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A typology of social media rituals

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Abstract

Given its massive volume and rapid development of new trends, the universe of user-generated content may seem utterly chaotic. Yet the flow of content is underlined by deep-rooted patterns of communication. In this article, we present the first systematic attempt to identify these patterns using the concept of social media rituals. Understood as typified communicative practices that formalize and express shared values, rituals offer a productive path to categorize popular genres of content and trace the values they convey. Integrating theoretical literature on rituals with empirical studies of social media genres, we develop a typology of 16 rituals that express diverse values, ranging from respect and responsibility to materialism and pleasure. Furthermore, we show that rituals embed different notions of good communication, as reflected in the values of authenticity, persuasion, affiliation, and demonstration. Finally, we discuss how our framework can facilitate comparative investigations of user-generated content and platform values.

Lay Summary

The world of user-generated content on social media is vast and seemingly unorganized. In this article, we attempt to identify some of its overarching patterns by sorting social media content into different "rituals," patterned ways of communicating where people express and negotiate shared values. We integrate theoretical literature on rituals with empirical studies of social media genres to develop a typology of 16 rituals. Each ritual conveys different values, ranging from respect and responsibility to materialism and pleasure. Rituals also convey different notions of what counts as good communication, emphasizing one of four communicative values: authenticity, persuasion, affiliation, or demonstration. In our conclusion, we discuss how our framework can support future comparative research on what people post to social media.

Keywords: genres, rituals, social media rituals, user-generated content, values

From performing dance challenges to debating political issues to wishing happy birthday to distant relatives, billions of people across the world use social media to express what matters to them. Each contribution amounts to "a tiny value assertion" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 210), which is then subjected to a series of tiny evaluations in the form of likes, shares, and comments. While values and evaluation processes are central to digital culture, the construction of values by users has not yet been studied systematically. This can largely be explained by the scale and decentralization of digital culture. Given its massive volume and rapid development of new trends, the universe of user-generated content may seem utterly chaotic. The transnational character of social media further adds to the complexity, as culturally situated practices associated with the production of digital content may not have the same visibility in different contexts. Yet, we contend that deep-rooted patterns of communication—which we refer to as social media rituals—cross contexts and underlie this seemingly chaotic sphere.

Building on and expanding pioneering studies of social media rituals (Burgess et al., 2018; Gibbs et al., 2015), we define such rituals as typified communicative practices on social media that formalize and express shared values. The concept offers a productive way to categorize popular genres of user-generated content and trace the values they convey. While some studies have suggested using genres as keys for ordering the chaotic universe of user-generated content (Hallinan, Kim, Scharlach, et al., 2021), the number and ephemerality of social media genres make comparative investigation difficult. Even though the concepts of ritual (Grimes, 2013) and genre (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992) both focus on patterned modes of expression, rituals encompass a wider range of phenomena and more explicitly foreground the expression of values (Bell, 1997; Goffman, 2005 [1967]), broadly understood as guiding beliefs about what is desirable. Hence, we approach ritual as a higher-level analytic that potentially encompasses many specific genres.

In order for social media rituals to function effectively as a framework for organizing and comparing social media genres, we need a sense of what types of rituals are out there. Unfortunately, existing research offers little guidance on this front. While there have been studies of specific social media rituals including celebrity deaths (Burgess et al., 2018), roasts on Reddit (Dynel & Poppi, 2019), and the ritualized interactions of families that live far apart (Abel et al., 2021), there have been no systematic attempts to categorize or typify such rituals. Furthermore, following a broader trend of social media studies (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021), most of the research on social media rituals focuses on English-language content, making it difficult to determine the cross-cultural relevance of specific ritual practices. Embracing these challenges, we set out to identify transnationally popular social media rituals and examine the values that they convey.

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Our study of social media rituals unfolds in four parts. First, we review the literature, discussing how rituals construct shared values, media technologies shape the characteristics of rituals, and genres of user-generated content act as the building blocks of social media rituals. Second, we present our methodology: a grounded analysis integrating literature on rituals and research on genres of social media content, complemented by a transnational participant observation of social media platforms. Third, we introduce our typology of 16 social media rituals, each associated with a set of core and communicative values. We argue that the typology balances the flexibility necessary to accommodate most genres of user-generated content with the boundedness necessary for a useful analytical tool. Finally, we discuss how our framework can facilitate future comparative investigations of user-generated content and platform values.

Literature review

The ritualized construction of values

Despite the proliferation of attempts to define rituals over a century of scholarly investigation, the concept remains somewhat elusive. As Grimes (2013) summarizes, rituals have "a set of family resemblances" but lack a "singular, shared, definitive quality" (appendix, p. 38). However, most approaches agree that rituals are intentional and typified performances through which "people embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things" (Bell, 1997, p. xi). Accordingly, rituals are concerned with the relationship between people and the values that govern their behavior. This association between values and rituals can be traced back to Durkheims (1995 [1915]) foundational work on the role of religious rituals in the production of moral communities. Durkheim contends that religious rituals not only venerate the divine but also reproduce a shared vision of society. In other words, rituals mobilize people and integrate them into a community that shares a set of social values.

The lens of ritual, however, need not exclusively apply to highly formalized performances. As Goffman (2005 [1967]) demonstrated, the concept can also illuminate the social function of more mundane exchanges. According to Goffman, interpersonal interactions are calculated performances in which people aim to preserve their self-worth and recognize the worth of others. In turn, these actions reaffirm societal principles of evaluation, namely, the values according to which social worth is assigned. From the above, we conclude that all rituals, from the mundane to the sacred, selectively incorporate the norms and aspirations of particular social groups (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2013).

