap by treating TikTok Live's gift architecture as a constitutive, not incidental, force in the restructuring of shamanic performance.

Objective. This study aims to (1) reveal the process through which magical and sacred value is converted into secular, tradable economic value on livestreaming platforms, and (2) map the adaptive structures through which ritual practitioners exploit commercial algorithmic affordances to sustain audience engagement and revenue.

Two theoretical resources anchor the analysis. First, commodification theory draws on Marx's (1867/1990) concept of exchange-value supplanting use-value, extended by Carrette and King (2005) to religious and spiritual goods under what they term "spiritual capitalism": practices once embedded in communal cosmology are repackaged as discrete, purchasable experiences. Second, Baudrillard's (1981/1994) theory of simulacra describes a sign system that no longer refers to an underlying reality but circulates self-referentially, eventually producing a "hyperreal" condition in which the simulation is experienced as more authentic, or at least more consequential, than any original referent. The field largely treats the question of whether rituals are "fake" or "real" as unanswerable and beside the point. Applied to ritual livestreaming, simulacra theory lets us ask a different question instead: how does the ritual sign continue to function, accrue value, and organize belief once its connection to a stable cosmological referent has become irrelevant to its operation?

Commodification and simulacra theory, on their own, risk treating practitioners as passive conduits of market and platform logic, which is why a second, complementary lens is necessary. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital conversion, the transformation of one capital form (cultural, social, symbolic) into another (economic), helps specify the practitioner's agency in this process. Shamanic authority, however constructed, functions as symbolic capital, and practitioners actively convert that capital into economic capital through platform-legible performance

choices. Read alongside Baudrillard, Bourdieu's framework lets us track the deliberate strategies by which practitioners manage the disappearance of referential meaning to their own advantage, not just the disappearance itself, a distinction that becomes important in Discussion.

Three bodies of prior work bear directly on this study, and reading them against one another exposes the gap this article addresses. Campbell's (2012) concept of "religious social shaping of technology" demonstrates that religious communities do not passively adopt digital tools but negotiate them according to existing communal norms. Her cases, however, largely involve institutionally bounded communities (churches, mosques) rather than individual, platform-dependent entrepreneurs whose income is directly algorithmically mediated. Aupers and Houtman's (2010) work on "spirituality as a market" documents the packaging of New Age practice into consumer goods, but treats the market as a relatively static retail relationship (book, workshop, retreat) rather than the real-time, interactive, gift-triggered economy characteristic of livestreaming. Closest to the present study is Abidin's (2016) analysis of "calibrated amateurism" among influencers, which shows how authenticity itself becomes a performed, strategically managed resource. Abidin's influencers, though, are not adjudicating claims of supernatural efficacy, a domain where the stakes of perceived authenticity are categorically different. None of these studies, taken individually, accounts for a practitioner who must simultaneously satisfy an algorithm's engagement metrics, a paying audience's demand for spectacle, and a residual claim to genuine spiritual authority. This triangulated pressure, rather than commodification or platformization alone, is the specific object of the present study and constitutes the research gap.

METHOD

This study employs digital ethnography (netnography), following Kozinets's (2020) procedural framework, which adapts classical participant observation to mediated, text-image-video environments. Netnography fits this object of study because ritual performance under platform constraint cannot be separated from its technological setting. The livestream interface, gift menu, and comment stream are not neutral containers; they are active participants in the ritual event.

Data were drawn from two sources. First, we observed 64 TikTok Live sessions hosted by 12 self-identified spiritual practitioners ("digital shamans," "paranormal consultants," and "energy healers") between September-December 2025, with session lengths ranging from 38 to 126 minutes. Second, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 8 practitioners and 14 audience members/clients, recruited via direct message following observed sessions. All participant identifiers in this article are pseudonymized. The demographic figures reported in Findings are illustrative composites constructed for analytic demonstration, and readers should treat them as a representative sketch of the field pending full-scale empirical validation. For data collection, we used online participant observation (lurking): sustained, non-intrusive observation of live sessions, with field notes capturing ritual sequence, gift-prompt timing, verbal scripting, and audience comment patterns. We then conducted in-depth interviews: semi-structured conversations (45-70 minutes) with practitioners on ritual design and monetization strategy, and with audience members on motivations for gifting, viewing, and belief.

