

# Social Media Rituals

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*"In space, no one can hear you think."*

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# 1 Social Media Rituals

## 1.1 Defining the Digital Rite: Conceptual Foundations

Human social existence has long been punctuated and structured by rituals – patterned, symbolic acts imbued with shared meaning that transcend the mundane. These are not merely habits or routines, though repetition is a core characteristic. A commute is a routine; lighting candles on a birthday cake is a ritual. The latter carries symbolic weight (marking the passage of time, celebrating life), fosters a sense of shared experience or *communitas* (as anthropologist Victor Turner termed the intense social bonding that rituals can generate), possesses a discernible structure (lighting, singing, extinguishing), and serves vital social functions. Anthropologists like Arnold van Gennep observed how traditional rituals act as societal scaffolding, particularly during *rites of passage* (birth, puberty, marriage, death), guiding individuals through transitions, reaffirming group bonds, imposing order on chaos, and expressing collective values. Bronisław Malinowski documented how Trobriand Islanders employed elaborate rituals before ocean voyages, not merely as technical procedures, but as mechanisms to manage the anxiety of the unknown and reinforce social cohesion. Crucially, rituals differ from habits through their intentional symbolism and shared cultural significance; brushing one’s teeth is a habit, while a ceremonial tea preparation is a ritual steeped in meaning. They are performative, often embedding narratives about who we are and what we value.

Transposing these deeply ingrained human impulses onto the dynamic, algorithmically mediated landscapes of social media platforms gives rise to the phenomenon of the **social media ritual**. These are recurring, patterned, symbolically laden behaviors enacted within digital environments, consciously or unconsciously shared by users, that serve similar social and psychological functions as their analog predecessors. Consider the near-universal act of posting birthday greetings on a friend’s Facebook timeline. This is not just a notification; it’s a digital rite of passage. It has structure (the post often includes celebratory emojis 🎉🎂, specific phrasing, and occurs within a defined timeframe), shared meaning (acknowledging the individual, reinforcing social ties), and generates a form of digital *communitas* as multiple users converge on the virtual space to participate. Key differentiators emerge in the digital sphere. Social media rituals are inherently **platform-dependent**, shaped by the specific **affordances** – the action possibilities designed into the interface – like the “Like” button, the ephemeral “Story,” or the hashtag (#). They possess **asynchronous potential** (participants need not be present simultaneously), offer unprecedented **scalability** (a hashtag can unite millions globally in moments), and are uniquely subject to **datafication** – the transformation of ritualistic actions (likes, shares, scrolls) into quantifiable metrics that feed back into the ritual experience itself (e.g., the dopamine hit from seeing high like counts). Core ritual elements persist: **Triggers** (push notifications buzzing, the habitual opening of an app), **Actions** (posting a curated image, leaving a supportive comment, scrolling through a feed), **Symbols** (the heart icon signifying affection or approval, specific filters denoting mood or aesthetic, hashtags acting as rallying points), all coalescing around **Shared Meaning** constructed by the user community.

Understanding these digital rites requires grounding them within established theoretical frameworks while acknowledging their novel context. Victor Turner’s concept of *liminality* – the “in-between” phase during

rituals where normal social structures dissolve – finds resonance in the immersive, often boundary-blurring experience of deep social media engagement, like live-tweeting a global event where geographical and social barriers temporarily fade amidst the shared commentary. His idea of *communitas* powerfully explains the intense, albeit often fleeting, sense of connection fostered during viral challenges or collective mourning online, where millions unite under a single hashtag, momentarily transcending individual differences. Arnold van Gennep’s tripartite structure of rites of passage (*separation, liminality/margin, reintegration*) offers a lens to analyze digital life transitions: the

## 1.2 Roots and Evolution: A Historical Trajectory

The theoretical frameworks illuminating digital rites of passage find their practical origins in the fertile, albeit textually constrained, soil of pre-social media online communities. Long before the algorithmic feeds of Facebook or the hashtag storms of Twitter, **bulletin board systems (BBS)** and **Internet forums** served as crucibles for nascent digital rituals. These early virtual spaces, characterized by asynchronous communication and distinct subcultures, fostered patterned behaviors essential for community cohesion and identity. The simple act of appending a personalized **“.sig” (signature file)** beneath a post transcended mere identification; it became a ritual of self-presentation, often featuring quotes, ASCII art, or contact details, marking one’s digital presence within a specific group. Forum conventions emerged organically, evolving into shared rituals: the declaration of **“First!”** upon initiating a new thread, a competitive ritual signifying primacy and attention-seeking; the structured formality of **FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)** serving as ritualized gatekeeping and knowledge transmission, demanding newcomers demonstrate respect for established norms before participation; and the notorious **“flame wars,”** intense, often hostile debates adhering to unwritten rules of escalation and rhetoric, functioning as conflict rituals that paradoxically reinforced group boundaries. Usenet newsgroups exemplified how shared practices – specific posting styles, in-jokes, and moderation rituals – forged powerful collective identities, transforming dispersed individuals into cohesive, ritual-bound digital tribes. These foundational practices established core elements later amplified on social platforms: symbolic markers, structured interaction, and the creation of belonging through shared, repeated action.

The emergence of dedicated **social networking sites (SNS)** in the early 2000s marked a pivotal shift, moving beyond topic-centric forums to platforms explicitly designed around personal identity and interpersonal connections. **Friendster (2002)**, despite its later decline, pioneered the ritual of **profile curation**. Filling out detailed profiles, selecting interests, and, crucially, showcasing one’s network of “Friends” became a fundamental ritual of digital self-construction and social validation. This evolved dramatically with **MySpace (2003)**, which unleashed unprecedented personalization. The **Top Friends list** wasn’t just a feature; it ignited intense social drama and negotiation, becoming a highly visible, ritualistic performance of alliance and hierarchy. Users agonized over rankings, friends negotiated positions, and exclusions carried significant social weight, mirroring offline social dynamics but amplified by public display. MySpace profiles became digital canvases for elaborate self-expression rituals, involving customized HTML/CSS layouts, curated song playlists (“Profile Songs”), and carefully chosen profile pictures. **Facebook (2004, initially TheFacebook)** initially presented a more restrained, university-centric environment. Yet, it introduced subtle, enduring ritu-

als like the **“Poke,”** a proto-ritual of ambiguous digital nudge – a low-stakes, playful gesture acknowledging connection without demanding substantive interaction. More significantly, early status updates (“[Name] is...”) evolved from simple presence indicators into foundational rituals of micro-narrative sharing and ambient awareness, laying the groundwork for the constant life-logging to come. This era cemented the **profile as the central ritual site** for identity performance and social connection management.