While there is a rich tradition of theorizing ritual, there has been significantly less interest in categorizing different types of rituals. Among existing typologies, some are broad and offer novel ways to think about rituals rather than actionable tools for empirical analysis. Examples include Humphrey and Laidlaw's (1994) twofold distinction between performance-centered and liturgy-centered rituals and Whitehouse's (2004) distinction between doctrinal and imaginistic religious rituals. Bell (1997) offers a somewhat more extensive typology, identifying six ritual genres (rites of passage; calendrical and commemorative rites; rites of exchange and communion; rites of affliction; rites of feasting, fasting, and festivals; and political rituals) based on a review of the terms employed by other scholars in the field. To the best of our knowledge, the most comprehensive attempt to classify ritual types has been carried out by Grimes (2013). Developed during his tenure as editor of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* to classify incoming articles, Grimes' typology features 18 rituals distinguished according to their main function. Given the lack of equivalent typologies for social media rituals discussed below, this provides a useful starting point for parsing social media content.

The mediation of rituals: From mass to social media

Although rituals have conventionally been investigated in the context of local communities, mass communication technologies have changed the scale at which rituals can take place. Foundational work on the mediation of rituals focused on exceptional events, more closely aligned with Durkheim's religious rituals than with Goffman's interactional rituals. For example, Dayan and Katz (1996) conceptualized media events as exceptional moments that interrupt the flow of everyday life, such as the televised funeral of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. Building on this notion, Cottle (2006) defines mediatized rituals as "exceptional and performative media phenomena that serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities based on symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be" (p. 415).

Crucially, however, various scholars have noticed that media rituals are not limited to extraordinary events but also encompass everyday interactions with media. Whether involving television (Couldry, 2003), computer-mediated communication (Hillis, 2009), or social media platforms (Humphreys, 2018), media rituals are interwoven in our daily life. From public confessions on daytime talk shows to the documentation of everyday life on a personal blog, mundane patterns of mediated communication construct shared societal notions of what is worthy of attention and, therefore, has value.

While the boundary between the exceptional and everyday in mediated rituals has never been tidy (see Couldry, 2002), social media further problematize the distinction, insofar as the same platforms facilitate interpersonal interactions and mass broadcasts. Nonetheless, this distinction continues to shape research on social media rituals. Emphasizing the exceptional, Burgess et al. (2018) define social media rituals as "platform-specific social media conventions and patterned responses to acute events . . . characterised by the convergence of private and personal audience practices with public discourse, in networked publics" (p. 230). Following this definition, the literature on social media rituals has primarily focused on "acute events" of global relevance such as celebrity deaths (Van den Bulck & Larsson, 2019). Yet, the lens of ritual has also been applied to the study of everyday forms of social media content such as the display of social support on Twitter (Brownlie & Shaw, 2019) or the announcement of New Year's resolutions (Hallinan, Kim, Mizoroki et al., 2021). Combining both research trajectories, we contend that the concept of social media rituals can be applied to study a broad range of social media content types, encompassing both acute events and more mundane actions.

Accordingly, we propose an updated definition of social media rituals as typified communicative practices on social media that formalize and express shared values. Much like their mainstream media counterparts, the values that underpin social media rituals relate to the techno-cultural logics and communicative norms surrounding the medium itself. As

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Couldry (2002) notes, media participate in the performative enactment of rituals, infusing them with media-specific values. Thus, live televised coverage from the site of a natural disaster not only conveys community values such as solidarity with the victims but also upholds the media-related value of liveness. As such, the mediated articulation of values often invokes normative ideas about the act of communication itself, or what Shifman (2019) refers to as communicative values. If general values provide guidelines for how we should conduct ourselves in a wide array of domains, communicative values relate specifically to desirable modes of expression. For example, the value of authenticity relates to both the imperative to convey information that accurately represents the world and to the expression of one's "true" self (Shifman, 2018). Authenticity is invoked in ritualized performances as varied as confession cue cards (Hall, 2016), far-right commemoration memes (Trillò & Shifman, 2021), and strategic self-branding by micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2017).

Genres as the building blocks of social media rituals

While social media rituals represent broad types of value-infused action, their realization takes place through typified genres of user-generated content. For example, ritualized demotion can take the shape of customer complaints left on companies' Facebook pages or "plastic surgery gone wrong" photos shaming celebrities. Following the literature, we refer to genres as socially recognized categories of cultural expression that share elements of form, content, and interpretative expectations (Miller, 1984; Mittell, 2001; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

Social media genres lack some of the "obligatoriness" typical of older media genres (Giltrow & Stein, 2009), in part because social media makes it easier to produce and circulate content (Miller et al., 2016). Given the relative elusiveness of social media genres, there have been few attempts to systematically categorize them (e.g., Hallinan, Kim, Scharlach et al., 2021; Rieder et al., 2020; Westman & Freund, 2010). Genres, however, remain fundamental for the production of cultural content on social media (Milner, 2016), providing users with recognizable templates for self-expression. Thus, a growing body of knowledge investigates the cultural implications of specific social media genres, with the selfie representing a particularly prominent example (Frosh, 2015; Tifentale & Manovich, 2015; Zappavigna, 2016).

Much like their analog counterparts, ritualized expression through social media genres conveys values. For example, Kumar (2021) connects the selfie and vlog to individualism and self-disclosure respectively, arguing that these values are tied to Western ideas of modernity that serve the interests of social media corporations. Indeed, the norms regulating what is valued on social media platforms—which are often formed through negotiation between local values of users and the values promoted by the corporations themselves—may determine what rituals and genres achieve mainstream visibility, which remain niche sub-cultural phenomena, and which are simply not permitted (Hallinan, Kim, Scharlach et al., 2021).