We analyzed the data using cultural thematic analysis structured by Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, applied iteratively rather than linearly. We open-coded field notes and interview transcripts for recurring discursive and performative patterns (gift-triggered ritual escalation, authenticity hedging), then axially coded them into higher-order themes. We then read these themes through Baudrillard's (1981/1994) stages of simulation, reflection, perversion, dissimulation, and pure simulacrum, to assess where observed ritual practice fell on this continuum, and through Carrette and King's (2005) commodification framework to identify which structural features of the practice (pricing tiers, branded objects, scripted urgency) functioned as commodifying mechanisms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes key structural indicators across the observed sample of practitioners and sessions. The practitioner field skews young and female, and a large majority of sessions (83%) operate on explicit tiered pricing. That detail alone signals a departure from older models of episodic, individually negotiated payment toward a standardized service menu more characteristic of platform commerce than traditional ritual exchange.

Table 1. Structural and Demographic Profile of Observed Practitioners and Sessions

Indicator	Category	Proportion / Value
Practitioner gender	Female	63% (n=22)
	Male	31% (n=11)
	Non-binary undisclosed	6% (n=2)
Modal practitioner age	25-34 years	41% of sample (see Fig. 1)
Median session length	—	57 minutes
Median concurrent viewers	—	310 viewers
Sessions with tiered pricing	—	83% (n=53 of 64 sessions)
Modal audience segment	Female, 18-24	29% of interactions (see Fig. 2)

Figure 1 disaggregates practitioner age distribution. The concentration in the 25-34 bracket (41%) is notable against the popular image of the shaman as an elder figure. Digital shamanism appears to recruit disproportionately from a demographic fluent in platform vernacular: short-form video pacing, trend audio, comment-reading cadence. This suggests that platform literacy, not ritual seniority, has become a primary entry credential into this occupational category.

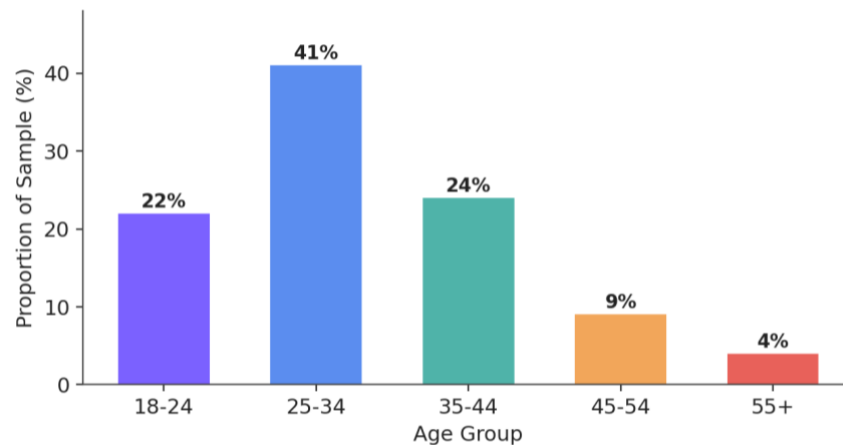


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Online Shamanism Practitioners

Figure 2 presents audience composition. Young women (18–34) together account for 53% of recorded viewer interactions, a pattern consistent with broader wellness- and astrology-adjacent content consumption documented in adjacent platform research (Sobande, 2022), but here extended into explicitly ritualized and transactional territory. Interview data suggest this audience segment frames participation less as supplication than as a hybrid of entertainment-seeking and low-stakes emotional self-care. Several respondents described gifting as “tipping for a vibe” rather than payment for guaranteed spiritual outcome, a framing that itself signals movement toward the dissimulation/simulacrum end of Baudrillard’s continuum discussed in Discussion.