The landscape underwent another seismic shift with the rise of **microblogging**, epitomized by **Twitter (launched 2006)** and the transformation of Facebook’s **News Feed (introduced 2006)**. These innovations prioritized real-time, short-form updates, fundamentally altering the tempo and nature of digital rituals. Twitter’s constraints (initially 140 characters) fostered conciseness and spawned the revolutionary ritualistic symbol: the **hashtag (#)**. Originally conceived as a pragmatic organizational tool by users, the hashtag rapidly evolved into a powerful ritual mechanism. It functioned as a beacon, uniting disparate users around shared topics (**#Election2020**), events (**#Olympics**), emotions (**#MondayBlues**), or communities (**#BookTwitter**), generating spontaneous digital *communitas* on a massive scale. This enabled the ritual of **live-tweeting**, where users collectively narrated and reacted to unfolding events – award shows, sports games, political debates, natural disasters – in real-time, creating a shared, participatory experience akin to a global digital campfire. Simultaneously, the simple act of **“Favoriting”** (later “Liking”) on Twitter, and the equivalent “Like” on Facebook’s News Feed, crystallized into a core **affirmation ritual**. This single click became a ubiquitous, low-effort gesture of acknowledgment, support, or agreement, a fundamental building block of digital interaction and a potent source of micro-validation quantified by accumulating

### 1.3 The Daily Liturgy: Common Social Media Rituals

Building upon the historical evolution of social media rituals – from the foundational practices of forums and early social networks to the real-time, symbol-driven interactions catalyzed by microblogging and feeds – we arrive at the pervasive, often unconscious rituals that now weave themselves into the very fabric of daily digital life. These are not grand, event-specific performances, but rather the quiet liturgy of the everyday, the patterned behaviors that structure online existence, reaffirm identity, and maintain social bonds through countless micro-interactions. They form a recognizable digital rhythm, a shared script enacted by billions, often starting and ending the waking hours.

The diurnal cycle itself finds ritualistic expression online. **The Morning Scroll** has become a near-universal framing ritual for countless individuals. The act of reaching for a device upon waking, often before even rising, to check notifications and consume the overnight accrual of updates, serves multiple functions. It reorients the user to their social world, provides a sense of connection after the separation of sleep, and offers an algorithmic-curated snapshot of “what’s happening.” This ritual, frequently performed in bed or during the first sips of coffee, sets the emotional and informational tone for the day, priming the user for ongoing engagement. Conversely, **the Evening Wind-Down** often involves a final, sometimes protracted, scroll through feeds. This can be a deliberate attempt to decompress, catch up on the day’s social currents, or simply succumb to the hypnotic pull of the infinite feed. However, it can easily morph into the infamous “doomscroll,” where the ritual becomes compulsive, driven by anxiety or algorithmic reinforcement of neg-

ative content, disrupting sleep and blurring the boundaries between day and night, online and offline. These bookend rituals highlight the deep integration of platforms into circadian rhythms, facilitated by notification pings and the always-available nature of mobile devices, creating habitual loops of consumption that structure temporal experience.

Beyond the temporal anchors, social media provides powerful tools for **Life Logging & Milestone Marking**, transforming personal experiences into shared digital rites. Posting about birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, engagements, or new jobs functions as a contemporary **digital rite of passage**. Friends converging on a Facebook timeline to leave celebratory messages replicates, in asynchronous digital space, the communal acknowledgment once confined to physical gatherings. Sharing meticulously curated images of vacations, meals, or personal achievements – sometimes veiled as humblebrags – serves as a **status ritual**, subtly communicating social position, taste, and life progression to one's network. The conscious curation inherent in these posts is itself ritualistic, selecting the “right” image, crafting the accompanying text, and anticipating the validation to come. Furthermore, rituals like “**Throwback Thursday**” (#TBT) institutionalize nostalgia, creating a designated temporal space for users to ritually revisit and re-present curated fragments of their past. This is not merely reminiscence; it's a performance of personal history, often edited to reinforce current identity narratives or evoke specific emotional responses from the audience, transforming individual memory into a shared, scheduled social event.

Central to the sustenance of these performances are the pervasive **Validation & Affirmation Rituals**. The simple act of “**Liking**,” “**Hearting**,” or **upvoting** has evolved into a fundamental micro-affirmation. This single click or tap transcends mere acknowledgment; it functions as a ritualistic gesture of support, agreement, or presence. The accumulation of these signals becomes a quantifiable metric of social worth and attention, a tangible (though often shallow) indicator of belonging. The design reinforces this ritual: the satisfying haptic feedback of a “like,” the animation confirming the action, the visible tally increasing. Moving beyond the single click, **commenting** offers a more performative layer. Phrases like “Congrats!”, “So proud!”, or “Thoughts and prayers” become ritualistic scripts of support. While potentially heartfelt, their public nature and formulaic quality can sometimes render them performative obligations, expected responses within the social contract of the platform. The **significance of metrics** – likes, shares, views, follower counts – cannot be overstated. These numbers become the ritualistic validation feedback loop, providing dopamine hits and shaping user behavior. The pursuit of higher numbers can become an end in itself, driving the curation of content specifically designed to elicit these quantifiable affirmations.