The tangibility of genres combined with the conceptual richness and reach of rituals offers a productive framework for studying the construction of values in digital spheres. Since rituals are broader and more enduring forms of interaction than genres, using them as a higher-level classification mechanism enables the creation of a stable scheme of categorization for digital content. Generating a robust scheme of rituals that account for popular genres can allow us to study the dynamic environment of social media in a flexible way, supporting the examination of future genres vis-à-vis these higher-level analytical categories. Our study thus addresses two main questions: first, what are the main types of social media rituals? And second, how do the different types of social media rituals relate to values?

Methods

Given the aforementioned scarcity of literature about social media rituals, we draw upon two broader bodies of knowledge as the starting points for our investigation: literature about rituals and studies of social media genres. The first trajectory helps establish the meaning and social functions of rituals, while the second brings together accounts of existing social media practices. As detailed below and illustrated in Figure 1, we followed the principles of grounded theory and constantly compared (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) the two bodies of knowledge in order to develop our typology of social media rituals.

For rituals, we searched for existing classification schemas, combining a top-down and bottom-up approach. First, we conducted a cross-disciplinary literature review, drawing on classic work from ritual studies (e.g., Grimes, 2013), anthropology and sociology (e.g., Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1995 [1915]; Goffman, 2005 [1967]), as well as work on media rituals (e.g., Cottle, 2006; Couldry, 2002; Dayan & Katz, 1996) and social medial rituals (e.g., Abel et al., 2021; Burgess et al., 2018), to identify different types of rituals and logics of classification. As mentioned in the literature review, we found remarkably few attempts at creating a broad typology of rituals, with Grimes' (2013) list of 18 ritual types being the most systematic and holistic. We supplemented the list of rituals yielded by this literature review with a bottom-up approach to classification, typing the phrase "ritual of…" into Google Scholar and going through the alphabet to see autofill suggestions. For any novel ritual types, we looked to the recommended literature for a definition or description.

We applied a similar combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches for our inspection of social media genres. First, we built upon our prior genre research, which included a review of titles and abstracts from 15 top media and communication journals since 2005 to identify types of social media content (Hallinan, Kim, Scharlach et al., 2021). We supplemented the list generated from this top-down approach with several empirical investigations of genres across the globe, including an open-ended transnational survey of the types of content that people like and dislike, structured interviews, and participant observation of five social media platforms following principles outlined by boyd (2015). These three methods were applied by a transnational (and multilingual) team of researchers and participants from the United States, Italy, South Korea, Germany, and Japan. Together, these strategies resulted in an extensive list of over 200 social media genres, including well-established ones like "makeup tutorials," "birthday wishes," and "travel photos," alongside less well-documented genres like "commemoration memes," "personal diary manga," and "algorithmic complaints." While this is certainly not an exhaustive account, it provides a broad perspective on social media that crosses platforms, communities, and languages.

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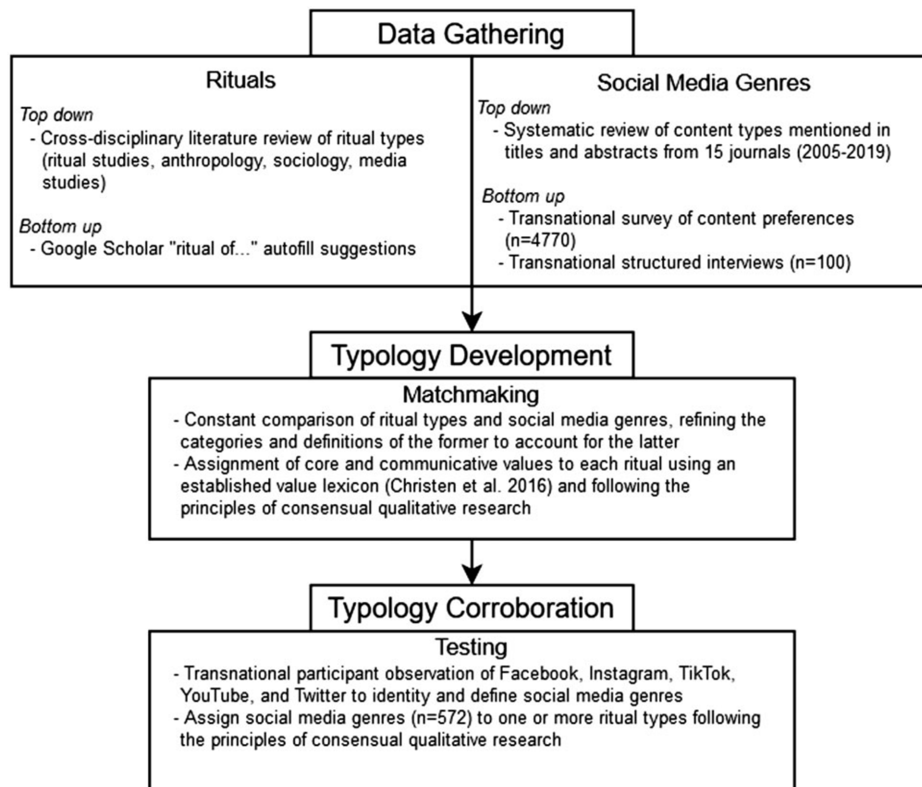

Figure 1. A summary of the study's methods and main analytical stages.