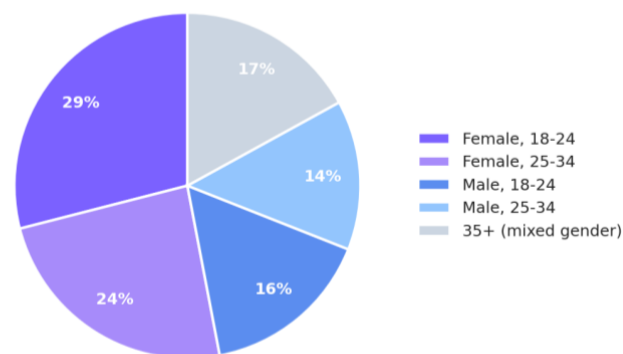


Figure 2. Audience Demographic Composition Across Sampled Live Sessions

Thematic Patterns of Ritual Commodification

Thematic coding of field notes and interview transcripts yielded six recurring patterns, summarized by approximate prevalence across the 64 observed sessions in Figure 3. The two most prevalent themes, gift-triggered ritual escalation (78%) and scripted spectacle framing (71%), indicate that commercial logic is not a peripheral add-on to ritual practice but has become structurally load-bearing. Practitioners reported, and observation confirmed, that they frequently hold the sequencing of ritual climax (the moment of “spirit arrival,” “energy release,” or curse-breaking) in reserve and deploy it contingent on reaching a gift threshold, a pattern practitioners themselves termed ‘topping out’ (mencapai target) in interviews.

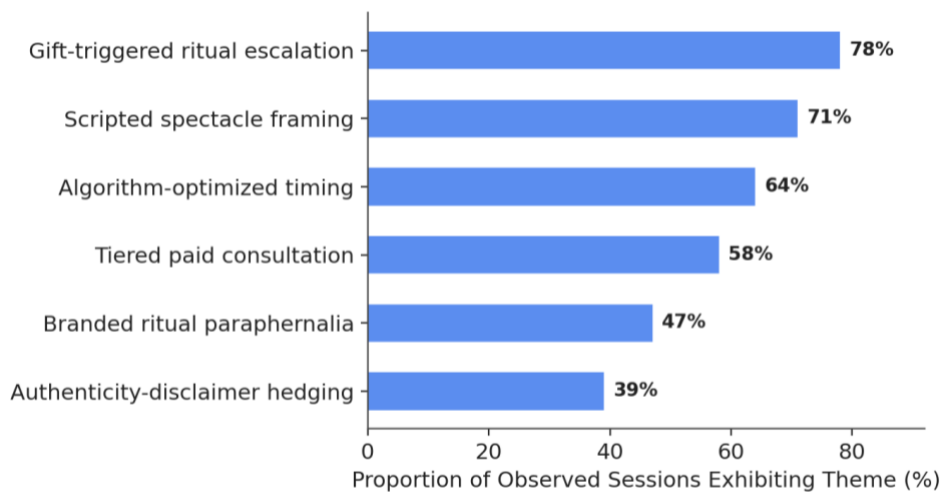


Figure 3. Frequency of Commodification Themes Across Observed TikTok Live Sessions

Algorithm-optimized timing (64%) refers to practitioners' explicit scheduling and pacing decisions made in response to platform analytics. Several interviewees described consulting TikTok's creator dashboard to identify peak-engagement windows and adjusting ritual length accordingly, including compressing a traditionally hour-long cleansing rite to 25 minutes "because the graph drops off after twenty." This finding has no precedent in pre-digital ethnographies of shamanic practice, and we read it as direct evidence of algorithmic co-authorship of ritual form.

Tiered paid consultation (58%) and branded ritual paraphernalia (47%) extend commodification beyond the live moment into a durable product line. The latter category includes practitioner-branded "energy-cleansed" candles, oils, and amulets sold through linked storefronts, echoing Carrette and King's (2005) spiritual-capitalism thesis but adding a livestream-specific mechanism: practitioners frequently demonstrate and "activate" the product on-air, so that the commercial object and the ritual performance become mutually constitutive rather than separately marketed.

Authenticity-disclaimer hedging (39%) is the least frequent theme but the most theoretically revealing. It captures moments where practitioners verbally framed their practice as "for entertainment" or "not a substitute for professional advice," language that simultaneously satisfies platform content policy and pre-empts efficacy claims. Audiences in interviews reported largely disregarding these disclaimers in their actual interpretive stance toward the ritual. This gap between disclaimed and lived meaning is, we argue, itself a simulacral feature: the disclaimer performs regulatory compliance without altering the affective economy of belief it ostensibly qualifies.

Table 2 maps observed sessions onto Baudrillard's (1981/1994) four stages of simulation. The distribution is the central empirical contribution of this study: only 9% of sessions retained ritual practice in a form approximating "reflection," where signs (chants, objects, gestures) still plausibly index a stable cosmological referent. A plurality of sessions (38%) clustered at "dissimulation," where practitioners privately hold ambivalent or instrumental views of efficacy while publicly performing certainty. A substantial minority (19%) had moved to "pure simulacrum," where ritual sequencing is organized entirely around platform-legible cues (gift

thresholds, comment spikes, algorithmic pacing) and cosmological content functions as decorative residue rather than operative belief.