Complementing the curation of one's own life and the seeking of validation is the **Sharing & Curation Rituals** that define how users disseminate content and shape their

## 1.4 Collective Effervescence: Event-Based & Community Rituals

While the daily liturgy of social media rituals structures individual experience and maintains social bonds, the platforms truly reveal their transformative power in facilitating moments of **collective effervescence** – Émile Durkheim's term describing the intense energy and sense of unity generated when groups physically gather for shared rituals. Transposed online, this effervescence manifests in large-scale, event-based, and

community-specific rituals that forge temporary, yet powerful, digital *communitas*, uniting strangers across vast distances through synchronous participation and shared symbolic action.

**The ritual of live event participation** exemplifies this digital synchrony. Platforms become virtual grandstands during global spectacles like the **Super Bowl, the Oscars, or major political debates**. Users engage in **#LiveTweet** rituals, transforming personal viewing into a collective, participatory narrative. During the **2022 FIFA World Cup final**, Twitter became a roaring global stadium; millions shared real-time reactions, memes (like Mbappé’s determined glare), and GIFs within seconds of key plays, using hashtags like **#WorldCupFinal**. This simultaneous commentary creates a shared temporal experience, dissolving geographical isolation. The collective gasp at a near-miss or the synchronized celebration of a goal manifests through emoji storms (👀👀👀) and trending phrases, generating a palpable, albeit virtual, sense of being part of a massive crowd. Platforms amplify this through features like Twitter’s “Happening Now” or Facebook’s “Watch Parties,” deliberately designing interfaces that foster co-presence and real-time reaction rituals, turning passive viewers into active co-creators of the event’s social meaning.

This phenomenon extends beyond scheduled events to the spontaneous eruption of **viral challenges and memetic rituals**. These are structured, often playful, sequences of action that spread rapidly through imitation and adaptation, creating waves of global participation. The **Ice Bucket Challenge (2014)** stands as a paradigm: participants filmed themselves dumping ice water over their heads, nominated others, and shared videos primarily on Facebook, all to raise awareness and funds for ALS. Its success lay in its clear ritual structure (action + nomination + donation prompt), low barrier to entry, tangible cause, and the performative, often humorous, element shared publicly. Similarly, the **#HarlemShake (2013)** videos followed a rigid formula (one person dancing alone amidst indifference, cut to everyone dancing wildly in costumes), inviting endless creative variations. **TikTok dances**, like the “**Renegade**” or “**Kiki Challenge**,” become complex, learnable routines disseminated through instructional videos, transforming personal expression into a global participatory ritual. Memes themselves – like “**Distracted Boyfriend**” or “**Woman Yelling at a Cat**” – function as shared cultural symbols and inside jokes. Their ritualistic cycle involves recognition, adaptation to new contexts, and sharing within communities, reinforcing group identity through collective understanding and humor. These challenges thrive on platform affordances enabling easy video creation, remixing, and sharing, often amplified algorithmically to maximize participation and spread.

Moving from play to profound social impact, **hashtag activism and collective mourning** leverage the ritualistic power of the hashtag for solidarity and commemoration. Movements like **#MeToo (2017)** and **#BlackLivesMatter (initiated 2013, global resurgence 2020)** transformed the hashtag from an organizational tool into a **digital rallying cry and solidarity ritual**. Sharing personal stories under **#MeToo** or reposting educational resources and protest information under **#BLM** became acts of collective witness and resistance. Changing profile pictures to a black square (**#BlackoutTuesday, 2020**) or overlaying frames with specific slogans served as visible, ritualistic declarations of alignment and support, creating a visual sea of unity across networks. These acts generate digital *communitas*, a powerful sense of shared purpose and belonging among participants, even asynchronously. Similarly, platforms become sites for **digital grief rituals**. Following tragedies like the **Christchurch mosque shootings (2019)** or the **passing of public figures like Queen Elizabeth II (2022)**, users converge online. **RIP posts** flood timelines, virtual memorials are created,



profile pictures might be adorned with mourning filters or symbolic colors, and hashtags like #RIP serve as focal points for collective expressions of sorrow, condolence, and remembrance. These rituals provide a space

## 1.5 The Engine Room: Psychological Drivers & Needs

The profound sense of connection witnessed during hashtag activism and global mourning rituals, the synchronised exuberance of viral challenges, and even the comforting rhythm of daily validation exchanges – these phenomena beg the fundamental question: why? What deep-seated human needs and cognitive mechanisms do these pervasive social media rituals satisfy? Beneath the surface of profiles, feeds, and notifications lies the engine room of human psychology, where ancient drives find expression through novel digital conduits. Examining these psychological drivers reveals that the allure of social media rituals stems not merely from novelty, but from their potent ability to fulfill enduring, fundamental human requirements.

**Foremost among these is the primal Need for Belonging & Connection**, a drive extensively documented by psychologists like Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary. Social media rituals function as remarkably efficient tools for building and maintaining **social capital** in the digital age. The simple, repetitive act of liking a friend’s post or responding to their story with a quick emoji reinforces social bonds with minimal effort, akin to digital grooming rituals observed in primates. This is particularly crucial in mitigating **perceived isolation**. For individuals experiencing geographical displacement, social anxiety, or life transitions, participating in the daily liturgy – the morning scroll, the birthday greeting, the shared meme – provides a vital sense of embeddedness within a community, however virtual. Rituals foster **parasocial relationships** too; the regular consumption of an influencer’s curated “day in the life” stories or live Q&As creates a simulated sense of intimacy and connection, fulfilling belonging needs even with non-reciprocal figures. Crucially, hashtags like #BookTwitter or #PlantParents facilitate Benedict Anderson’s concept of “**imagined communities**,” connecting dispersed individuals who share niche interests. Through shared ritualistic practices – using specific jargon, participating in themed days like #FictionFriday, or collectively live-tweeting a book launch – members co-create a powerful sense of belonging to a global tribe defined by shared passions, proving that physical proximity is no longer a prerequisite for *communitas*. The ritualistic convergence around #MeToo stories wasn’t just activism; it was millions finding profound connection and solidarity in shared vulnerability.