Having created our lists of ritual types and social media genres, we then moved to refine the former to better account for the latter in a process we colloquially describe as matchmaking. We aimed to create a typology of social media rituals that accounts for the vast majority of genres we identified in our literature-based and empirical research. We began from Grimes' list of 18 rituals, examined how other ritual types we identified related to this schema, and used the list of social media genres to determine the applicability of each type to social media. While we retained some of the original labels from Grimes' list (e.g., rites of commemoration), we also updated some of them to improve intelligibility (e.g., "agonistic rites" were relabeled as "rituals of competition"), dropped those that had no direct equivalent in mainstream digital spheres (e.g., "sacrificial rituals"), and added new types that Grimes did not account for (e.g., "rituals of sensation" such as ASMR videos). Our final list includes 16 distinct ritual types, which accounted for the vast majority of the social media genres we identified.

As we developed our list of ritual types, we sought to identify analytically distinct categories that encompass multiple genres. We systematically developed and compared the definitions of each ritual, making sure we could identify at least one distinctive core feature. For example, while both subjectification and taste signaling enact affiliation with a group, the former focuses on social roles while the latter focuses on cultural preferences. Whereas the rituals we identified are analytically distinct, a single social media genre may bring together multiple rituals, a phenomenon we discuss below.

Finally, we conducted another round of analysis to examine and corroborate the analytical power of the typology. This round was based on data gathered by five research assistants from the countries outlined above, who conducted participant observations of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter during August 2021, exploring trending topics, platform recommendations, and generic searches. This process resulted in the identification of 572 social media genres. Based on descriptions and examples provided by the research assistants, the authors classified 547 of the genres into at least one of the 16 categories following the principles of consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 1997). The descriptions of the remaining 25 genres provided by the research assistants were too thin to allow classification.

As we refined our typology, we worked to identify the core values associated with each type of ritual. Since existing value schemas such as Hofstede's (2003) cultural dimensions or Schwartz's (2012) list of basic values do not readily map onto social media practices (Hallinan, Kim, Scharlach et al., 2021; Shifman, 2016), we employed an established value lexicon from Christen et al. (2016) for a more communication-oriented approach. The lexicon features 78 groups of value-related terms in both English and German, organized according to their cross-reference proximity in thesauruses and verified by the assessment of an expert group. To expand cross-cultural applicability beyond English and German, the international team described above assessed the cultural resonance of the list across six languages, coming to a strong consensus over 64 terms. Part of the process included relabeling the groups of value terms for stronger cross-cultural resonance.

Working with the modified list of 64 values and the list of 16 rituals, each of the authors independently assigned up to five values per ritual, guided by the following questions: which modes of behavior and states of affairs does the ritual frame as desirable? What counts as good communication according to this ritual? We then discussed our responses in several extended sessions following the principles of

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consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 1997). While the number of possible values associated with each ritual is potentially boundless, we sought to focus on fewer values with stronger consensus for our exploratory study. These deliberations resulted in agreement among the authors over a list of two core values and one communicative value for each ritual. Although some rituals had strong agreement on more values, we chose to use the minimal number of two values per ritual to ensure consistency. Finally, we compared the values associated with each ritual, looking for affinities and tensions.

Findings

Our typology consists of 16 social media rituals, each associated with distinctive genres of user-generated content and a diverse set of values ranging from respect and responsibility to materialism and pleasure. As a general observation, we found that some veteran ritual forms readily translate to social media, such as the migration of a face-to-face tarot reading to an algorithmically recommended tarot reading on TikTok, while others are not reflected in mainstream content, including many sacrificial rituals. And sometimes, newer social media practices lack clear predecessors among older ritual categories, such as the production of tingles and parasociality associated with ASMR videos. Overall, we found an impressive amount of continuity between older ritual types and newer media practices, supporting our general contention that rituals are more enduring forms of interaction than genres, making them especially useful for studying the dynamic environment of social media.

In what follows, we define each ritual type, briefly discuss two exemplary genres, and present the core values associated with the ritual (see Table 1 for a summary). After introducing each ritual, we describe how they reflect different notions of good communication, that is, their communicative values. Before outlining our typology, we wish to make the following clarifications. While each ritual is analytically distinct, some genres combine multiple rituals into a single practice. For example, there is a trend of makeup product review videos that call out racism in the beauty industry (Lawson, 2021). In this genre, content creators present their audiences with an evaluation of the product under scrutiny. However, they also condemn racial inequality by exposing, for example, the limited range of options available for darker skin tones and, in turn, the racial bias of the cosmetic industry and the beauty standards on which it is built, thus integrating rituals of evaluation and demotion.

Relatedly, while our typology identifies two core values for each ritual type, these are by no means the only values that such rituals entail. Different genres of social media content often express other commitments beyond the core values associated with their respective ritual type. For example, the genre of "tech review" videos embeds the core values of knowledge and excellence characterizing rituals of evaluation, but also promotes genre-specific values such as novelty and efficiency. Hence, our claim is not that each ritual type is exclusively characterized by the core values listed in the typology, but rather that those values are central to the ritual type and appear in all genres that fall within its scope.

Rituals of promotion

Rituals of promotion seek to elevate the status, visibility, recognition, or regard of something or someone. For example, "new job announcement" tweets highlight a noteworthy accomplishment that positively reflects on the poster, while influencers who publish "sponsored content" on Instagram elevate the status of a product through their personal endorsement. By sharing good news or recommending a product, people affirm that distinctive individuals and objects should be held in high regard. Thus, such rituals uphold the values of reputation (people should seek esteem, status, or popularity) and excellence (people should strive to be, or appreciate that which is, of superior merit).