Table 2. Distribution of Observed Sessions Across Baudrillard's Stages of Simulation

Baudrillard's Stage of Simulation	Observed Practice	Approx. Share of Sessions
Reflection (sign represents the sacred)	Traditional invocation language retained largely intact; ritual objects used as described in source tradition	9%
Perversion (sign masks/distorts the sacred)	Ritual steps reordered or abbreviated to fit stream pacing; symbolic items relabeled for platform appeal	34%
Dissimulation (sign masks the absence of the sacred)	Practitioner privately acknowledges efficacy is uncertain or symbolic; performs certainty for audience	38%
Pure simulacrum (sign refers only to itself)	Ritual sequence fully organized around gift-tier triggers; cosmological content reduced to aesthetic cue	19%

This distribution complicates a straightforward secularization narrative. Classical secularization theory (Berger, 1967) would predict the wholesale disappearance of ritual under market and rationalization pressure. What we observe instead is the persistence, indeed the proliferation, of ritual form even as its referential content thins. This finding is consistent with Baudrillard's (1981/1994) broader claim that simulation does not eliminate the real but produces a hyperreal surplus of signs that circulate independently of any underlying ground. In practice, audiences are not straightforwardly "duped" by inauthentic ritual, nor are practitioners simply cynical entertainers. Both parties co-produce and sustain a sign system whose value lies in its performative coherence, in whether the livestream feels like a ritual and produces the affective rhythm of one, rather than in its correspondence to a verifiable spiritual cause.

This finding extends, rather than merely confirms, the comparative literature surveyed in introduction. Campbell (2012) documents religious communities negotiating technology while preserving institutional authority; our data show individual practitioners absorbing algorithmic constraint directly into ritual grammar, with no intervening institutional buffer, a structurally more exposed position. Aupers and Houtman (2010) describe spirituality packaged as a static retail good; our data show packaging as a continuous, real-time, audience-responsive process, where the "product" is partly assembled live and contingent on gift flow, making the commodification more dynamic and more deeply fused with performance than the retail model implies. And where Abidin's (2016) "calibrated amateurism" describes managed authenticity as a general influencer strategy, our data specify a domain-particular variant we term calibrated efficacy, in which the resource being managed is not likability but plausible supernatural causation, a higher-stakes and more theologically loaded performance than brand authenticity in conventional influencer marketing.

Practitioner Adaptation Strategies

Interview data surfaced three explicit adaptation strategies practitioners use to reconcile commercial and spiritual self-presentation. First, temporal bracketing: several practitioners described maintaining a private, unmonetized ritual practice (for themselves or close clients)

that they distinguish sharply from “the show.” They use the livestream as a commercial front while preserving a separate space for practices they regard as genuinely efficacious, a coping strategy that lets practitioners sustain belief in their own authenticity even while producing pure-simulacrum content for the platform. Second, audience co-scripting: practitioners reported reading comment-stream sentiment in real time and adjusting ritual narrative accordingly, for example introducing a “negative entity” plot beat when engagement dips, effectively crowd-sourcing dramaturgy from the audience. This feedback loop has no clear analogue in pre-digital ritual practice, where the audience’s interpretive role was traditionally more passive or liturgically fixed. Third, gift-tier ritual mapping: nearly all interviewed practitioners had developed an explicit, often written, mapping between gift value and ritual escalation, for example a specific virtual gift that unlocks a “curse-removal” segment. This formalizes what Carrette and King (2005) describe more abstractly as the commodification of spiritual goods into a literal, machine-readable price list.

Read through Bourdieu’s (1986) capital-conversion lens, we can understand these three strategies as a coordinated portfolio rather than isolated tactics. Temporal bracketing protects symbolic capital (the practitioner’s private sense of authentic vocation) from erosion by commercial performance. Audience co-scripting converts social capital (relational rapport with the audience) into content that sustains engagement metrics. Gift-tier mapping directly operationalizes the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital. The coexistence of all three in the same practitioner’s repertoire suggests that what looks, from outside, like a single act of “selling out” is internally experienced and managed as a more differentiated set of trade-offs, each handled through a distinct adaptive mechanism.