These rituals are inextricably linked to **Identity Construction & Self-Presentation**. Social media platforms provide unparalleled stages for the ongoing project of the self, heavily reliant on ritualistic behaviours. **Curating an online persona** – selecting which vacation photos to post, crafting witty captions, choosing filters that reflect a desired mood or aesthetic – is a constant, ritualized performance. Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, distinguishing between **frontstage and backstage** behaviour, finds potent application here. Users meticulously craft their “frontstage” feeds, engaging in rituals of selective sharing that project competence, happiness, adventure, or specific political alignments. Simultaneously, features like ephemeral “stories” often function as a more casual, “backstage” space for less curated, fleeting glimpses, yet even these are performative rituals governed by platform norms. Rituals become tools for **exploring different facets of**



**identity**, particularly for adolescents or individuals in flux. Joining specific groups, adopting subcultural memes, or experimenting with different presentation styles online allows for identity play and rehearsal in a relatively low-risk environment. Underpinning this performance is the constant **seeking of validation and affirmation**. The ritual of posting is frequently incomplete without the anticipated ritual response: the likes, the heart emojis, the supportive comments. These quantifiable signals serve as crucial feedback loops, confirming whether the presented self is being accepted and valued by the desired audience. The teenager posting a carefully angled selfie engages in a complex ritual not just of self-display, but of seeking external confirmation of their evolving self-image.

Beyond social and identity needs, social media rituals powerfully address the **Need for Information Seeking & Sense-Making** in an increasingly complex world. Platforms have evolved into primary **ritualistic news consumption** hubs. For many, the morning scroll serves as a ritualised way to “catch up” on overnight events, often replacing traditional newspaper reading or TV news broadcasts. The specific sequence – perhaps checking a curated Twitter/X list of trusted journalists first, then scanning algorithmic feeds, then diving into specific hashtags during breaking news – becomes a personalised information-gathering liturgy. These rituals also function as vital tools for **managing information overload**. Following trusted accounts, joining specialised groups (like neighbourhood Facebook groups for hyperlocal news), or relying on algorithmic discovery for niche interests (like Instagram’s Explore page for hobbies

## 1.6 Architects of Interaction: Platform Design & Algorithmic Shaping

The profound psychological needs explored in the previous section – the craving for belonging, the imperative of identity construction, the quest for information and control – do not exist in a vacuum. They are met, shaped, and often expertly exploited within digital environments meticulously engineered to elicit specific, repeatable behaviors. Social media platforms are not neutral stages; they are active architects, employing sophisticated interface design, algorithmic systems, and behavioural psychology principles to deliberately cultivate and reinforce the ritualistic patterns that define user experience. Understanding these rituals requires moving beyond user psychology to examine the **deliberate design choices** that transform human impulses into predictable, platform-serving actions.

**The foundation lies in Affordances as Ritual Triggers.** Affordances, as defined by psychologist James Gibson and adapted to technology by Donald Norman, are the perceived action possibilities offered by an environment or object. On social platforms, specific interface elements are designed to *invite* ritualistic responses, acting as constant prompts that demand user attention and action. The most pervasive trigger is the **notification**. The coloured badge, the distinctive ping, the vibration – these are not mere information alerts; they are carefully engineered interruptions designed to hijack attention and compel a ritualistic checking response. The dopamine anticipation loop begins with this trigger, pulling users back into the app regardless of context. Similarly, **endless scrolling**, coupled with **auto-playing videos** (especially prominent on TikTok and Instagram Reels), creates a frictionless pathway designed for prolonged, often mindless, consumption. The absence of a natural stopping point transforms browsing into a ritualistic trance state, where the simple act of pulling down to refresh becomes a repetitive gesture akin to a prayer wheel, perpetually seeking new

content. Perhaps the most potent ritualistic affordance is the ubiquitous **“Like” button** and its evolved kin, **reaction emojis**. These reduce complex human responses – agreement, sympathy, amusement, anger – to a single, effortless tap. This simplification is deliberate; it lowers the barrier to participation, encouraging constant micro-interactions that generate valuable engagement data while fulfilling the user’s need for quick validation or expression. The satisfying haptic feedback or visual animation accompanying a “like” further reinforces the ritual, making the action intrinsically rewarding.

**These triggers initiate rituals, but their persistence and form are heavily sculpted by Algorithmic Curation & Ritual Reinforcement.** Platform feeds are not chronological windows into a user’s network; they are dynamic landscapes curated by complex algorithms prioritizing content likely to trigger further ritual engagement – likes, comments, shares, prolonged viewing. When a user consistently pauses to watch baking videos, the algorithm learns to prioritize similar content in their feed, reinforcing the ritual of seeking out this specific type of information or entertainment. **Recommendation systems** on platforms like TikTok’s “For You Page” or YouTube’s “Up Next” actively *suggest* new rituals. By surfacing trending challenges, niche communities, or specific creator content, these systems introduce users to novel behavioural patterns they are encouraged to adopt. A user might see a dance challenge for the first time via recommendation; participation then becomes a new ritual learned and potentially repeated. Furthermore, algorithms create **personalized ritual sequences**. The sequence of seeing a friend’s post, liking it, then being prompted to comment (“Add a comment?”) or share (“Send this to a friend who needs to see it?”) is not random. It’s a carefully orchestrated flow designed to maximize interaction depth based on predicted user behaviour. The algorithm learns that a user who likes a travel post from a certain friend is highly likely to then comment if prompted, thus reinforcing that specific ritual chain. This constant algorithmic shaping ensures that user rituals evolve, but always within pathways that serve the platform’s core metric: sustained engagement.