Rituals of demotion

Rituals of demotion seek to lower the status, visibility, recognition, or regard of something or someone. For example, "Karen" YouTube videos criticize the behavior of someone (typically a white woman) who harasses others in public, while "customer complaint" tweets draw attention to businesses that violate the expectations of consumers. By calling out unacceptable behavior or service, people reinforce shared standards of conduct and inspire compliance from others. Thus, such rituals are predicated on conformity (people should act in accordance with socially accepted norms) and responsibility (people should fulfill their duties and obligations).

Rituals of evaluation

Rituals of evaluation subject someone or something to evaluation, scrutiny, or critical analysis. For example, "product review" videos describe a product and judge its merit, while "tier list" memes place related objects within a set of hierarchical categories. Through the practice of reviewing or ranking, people affirm the role of information in establishing the relative merit of individuals and objects. Thus, such rituals are predicated on knowledge (people should seek truth and/or understanding through study, experience, or reasoning) and excellence (people should strive to be, or appreciate that which is, of superior merit).

Rituals of requesting

Rituals of requesting ask for aid or support for a person, group, or cause. For example, "crowdfunding requests" share information about a particular issue in order to obtain the financial support of others, while "information-seeking" posts pose a question to gather audience input. Asking for resources or information expresses the belief that people should help each other. Thus, such rituals are predicated on care (people should be actively concerned about and/or provide support for someone or something) and altruism (people should be concerned for the well-being of others and willing to help them, regardless of the personal impact).

Rituals of transformation

Rituals of transformation document how someone or something has changed over time as a result of the exertion of creativity or skill. For example, "home makeover" videos show the progressive transformation of a house, while "before and after" fitness photos track improved fitness levels. By documenting the process of transformation, people celebrate the ability to produce desirable changes. Thus, such rituals are predicated on progress (people should strive for improvement over time) and control (people should strive to influence the actions, functions, and/or outcomes of someone or something).

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Table 1. A summary of our typology of social media rituals

Ritual type	Core values	Communicative value	Iconic genres
Promotion	Reputation Excellence	Persuasion	New job announcement #sponsoredcontent posts
Demotion	Conformity Responsibility	Persuasion	"Karen" videos Customer complaints
Evaluation	Knowledge Excellence	Persuasion	Tech reviews Tier list memes
Requesting	Care Altruism	Persuasion	Crowdfunding requests Information seeking (e.g., housing, jobs)
Transformation	Progress Control	Demonstration	Home/room makeover videos Before and after fitness photos
Sensation	Aesthetics Pleasure	Demonstration	ASMR videos "Oddly Satisfying" videos and gifs
Consumption	Materialism Pleasure	Demonstration	Unboxing or haul videos Mukbang videos
Competition	Effort Excellence	Demonstration	Video game speedruns Political debate videos
Taste signaling	Creativity Aesthetics	Affiliation	Viral TikTok dances Deep fried memes
Commemoration	Loyalty Respect	Affiliation	Celebrity death tweets (#RIP__) Facebook memorial pages
Relationship work	Intimacy Care	Affiliation	YouTube apology videos Happy birthday wishes
Pledging	Commitment Responsibility	Affiliation	Profile picture filters ("I stand with...") New year's resolutions
Subjectification	Reputation Conformity	Authenticity	Family vacation photos Best friend selfies
Disclosure	Transparency Control	Authenticity	Day-in-the-life vlogs Ask me anything Q&A's
Forecasting	Knowledge Control	Authenticity	TikTok tarot readings Sports predictions
Advising	Knowledge Care	Authenticity	Workout dos and don'ts Software tutorial videos (e.g., Excel)

The ritual types are listed according to the order in which they are discussed in the article.

Rituals of competition

Rituals of competition assess the relative merit of someone or something by measuring their performance against others. For example, "video game speedruns" document a player's attempt to complete a game in record time, while "political debate" streams feature individuals determining the relative merit of their positions on a topic through argumentation. By recording a gamer's best performance or sparring over ideas, people invoke the notion that individuals should consistently strive to distinguish themselves from others. Thus, such rituals are predicated on effort (people should devote significant time and/or energy toward something) and excellence (people should strive to be, or appreciate that which is, of superior merit).

Rituals of consumption

Rituals of consumption document the act of consuming something, including material objects, cultural products, and food. For example, "unboxing" videos portray someone opening the packaging of a product and tactilely interacting with it, while "mukbang" videos record someone eating. By documenting the process of eating or encounters with manufactured goods, people affirm the role of objects as sources of individual enjoyment. Thus, such rituals are predicated upon materialism (people should acquire and appreciate material possessions or cultural goods) and pleasure (people should seek enjoyable and satisfying experiences).

Rituals of sensation

Rituals of sensation seek to produce an altered state of mind or consciousness through media stimulation. For example, "ASMR tapping" videos use sounds to elicit feelings of calmness and tranquility, while "oddly satisfying" GIFs display images of objects that are unexpectedly visually pleasing due to their texture or symmetry. By sharing relaxing audio tracks or mesmerizing shapes, people highlight the role of sensory stimulation in provoking enjoyment. Thus, such rituals are predicated upon aesthetics (people should cultivate and appreciate things that are pleasing to the senses, especially sight) and pleasure (people should seek enjoyable and satisfying experiences).