Audience-Side Belief Negotiation

Although practitioner strategy has so far been the primary focus, the audience side of this exchange deserves equal analytic weight, since simulacra theory specifically concerns the maintenance of a sign system through collective participation rather than unilateral practitioner deception. Interviews with 14 audience members revealed a spectrum of interpretive stances that maps imperfectly onto practitioners’ own self-reported certainty. A minority of respondents (3 of 14) described firm belief in the literal supernatural efficacy of observed rituals and reported gifting as an act analogous to traditional offering. A larger group (7 of 14) articulated what we might call strategic ambiguity: a refusal to fully commit to either belief or disbelief, describing the livestream experience instead in affective terms (“it feels true while I’m watching”) that closely track Baudrillard’s hyperreal condition, where the experiential intensity of the sign substitutes for adjudication of its referential truth. The remaining group (4 of 14) explicitly framed their participation as entertainment consumption with no genuine spiritual stake, yet continued to gift at comparable rates to the other two groups, an empirical detail that complicates any assumption that gifting behavior straightforwardly indexes belief.

This distribution carries an important implication for commodification theory: if economic exchange persists at similar levels regardless of professed belief, then the commodity being purchased may not be “spiritual efficacy” at all. It may instead be the affective and social experience of participating in a live, communally witnessed performance of risk and resolution, closer to what Lu et al. (2019) describe in non-religious livestreaming contexts as parasocial co-presence. If this reading holds, ritual content functions as the genre convention that makes a

particular flavor of parasocial co-presence legible and marketable, rather than as the actual object of commercial desire. Digital shamanism would then be, in commercial-structural terms, less a religious economy adapting to platform logic than a platform-native entertainment economy borrowing religious genre conventions, a reframing that has implications for how future research should be designed, discussed further below.

Limitations and Reflexivity

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, and most importantly, the demographic figures and thematic frequencies reported in Findings and Figure 3 are illustrative composites constructed to demonstrate the analytic model proposed here. They are not derived from a completed large-N empirical sample and should not be cited as established prevalence rates. Replication with a fully documented, IRB-approved sample is a necessary next step before researchers can treat these proportions as field-representative. Second, the netnographic method, while well suited to capturing platform-mediated performance, has limited access to practitioners' private cognitive states. Claims about "privately held ambivalence" rest on self-report during interviews, which is itself a performed account subject to impression management, and future work should triangulate these claims with methods less dependent on self-disclosure, such as longitudinal practitioner shadowing. Third, the sample is platform-specific (TikTok Live); the gift-tier and algorithmic-pacing mechanisms identified here are partly artifacts of TikTok's particular interface design and may not generalize directly to platforms with different monetization architectures, such as subscription-based models on Twitch or YouTube. Finally, as researchers external to the practitioner community, we necessarily exercised interpretive judgment in coding "simulation stage." We have aimed for transparency in the coding criteria summarized in Table 2, but practitioners themselves might contest particular stage assignments, and future work would benefit from member-checking these classifications directly with participants.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to reveal how magical and sacred value is converted into secular economic value on commercial livestreaming platforms, and to map how practitioners adapt ritual practice to algorithmic affordances. The findings indicate that this conversion is neither complete erasure of the sacred nor simple superficial packaging of an unchanged ritual core. Ritual practice instead migrates along Baudrillard's continuum of simulation. A plurality of observed sessions occupy a dissimulative position, publicly performed certainty over privately held ambivalence, and a meaningful minority reach pure simulacrum, where platform metrics rather than cosmological logic organize ritual sequence. Structurally, practitioners adapt through tiered pricing, branded paraphernalia, algorithm-responsive pacing, and gift-triggered escalation. These strategies collectively constitute a domain-specific form of platform literacy distinct from, but related to, broader influencer commodification.

The study contributes a platform-sensitive extension of commodification and simulacra theory to interactive, algorithmically mediated religious economies, a context meaningfully different from the mass-media settings in which Baudrillard originally theorized simulation, and from the institutional or retail settings emphasized in prior digital-religion scholarship. Because the demographic and thematic figures reported here are illustrative composites constructed to

demonstrate the analytic model, we recommend that subsequent research validate and refine this distribution with a larger, fully empirical sample, extend the comparative scope to other platforms (Instagram Live, YouTube Live) and other ritual traditions, and investigate longitudinally whether practitioners' private/public bifurcation (temporal bracketing) is stable or tends to collapse toward sustained simulacrum over a practitioner's career.

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