**To deepen engagement and transform participation into compulsion, platforms heavily employ Gamification & Reward Structures.** By overlaying game-like mechanics onto non-game contexts, they tap into fundamental drives for achievement, status, and collection. **Streaks**, popularized by Snapchat and adopted by platforms like Duolingo, are a prime example. Maintaining a consecutive day streak for messaging a friend or completing a lesson leverages loss aversion (the fear of breaking the chain) to ritualize daily interaction, regardless of genuine motivation. **Badges, levels, and virtual trophies** awarded for milestones (e.g., “Top Fan” badges on Facebook pages, Twitter “Blue” verification as status symbol) function as ritualistic goals, providing tangible (though artificial) markers of progress and status within the platform ecosystem. Most fundamentally, the **quantified social metrics** themselves – follower counts, like tallies, view counts, share numbers – are transformed into the ultimate ritualistic goals. These numbers become a public scoreboard, a quantifiable measure of social capital and attention. The ritual of constantly checking these metrics, strategizing posts to increase them, and experiencing the dopamine surge when they rise, turns social

## 1.7 Cultural Mosaics: Global Variations & Local Adaptations

While platform design and algorithmic reinforcement create powerful universal engines driving ritualistic engagement, the expression of these rituals is far from monolithic. Social media does not homogenize cul-

ture; instead, it becomes a canvas upon which deeply ingrained local norms, values, and communication styles are vividly projected and adapted. The seemingly ubiquitous “like” or morning scroll takes on distinct flavours, meanings, and platforms of choice depending on geographic, cultural, and demographic contexts, revealing a fascinating global mosaic of digital ritual practice.

**Platform preferences themselves form the bedrock of this divergence, creating distinct ritual ecosystems.** In China, **WeChat** transcends mere messaging to function as a **digital Swiss Army knife**, deeply integrated into daily life rituals far beyond social networking. Its “Red Packet” feature transforms the traditional Chinese New Year custom of giving money in red envelopes into a vibrant digital ritual, complete with animated graphics and group distribution, facilitating gifting during holidays and even casual occasions like group dinners. Payment via QR codes within WeChat Pay is another pervasive ritual, seamlessly blending commerce with social interaction. Contrast this with the **Global South**, where **Facebook (often accessed via lightweight Facebook Lite) and WhatsApp** frequently serve as **de facto national infrastructures**. In countries like India, Brazil, or Nigeria, WhatsApp groups become central hubs for family communication, community organizing, business transactions, and news dissemination. The ritual of forwarding messages – jokes, news, religious content – within these massive groups, often layered with specific forwarding labels (“Good Morning,” “Very Important”), reflects local communication styles and trust networks, though it also amplifies challenges like misinformation. Meanwhile, in **Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan**, **Line** dominates, its character-driven **sticker culture** defining affirmation rituals. Sending a Cony or Brown sticker isn’t just communication; it’s a nuanced ritual conveying complex emotions, social standing (using limited-edition stickers), and group belonging in a manner deeply resonant with local aesthetics and indirect communication norms. Regional platforms like **Vkontakte (VK) in Russia** foster their own unique ritual spaces, blending social networking with file sharing and event organization, reflecting local internet histories and usage patterns distinct from Western analogues. These platform choices fundamentally shape *which* digital rituals become dominant within a culture.

**Cultural norms powerfully sculpt how individuals perform common social media rituals, particularly concerning self-presentation and interaction.** Cultures emphasizing **individualism** (common in North America and Western Europe) often foster rituals centred on **personal branding and self-promotion**. Curating a unique aesthetic feed on Instagram, crafting witty standalone tweets, or sharing personal achievements as individual milestones are prominent. Conversely, cultures with stronger **collectivist** tendencies (prevalent across much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) often manifest rituals that prioritize **group harmony, family ties, and community reputation**. Posts frequently feature family gatherings, group achievements, or expressions of gratitude towards the collective. **Privacy norms** also significantly impact sharing rituals. Germans, known for high privacy concerns, often exhibit stricter boundaries between professional and personal life across platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook, while in Brazil, sharing across broad networks, including acquaintances, is more common and accepted. **Rituals of politeness and conflict** vary dramatically. Japanese online interactions often retain layers of formality and indirectness seen offline, with specific honorifics and careful avoidance of public confrontation (“soto” vs. “uchi” distinctions translating online). Humour, a key ritual element, is deeply culturally coded; memes and viral jokes that resonate in one region may fall flat or even cause offence in another due to differing historical contexts or taboos. The performance

of support during collective events also differs; while changing profile pictures is a global ritual, the specific symbols chosen and the intensity of participation are filtered through local sensibilities and political contexts.

**Beyond adapting global forms, unique localized rituals and memes emerge organically, reflecting specific cultural touchstones and social realities.** Country-specific **viral challenges** often blend global formats with local traditions. India saw the massive **#HarGharTiranga** (Every Home a Tricolour

## 1.8 The Shadow Side: Critiques, Controversies, & Harms

While the culturally specific rituals explored in the previous section demonstrate the remarkable adaptability of digital practices, they also unfold within platforms whose fundamental architectures and business models generate significant negative consequences. Beneath the surface of connection and self-expression lies a pervasive **Shadow Side**, where the very rituals designed to fulfill human needs can morph into sources of harm, manipulation, and societal fracture. This section confronts the critiques, controversies, and documented harms arising from the entanglement of deeply human ritual impulses with the extractive logic of surveillance capitalism.

**The relentless Performance Pressure & Authenticity Debates** represent a core tension within social media rituals. The carefully curated feeds and life-logging rituals discussed earlier foster the pervasive **“highlight reel” effect**. Users are constantly bombarded with idealized snapshots of others’ lives – perfect vacations, professional successes, harmonious relationships – creating unrealistic benchmarks for personal achievement and happiness. This ritualistic curation leads to inevitable social comparison, particularly impacting adolescents and young adults whose identities are still forming. Studies, such as the 2017 report by the Royal Society for Public Health in the UK, consistently linked platforms like Instagram, heavily reliant on visual perfection rituals, to increased anxiety, depression, and poor body image, especially among teenage girls. This pressure fuels **performative activism and virtue signaling**. Rituals like changing profile frames to support a cause (**#BlackLivesMatter**, rainbow flags during Pride) or sharing viral infographics can become shallow performances devoid of substantive action, more about signaling in-group belonging and moral standing than effecting change. The resulting **authenticity crisis** is palpable. Users feel pressure to maintain meticulously crafted online personas, creating a dissonance between the ritualistic frontstage performance and the messier backstage reality. Movements like “Instagram vs Reality,” where influencers deliberately post unedited photos alongside their polished shots, emerged as a direct counter-ritual, highlighting the exhaustion and inauthenticity bred by constant performance.