Rituals of taste signaling

Rituals of taste signaling enact association with others through aesthetic preferences or highly patterned modes of cultural expression. For example, TikTok "dance challenges" iterate popular choreography to affirm someone's belonging within a community that is up-to-speed on platform trends, while "deep fried" memes feature grainy or washed-out images that are only recognizable to others with previous knowledge of the meme. By sharing their interpretations of cultural trends, people draw upon their qualities of inventiveness and affiliation with taste-based communities. Thus, such rituals promote the values of creativity (people should respond to situations and/or express themselves in original,

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imaginative ways) and aesthetics (people should cultivate/appreciate that which is pleasing to the senses, especially sight).

Rituals of commemoration

Rituals of commemoration mark the passage of time and indicate that something or someone should be remembered, celebrated, or respected. For example, "celebrity death" tweets facilitate collective mourning at the recent death of a celebrity, while Facebook "memorial pages" establish de facto digital memorials where users can pay their respects to a friend. Through such commemorations, people affirm the importance of those that have passed away. Thus, such rituals promote the values of loyalty (people should consistently support and align with something or someone that they deem important) and respect (people should be treated with consideration or dignity).

Rituals of relationship work

Rituals of relationship work initiate, maintain, or repair relationships with others, whether dyadic ties or groups of people. For example, YouTube "apology" videos seek to repair the relationship between a creator and their audience after an actual or perceived breach of conduct, while Facebook "happy birthday wishes" perform relationship ties through the public display of wishes on someone's Facebook wall. Through well-wishing messages or apology videos, people show concern for one another and consequently cultivate close ties. Such rituals thus promote the values of intimacy (people should cultivate and appreciate close connections with others) and care (people should be actively concerned about and/or provide support for someone or something).

Rituals of pledging

Rituals of pledging declare a commitment to a cause or action. For example, Facebook "profile picture filters" declare solidarity with a given community or cause through a textual and symbolic photo overlay, while "New Year's resolution" tweets present someone's personal goals for the year to come. By openly making pledges, people signal their dedication to a cause as well as their sense of duty to fulfill it. Thus, such rituals promote the values of commitment (people should be willing to give time, effort, and/or resources to someone or something that they believe in) and responsibility (people should fulfill their duties and obligations toward someone or something).

Rituals of subjectification

In rituals of subjectification, people construct themselves as social subjects through the presentation of desirable identities. For example, "family vacation" photos reaffirm and cement someone's status as a member of a happy family unit through photos of the family smiling on holiday, while "best friend selfies" document the social interactions of a set of friends and restate their bond. By performing as "father," "daughter," or "best friend," people affirm the worth of these social identities. Thus, such rituals promote the values of reputation (people should seek esteem, status, or popularity according to a particular idea of what that entails) and conformity (people should act in accordance with socially accepted norms).

Rituals of disclosure

Rituals of disclosure make public something that would otherwise be considered personal, secret, hidden, or private. These rituals are not limited to personal disclosure, but also encompass the exposure of information about others. For example, "day-in-the-life" vlogs reveal information about someone's daily life, while "ask me anything" Instagram Q&As publicly respond to audience-submitted questions using the "Stories" function. By offering a sneak peek into someone's daily life or exposing someone's latest indiscretion, people promote the value of transparency (people should openly convey information as they know it), which we will later associate with the communicative value of authenticity. In addition, these rituals also promote the value of control (people should strive to influence the actions, functions, and/or outcomes of someone or something), understood as mastery over the disclosure of information.

Rituals of forecasting

Rituals of forecasting seek to predict, prognosticate, or prophesy a future event or trend. For example, TikTok "tarot readings" interpret the cards for an unknown viewer connected only by the recommendation algorithm, while "sports prediction" videos predict the outcome of an upcoming event such as the FIFA World Cup. By making such forecasts, individuals express an enduring human desire to know and influence the future. Thus, such rituals promote the values of knowledge (people should seek truth and/or understanding through study, experience, or reasoning) and control (people should strive to influence the actions, functions, and/or outcomes of someone or something), understood as mastery over the future.

Rituals of advising

Rituals of advising offer advice or information regarding a topic, area of life, or situation. For example, "workout do's and don'ts" share knowledge about fitness and inform audiences about effective workout routines, while "software tutorial" videos provide audiences with detailed instructions on how to perform different tasks with a software package like Microsoft Excel. By providing others with potentially useful tips or skills, people affirm that individuals should help one another by sharing information and expertise. Such rituals promote the values of knowledge (people should seek truth and/or understanding through study, experience, or reasoning) and care (people should be actively concerned about and/or provide support for someone or something).

Communicative values

Beyond core values, we also identified four values that we conceptualize as communicative values: persuasion, demonstration, affiliation, and authenticity. As discussed in the literature review, such values offer guidelines for understanding what constitutes desirable communication. While the four communicative values, to some extent, infuse all of the rituals in our typology, their salience varies across the different types of rituals, with specific communicative values playing a particularly pivotal role in some and not others. We thus treat these values as useful tools to differentiate between the types of communicative actions that rituals seek to accomplish.

The communicative value of persuasion is central in the rituals of promotion, demotion, evaluation, and requesting. In

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all four ritual types, people overtly seek to convince others that something is worth elevating, degrading, buying, watching, playing, or supporting. Through these rituals, people not only attempt to persuade others but also convey a normative message about persuasive communication, namely that people should strive to communicate in a way that influences the behavior of others or the course of events.

The communicative value of demonstration characterizes the rituals of transformation, sensation, consumption, and competition. In these rituals, visual evidence and stimuli are crucial to eliciting pleasurable responses in the audience, proving that something or someone has changed over time, or documenting the outcome of a competition. In turn, these promote demonstration as a value, namely conveying the message that people should express themselves through exhibition or the visual display of evidence.