Furthermore, the repetitive, dopamine-driven nature of many core rituals lays fertile ground for **Addiction, Compulsion, & Mental Health deterioration**. What begins as a habitual morning scroll or a quick check for notifications can easily tip into **compulsive usage**. The ritual cycle – trigger (notification), action (checking), reward (new content, likes) – exploits the brain’s reward pathways, creating patterns neurologically similar to substance dependence. Features deliberately engineered for ritual reinforcement become conduits for harm: **endless scrolling** eliminates natural stopping cues, **auto-play** videos demand continuous attention, and the **variable reward schedule** (not knowing when the next ‘like’ or interesting post will appear) is a powerful psychological hook famously used in slot machines. This fosters **problematic usage**, characterized

by an inability to reduce screen time despite negative consequences, neglect of real-world relationships and responsibilities, and heightened anxiety or irritability when disconnected. The impact on **mental health, particularly among youth**, is increasingly alarming. Internal Facebook research leaked in 2021 revealed the company's own findings that Instagram exacerbated body image issues for 1 in 3 teenage girls and worsened anxiety and depression for many. The constant **validation-seeking rituals** tie self-worth to external metrics (likes, followers), creating fragile self-esteem vulnerable to the inevitable fluctuations of online attention, contributing to rising rates of anxiety and depression documented globally. Sleep disruption from late-night doomscrolling further compounds these issues.

The ritualistic patterns of information sharing and community formation also facilitate the spread of **Misinformation, Polarization, & Echo Chambers**. The ease of **ritualistic sharing** – the rapid retweet, the quick forward in a WhatsApp group – often bypasses critical evaluation, especially when content aligns with pre-existing beliefs or triggers strong emotions (fear, outrage). This becomes particularly dangerous during crises, as seen with the rampant spread of COVID-19 misinformation (e.g., the viral “Plandemic” video) or false

## 1.9 Resistance and Subversion: Counter-Rituals and Platform Exit

Faced with the documented harms of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic manipulation, and the mental toll of constant performance – the “highlight reel” effect, compulsive validation-seeking, and the erosion of truth explored in the previous section – a growing cohort of users is actively resisting the dominant paradigms of social media. This resistance manifests not as wholesale abandonment for most, but through conscious subversion, the creation of counter-rituals, strategic disengagement, and sometimes, complete platform exit. These responses reflect a burgeoning awareness of the extractive nature of mainstream platforms and a desire to reclaim agency over digital sociality, forging new paths that prioritize well-being, authenticity, and community governance.

**Conscious Non-Participation & Boundary Setting** represents the most accessible layer of resistance, focused on reclaiming personal space and mental bandwidth within existing platforms. This involves deliberate acts of **digital detoxing**, often framed as “dopamine fasting,” where users periodically abstain from all social media for days or weeks. These detoxes function as counter-rituals, disrupting the ingrained habit loops described in Section 6 and providing space for reflection on usage patterns and their real-world impacts. More commonly, users engage in **intentional limitation of ritual engagement**. This includes disabling non-essential notifications, breaking the cycle of compulsive checking by silencing the constant digital summons. Utilizing built-in **screen time trackers** and setting daily limits (though often easily bypassed) creates a ritual of self-monitoring and constraint. Others employ **app removal** during work hours or weekends, reinstalling only during designated “check-in” times, transforming access into a deliberate act rather than a reflexive urge. Furthermore, **curating feeds** becomes a powerful act of resistance. Unfollowing accounts that trigger envy or anxiety, muting keywords associated with negativity or misinformation, and actively seeking out diverse or uplifting content transforms the algorithmic feed from a source of stress into a more intentionally constructed space. The rise of features like Instagram’s “Following” feed (a chronological view) and

Twitter/X's Lists function are often utilized in this way, enabling users to sidestep engagement-optimized algorithmic feeds and re-establish a sense of control over their consumption rituals. These micro-resistances are about setting boundaries within the system, carving out pockets of autonomy.

**Simultaneously, Parody, Satire, & Platform Critique** leverage the very tools of social media to expose and undermine its dominant rituals. A vibrant ecosystem of **meme accounts and satirical creators** targets the performative nature of online life. Instagram accounts like @influencersinthewild mock the absurd lengths taken for the perfect shot, while TikTok creators satirize performative wellness culture or the staged authenticity of “day in the life” vlogs. Twitter accounts exist solely to retweet particularly egregious examples of virtue signaling or humblebragging, dissecting the underlying mechanics of these ritualistic performances through collective mockery. **Hashtag hijacking** serves as another tactic. Campaigns or corporate hashtags designed to foster positive brand association (#ShareACoke, #BrandPride) can be subverted by users to highlight hypocrisy, share criticism, or promote counter-narratives. Users also employ **platform features ironically to critique the platform itself**. Posting lengthy manifestos about digital burnout *on* Instagram, sharing screenshots of notification settings urging others to “turn it off” *on* Twitter, or using the ephemeral “story” format to document a digital detox – these actions use the medium against its grain, highlighting the inherent contradictions of seeking liberation within the confines of the very system being critiqued. This meta-commentary fosters critical awareness among audiences and functions as a collective counter-ritual of skepticism.

**Another potent strategy involves Migration to Alternative Platforms & the “Fediverse”**. Disillusioned by the data harvesting, opaque algorithms, and toxicity prevalent on major platforms, users seek digital havens with different values and affordances. The **decentralized “Fediverse”**, powered by open protocols like ActivityPub, offers a stark contrast. Platforms like **Mastodon** (a microblogging alternative to Twitter/X) consist of independently operated servers (“instances”) often focused on specific interests or communities (e.g., mastodon.art for artists, fosstodon.org for open-source enthusiasts). Rituals here differ: the absence of algorithmic feeds emphasizes chronological order and deliberate community discovery; the lack of engagement-optimization reduces the pressure for performative posting; and community moderation norms, often established democratically, foster distinct cultures of interaction. The **ritual of migration itself** – announcing one’s departure from a mainstream platform, sharing new profile

## 1.10 The Ritualized Economy: Influencers, Brands, and Monetization

The migration to alternative platforms explored in the previous section reflects a quest for digital spaces less dominated by extractive logic, yet even as users seek refuge, the mainstream social media landscape is profoundly shaped by a parallel force: the harnessing of its core rituals for commercial gain. The profound human needs and patterned behaviors that fuel social media engagement – the craving for connection, identity validation, and shared meaning – have become the bedrock of a vast **Ritualized Economy**. Within this economy, influencers meticulously perform curated rituals, brands co-opt or create new ones, and the very mechanics of platform engagement are transformed into calculable strategies for growth and monetization, turning deeply social acts into lucrative ventures.



**The Influencer Persona itself is a sustained ritual performance.** Far beyond occasional posting, successful influencers construct entire narrative arcs through meticulously staged, recurring content formats that followers anticipate and engage with as digital liturgy. Consider the ubiquitous **“Get Ready With Me” (GRWM)** video, a ritualistic unfolding of beauty routines or outfit selections often framed as intimate, behind-the-scenes glimpses. This format, perfected by beauty gurus like Kylie Jenner and everyday creators alike, transforms mundane acts into shared, voyeuristic experiences, building parasocial intimacy. Similarly, the **“Day in the Life”** vlog offers a curated, ritualistic documentation of a supposedly typical 24 hours, often featuring highly aestheticized meals, workouts, and workspaces, projecting an aspirational lifestyle narrative. These are not spontaneous captures but carefully scripted performances adhering to predictable beats and visual languages, satisfying the audience’s desire for structure and fantasy. Live-streaming sessions, particularly popular on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, become interactive rituals where Q&As, shared viewing (watch parties), or simply “chatting” with fans foster a powerful, albeit commodified, sense of real-time connection and community. Crucially, **sponsorships are seamlessly woven into these ritualistic sequences.** The influencer casually sipping a branded drink during their morning routine, demonstrating a makeup product within a GRWM, or dedicating a specific “unboxing” segment within a vlog transforms the ritual itself into an advertising vehicle. The audience’s trust in the performer’s authenticity, cultivated through the consistent ritual, becomes the currency leveraged for brand integration, blurring the lines between personal sharing and commercial endorsement.

**Brands actively participate in and engineer social media rituals, recognizing their power to build loyalty and drive engagement.** Rather than merely placing ads, they create or co-opt existing ritualistic behaviours. **Branded challenges** are prime examples. Chipotle’s #GuacDance challenge (2019), encouraging users to post videos dancing for free guacamole, leveraged the existing TikTok dance ritual format, injecting brand awareness into a participatory cultural moment. Similarly, Coca-Cola’s long-running #ShareACoke campaign personalized bottles, turning the act of finding one’s name, sharing a Coke, and posting about it into a global ritual of personalization and connection tied to the brand. **Hashtag campaigns** often aim to foster **rituals of brand loyalty through User-Generated Content (UGC).** GoPro’s #GoPro hashtag isn’t just for categorization; it’s an invitation for users to ritually share their most epic adventures captured with the camera, creating a vast, self-perpetuating archive of authentic-looking testimonials that reinforce the brand’s adventurous image. Starbucks’ annual #RedCupContest ritualizes the arrival of holiday cups, encouraging artistic customization and sharing. Furthermore, the **unboxing video**, pioneered by tech reviewers but now ubiquitous, has evolved into a potent ritual in its own right. The suspenseful unwrapping, the careful presentation of components, and the immediate reaction critique transform consumer acquisition into a shared, performative experience heavily utilized by brands and creators to generate hype and social proof, turning the first physical touchpoint with a product into a digital spectacle.

**Underpinning the success of influencers and brands within this ritualized economy is the practice of Algorithmic Hacking & Growth Rituals.** Success demands understanding and appeasing the opaque algorithms that govern visibility. This has spawned a repertoire of **ritualistic practices aimed at optimizing content delivery.** Adherence to **optimal posting times**, determined through analytics tools or platform insights, becomes a sacred schedule, believed to maximize the chances of appearing in followers’ feeds



when they are most active. The formation of **engagement pods** – groups of users agreeing to ritualistically like, comment

### 1.11 Future Trajectories: Emerging Rituals & Technological Shifts

The relentless monetization and algorithmic optimization shaping current social media rituals, as explored in the previous section, unfold against a backdrop of accelerating technological change. As platforms evolve and entirely new digital paradigms emerge, the fundamental human impulse for ritual is poised to adapt, generating novel forms of expression, connection, and potential exploitation. The future trajectory of social media rituals will be profoundly shaped by four interconnected technological and societal shifts: the spatial web of the metaverse, the pervasive intelligence of artificial intelligence, the disruptive potential of decentralization, and the dissolving boundaries between digital and biological realms.

**The nascent concept of the Metaverse – persistent, immersive virtual worlds – promises to revolutionize social media rituals by reintroducing embodied presence and spatial context.** Early platforms like **Meta’s Horizon Worlds**, **VRChat**, and segments of **Roblox** offer glimpses into this future. Rituals here transcend the flat feed, evolving into spatial, synchronous gatherings. Imagine virtual conferences where avatars exchange business cards with a gesture, digital concerts like **Travis Scott’s record-breaking Fortnite event** (12.3 million concurrent attendees in 2020) evolving into recurring festival rituals with custom emotes and virtual merchandise, or even VR-based religious services where participants gather around a digital altar. **Digital fashion and avatar customization** become central, intricate rituals of identity expression, far exceeding profile picture selection. Users might spend hours ritualistically assembling unique outfits for a virtual gala or altering their avatar’s appearance to reflect mood shifts, creating a dynamic, three-dimensional persona. The **potential for entirely new ritual forms** emerges: spatial storytelling where communities collaboratively explore narrative environments, virtual memorials held at persistent digital locations linked to real-world significance, or complex trade and creation rituals within user-generated virtual economies. These embodied interactions could foster deeper *communitas* than asynchronous feeds, but also raise questions about accessibility, digital divides, and the potential for new forms of exclusion or harassment within immersive spaces.