The communicative value of affiliation is crucial to rituals of taste signaling, commemoration, relationship work, and pledging. In these rituals, people show their belonging to culturally defined units or causes by participating in activities that express (sub)cultural taste, allegiance to collective memory, dyadic bonds, or individual commitment. As such, they promote the value of affiliation in communication, namely that people should express themselves to show support or affiliation with a group or cause.

Finally, the communicative value of authenticity is pivotal to rituals of advising, forecasting, disclosure, and subjectification. In these rituals, people position themselves as sharing truthful information with others, accurately prognosticating the future, revealing formerly secret information, or affirming their authentic selves. Overall, these ritual types convey the notion that people should express themselves in a way that corresponds with external reality or with internal essence. The notion of authenticity is closely associated with the value of truthfulness, which has been widely discussed in relation to journalism (Zelizer, 2009). The two values are very close in meaning, with slightly different connotations. "Truthfulness" is often associated with correspondence to external reality, while "authenticity" is usually associated with correspondence to one's essence or culture. In this article, we chose to use "authenticity" because of its prominence in studies of social media (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Lee, 2020; Marwick, 2017).

Discussion

Participation in social media rituals valorizes ideals like excellence and altruism, knowledge and pleasure, respect and aesthetics. Although some values such as conformity, care, and control may seem more pivotal than others, it is important to note that the theoretical dispersion of values need not align with their empirical prevalence on social media platforms. Some types of rituals (e.g., promotion or transformation) are especially prominent and encompass a wide variety of popular genres across platforms, while others (e.g., forecasting) seem to be narrower in their application.

Widening the conceptual scope beyond the values intrinsic to each ritual, we can also point to overarching values that are fundamental to all social media rituals. Regardless of the type, participation in any ritual requires adherence to the rules of expressive genres. Milner (2016) explains this general principle as the combination of "fixity" and "novelty" in meme creation. Translating this notion to the conceptual language of values, we contend that a tension between conformity and creativity underpins all social media rituals. In contrast to traditional religious rituals that are supposed to closely follow a set of rules, the "networked individualism" (Wellman et al., 2006) underpinning communication on social media stresses both communal identities that demand some kind of conformity and creative self-expression that highlights individuality (Shifman, 2016). That is to say, in the context of social media rituals, communication needs to be patterned (conformist) enough to be recognized as a ritual while still serving an individual need for self-expression (creativity).

Complementing this general outlook, we identified a total of 19 values underpinning our 16 ritual types. Some of these values are specific to one ritual (e.g., altruism for rituals of requesting), while others are recurrent and cut across different rituals. The nine values that occur in multiple rituals are aesthetics, care, conformity, control, excellence, knowledge, pleasure, reputation, and responsibility. In light of their applicability to a wide range of social media genres, this list is a fruitful starting point for future research aiming to identify the core values of user-generated content. This model also enables researchers to identify values that are specific to individual genres or subgenres. For example, while all genres classifiable as rituals of transformation express the core values of progress and control, the specific genre of "decluttering" also invokes the value of aesthetics, "do-it-yourself" videos emphasize efficacy, and "before and after" fitness photos stress effort. This type of analysis can also apply to subgenres created by individuals or social movements to specifically promote certain values. Consider again the example of the "makeup review" videos that take a stance for racial justice discussed above. Such videos embed the values of knowledge and excellence inherent to rituals of evaluation and also combine them with political commitments to justice, equality, and representation.

Going beyond the core values expressed via user-generated content, we also highlight that social media rituals involve normative ideas of what counts as good communication. The rituals in our typology present four ideal types of what communication on social media should look like and what purpose it serves: authenticity, persuasion, affiliation, and demonstration. Of course, these communicative values are much older than social media platforms. The idea that authenticity, persuasion, affiliation, and demonstration are central principles of communication can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Over the years, each of these communicative values has been associated with distinct subdisciplines within the field of communication scholarship, with truth highlighted by journalism scholars, persuasion studied in political communication and marketing, affiliation foregrounded by sociolinguists studying speech communities and cultural studies scholars tracing fan cultures, and demonstration (as well as related concepts such as "monstration"; Dayan, 2009) widely discussed in media scholarship on television.

Many accounts stress how these four communicative values can contradict each other—telling the truth might undermine one's affiliation to certain groups and a quick glimpse at any given advertisement may invoke gloomy thoughts about possible contrasts between persuasion and authenticity. However, as we acknowledge above, while these communicative values reflect different areas of emphasis, they are by no means mutually exclusive. And indeed, successful campaigns on social media may derive their power from the explicit combination of

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these four values. Consider the recent case of vaccine selfies, in which people show themselves receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. This practice invokes the communicative values of authenticity and demonstration by portraying the process of receiving the vaccine. Simultaneously, such selfies also try to persuade others to get the shot and showcase affiliation with a community of like-minded people.

Conclusion

This article presents the first comprehensive analysis and typology of social media rituals, organized according to their function and constitutive values. The development of the typology brings together literature on ritual theory with research on social media genres, supplemented with a transnational survey of users and participant observation of social media platforms. Our typology outlines 16 different social media rituals, provides definitions and exemplary genres, and identifies the core values inherent to each ritual type. We also identify ideas about what each ritual considers good communication, organizing them into four groups characterized by the communicative values of authenticity, demonstration, affiliation, and persuasion.