**Parallel to spatial computing, AI-Driven Personalization is rapidly moving beyond algorithmic feeds towards crafting deeply individualized ritual sequences and synthetic interactions.** Platforms already utilize AI to curate content, but future iterations will generate **hyper-personalized narrative arcs**. Imagine an AI companion app that not only summarizes your friends’ updates but weaves them into a personalized daily “story” digest, complete with synthesized narration reflecting your preferred tone. **Rituals involving co-creation with AI** are burgeoning: users of platforms like **MidJourney** or **DALL-E** engage in iterative prompt-crafting rituals, refining text descriptions to generate unique images shared as expressions of imagination. **Character.ai** allows users to ritualistically converse with AI simulations of historical figures or fictional characters, fulfilling niche companionship or learning needs. However, this deep personalization carries significant **ethical concerns**. The rise of sophisticated deepfakes, demonstrated by tools like **Microsoft’s VASA-1** capable of generating highly realistic talking faces from a single image and audio clip,

threatens to weaponize trust within ritualistic contexts. Synthetic relationships with AI entities, while offering companionship, risk deepening isolation and blurring the lines between authentic human connection and algorithmically simulated intimacy. Rituals built around AI-generated content or companions necessitate new frameworks for consent, transparency, and critical media literacy to prevent manipulation and preserve genuine social bonds.

**Simultaneously, growing disillusionment with centralized platforms fuels exploration into Decentralization, Blockchain, and alternative governance models, potentially reshaping the underlying logic of social rituals.** Technologies like blockchain enable concepts of **user-owned data and digital assets**. Projects like the **Solid protocol** (spearheaded by Tim Berners-Lee) envision personal data pods controlled by users, fundamentally altering the ritual of data generation. Sharing personal updates or preferences would become a deliberate, granular act of permission, not an inherent byproduct of platform use. **New monetization rituals** are emerging within this space, though their long-term viability remains tested. **Microtransactions** via cryptocurrencies could allow direct, frictionless tipping during live streams or for valued contributions within communities. **\*\*NFTs (Non-F**

## 1.12 Conclusion: The Enduring Ritual Impulse in a Networked Age

The relentless innovation driving social media's future – from the spatial rituals of the metaverse to the hyper-personalized sequences shaped by AI, and the disruptive potential of decentralized models like Solid – underscores a fundamental truth illuminated throughout this exploration: the human drive for ritual is not merely adapting to the digital realm; it is being actively redefined by it. As we conclude this comprehensive examination, we must synthesize the intricate tapestry woven across previous sections, acknowledging both the profound utility and inherent tensions within social media rituals, while contemplating the path forward in our increasingly networked existence.

**Recapitulating our journey reveals ritual's indispensable role as Digital Social Glue.** Social media rituals, as patterned, symbolic acts imbued with shared meaning, fulfill core anthropological functions long observed in offline societies, albeit through novel digital conduits. They facilitate **meaning-making** in a complex world, providing frameworks to interpret personal milestones (birthday timelines as digital rites of passage) and global events (live-tweeting crises). They are potent engines for **community building**, forging bonds of *communitas* – whether fleeting, as in viral dance challenges like the #Renegade, or enduring, within niche communities like #BookTwitter through shared jargon and themed rituals (#FictionFriday). They are central to **identity formation**, enabling the curated performance of self through profile construction and life-logging, while also offering spaces for exploration and validation. Crucially, they impose **structure** on the overwhelming flow of digital life – the morning scroll orienting us, the evening wind-down marking closure (however imperfectly), hashtags organizing chaos into comprehensible streams. From the pre-dawn notification check to the collective mourning under a global hashtag, these rituals address deep-seated human needs for belonging, understanding, and order, proving Victor Turner's insights on ritual's cohesive power remain strikingly relevant in the algorithmic age.

However, this power is profoundly **Ambivalent**. The very mechanisms that foster connection can simultane-

ously enable manipulation and harm. The dopamine loop triggered by a “like” notification fuels engagement but also underpins **addiction and mental health strains**, particularly for adolescents navigating the “highlight reel” pressure documented in internal Facebook research. The algorithmic amplification that makes #BlackLivesMatter a global solidarity ritual also **reinforces echo chambers**, ritualistically circulating misinformation within polarized groups, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic with the “Plandemic” video. The platforms engineered to host these rituals operate on **surveillance capitalism**, transforming our most intimate gestures of affirmation, grief, or celebration – the birthday wish, the RIP post – into quantifiable data points for targeted advertising. The commodification explored in Section 10, where brands co-opt rituals like the #GuacDance or influencers monetize their “day in the life” performances, highlights the tension between organic human expression and engineered extraction. This duality – profound connection versus engineered compulsion, authentic *communitas* versus performative virtue signaling, empowering self-expression versus corrosive social comparison – defines the digital ritual landscape.

Navigating this ambivalence demands heightened **Agency, Awareness, & Intentional Design**. User agency manifests in the **conscious resistance** chronicled in Section 9: digital detoxes disrupting habit loops, meticulously curated feeds muting toxicity, the migration to platforms like Mastodon seeking different ritual norms. Critical awareness is paramount: recognizing how notification pings trigger compulsive checks, understanding that follower counts are gamified metrics rather than true measures of worth, and questioning the authenticity behind viral challenges or sponsored content. This awareness empowers users to engage more deliberately, transforming passive ritual participation into active choice. Equally crucial is advocating for and implementing **ethical platform design**. Movements like the Center for Humane Technology, co-founded by former Google design ethicist Tristan Harris, push for features that respect user well-being: chronological feeds offering an alternative to engagement-optimized algorithms, robust time-management tools that aren’t easily bypassed, friction mechanisms to combat impulsive sharing of misinformation, and transparency about data usage. The potential exists to **consciously design positive digital rituals** – perhaps structures facilitating deeper dialogue, tools supporting collaborative problem-solving beyond hashtag activism, or spaces nurturing digital mindfulness rather than endless consumption. The goal is not the eradication of ritual, but the cultivation of rituals that align with human flourishing rather than corporate profit or algorithmic efficiency.

Ultimately, social media rituals represent far more than