By way of conclusion, we wish to reflect on two ways that this study contributes to the broader body of knowledge on media rituals. First, our typology bridges the gap between research that is interested in the "exceptional" aspects of media and social media rituals (e.g., monumental events, influencers, politicians) and the more "mundane" aspects embedded in media use (e.g., birthday wishes, selfies, memes). As highlighted by Miller et al.'s (2016) understanding of social media as "scalable sociality," users produce and circulate content at different scales based on the level of privacy they wish to retain and the size of the public they aspire to reach. Building on this insight, we suggest that the social media rituals in our typology can be performed at different scales with different levels of publicity. For example, rituals of commemoration span from the highly exceptional, global, and public character of mourning David Bowie on Twitter on the day of his death to the relatively mundane and private character of the annual remembrance of a beloved pet on one's personal Facebook profile.

Second, drawing inspiration from the macro-level analysis of mass media events and rituals (Cottle, 2006; Dayan & Katz, 1996), the holistic orientation of our typology may facilitate systematic investigation of the interactions between types of social media content. As some of our examples showcase, different genres or different ritual types are created with awareness of each other, and often as a reaction or as a response to the values voiced by other genres or rituals. For instance, the value of materialism embedded in rituals of consumption is questioned in genres such as closet "decluttering" videos (Zappavigna, 2019) where participants get rid of stuff they no longer need and "anti-haul" videos where participants outline all the products they plan not to buy (Wood, 2021). These genres respectively represent examples of rituals of transformation and rituals of pledging that challenge the values associated with rituals of consumption. Understanding the interactions driving the production of new units of content, genres, and rituals may shed light on how users negotiate different understandings of what is important in life.

We thus see this typology as the first step in a systematic broad-scale analysis of user-generated genres and the values they embed. We hope that our work will facilitate more nuanced mappings of digital culture, understood as constituted by a multitude of platforms, communities, national groups, and subcultures. At the bird's eye level of digital culture, our framework can assist in studying the prevalence of different practices. We have reason to think that the rituals in our typology vary in their popularity and diversity. For instance, rituals of transformation seem to be both very popular and very diverse, encompassing photo-based genres such as "before and after" fitness photos and video-based genres such as TikTok "outfit transformations." Rituals of forecasting, on the other hand, seem to be both less popular and less diverse, heavily focused on astrology and sports. Mapping the prevalence of different practices provides a way to think broadly about the role of social media in society and to examine the values that are propagated—and those that are overlooked—through social media content.

Zooming in, the ritual framework allows us to examine the multiple cultural formulations that are expressed on social media. One pivotal lens is that of the platform: while many rituals manifest across platforms, further studies may identify associations between specific platforms and ritual types (e.g., promotion and affiliation on Instagram, disclosure and demotion on Twitter). Comparison between platforms can illuminate the specific features of platform cultures, revealing different factors that incentivize or disincentivize particular rituals and, with that, the expression of particular values. Furthermore, the typology provides a way to examine how platform cultures develop over time. The progressive professionalization of YouTube creators offers a very clear example where the original emphasis on disclosure exemplified by the slogan "broadcast yourself" and typified by its first major genre of vlogging (Burgess & Green, 2018) has progressively made room for a range of other social media rituals (advising, consumption, sensation, promotion, and evaluation).

A second possible lens of comparison relates to different locales. The notion of the local is incredibly varied and includes transnational comparisons (Hallinan, Kim, Mizoroki et al., 2021), major communities on a platform (e.g., Brock, 2020), niche subcultures (Zannettou et al., 2018), and social media movements (Caren et al., 2012). Despite this diversity, our schema of social media rituals provides a coherent framework for cross-cultural comparisons. At the level of national culture, patterns in the adoption of rituals of disclosure and promotion may confirm or contest deep-seated assumptions regarding the globalization of values in the digital age. Thus, we might find differences in both the presence of various ritual types and in the ways particular rituals are executed. For instance, our research has revealed that rituals of disclosure focusing on personal hardship are common in United States but fairly infrequent in Japan, where norms around expression and privacy result in anonymized personal narratives that substitute personal photos with manga illustrations. At the subcultural level, a comparative analysis of rituals of disclosure, demotion, and requesting may shed light on the different ways in which local communities use social media affordances to mobilize politically. For example, an analysis of demotion rituals focusing on "the elite" by far-right and far-left subcultures may help us identify similarities and differences between populist movements.

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We are conscious that our 16 categories cannot order all social media. However comprehensive, some content will necessarily fall outside of the scope of our typology. Our approach deliberately focuses on mainstream user-generated genres, intentionally excluding fringe content that is subject to removal due to the moderation policies of the platforms, such as sexually explicit content or graphic depictions of violence. We also do not focus on content produced by legacy media corporations (news, sport, and music) despite their popularity on social media. Furthermore, the typology was built mainly in reference to genres that are prominent on major social media platforms, potentially missing ritualized forms of participation that are specific to image boards (e.g., 4Chan) and other subcultural platforms (e.g., VK). Finally, our study is surely strengthened by its transnational character but remains limited by the positionality of the researchers and our focus on social media content in languages primarily associated with the Global North. Hence, our typology would benefit from further testing of its applicability with content produced in other locations and regions, particularly user-generated content originating in the Global South.

Limitations notwithstanding, this article represents the first systematic attempt to identify emergent patterns within the messy universe of user-generated content through the higher-level conceptual category of rituals that are broader than social media genres and more stable over time. Having undergone the ritualized "evaluation" of peer review, we hope this article will further "promote" the idea of social media rituals. We "pledge" our commitment to expanding this work in future comparative studies, and "request" that you, the patient reader, join us in this endeavor.

Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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