

Communicative Rituals in Virtual Communities An Anthropological Perspective on Symbolic Interaction via Social Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the communicative rituals that emerge within virtual communities on social media platforms from an anthropological perspective grounded in symbolic interaction. The study seeks to conceptualize communicative rituals within the digital sphere and to explore the symbolic mechanisms through which meaning, identity, and a sense of belonging are constructed within virtual communities. It also proposes a descriptive digital ethnographic model that demonstrates how communicative rituals can be analyzed through selected cases, including online campaigns, digital mourning/grief rituals, and rituals of celebrating political events. The findings indicate that digital rituals are no less significant than traditional rituals in terms of meaning-making and collective commitment; however, they take on novel forms in which visual, discursive, and programmatic symbols particularly platform algorithms intersect. The paper concludes with

methodological and theoretical recommendations for studying communicative rituals in the digital environment.

Keywords: rituals; communication; virtual communities; digital ethnography; symbolism; social media.

1. Introduction

Human societies have undergone profound transformations in patterns of communication with the expansion of digital media. Communication technologies are no longer merely channels for information exchange; rather, they have become cultural spaces in which collective identities are formed and symbols and meanings are continuously rearticulated. With the rise of social networking platforms, what may be termed virtual communities have emerged—digital social formations characterized by interactive and symbolic rituals that parallel, and at times even surpass, the traditional social rituals long

examined by classical anthropology (Turner, 1969).

These rituals are not limited to verbal interaction; they encompass the circulation of visual symbols, the celebration of digital events, collective participation in online “trends,” virtual protest rituals, the use of icons and hashtags, and the formation of collective identities that transcend geographical boundaries (Recuero, 2015). In this sense, social media functions as a space for the reproduction of culture and symbolic practices within a novel communicative environment.

The significance of this study stems from the need for an anthropological approach to understanding such interactions. While much media research tends to focus on technical and communicative dimensions, it often marginalizes the cultural and symbolic aspects that constitute the very core of social action in the digital sphere.

2. Methodological Framework of the Study

2.1. Research Problem

Despite the growing body of research on digital media, most existing studies approach the phenomenon from technical or behavioral perspectives, such as measuring levels of interaction or assessing content effects. These approaches often overlook the symbolic and cultural dimensions of interactions and fail to conceptualize virtual communities as social entities endowed with shared rituals, symbols, and narratives. This omission constitutes a

significant knowledge gap that calls for an anthropological intervention.

From this standpoint, the central research question can be formulated as follows:

How do communicative rituals within virtual communities shape symbolic meaning and reinforce collective identity and belonging among social media users?

Building on this overarching question, the study addresses the following sub-questions:

1. What is the nature of communicative rituals within virtual communities on social media platforms?
2. How do digital symbols contribute to the construction of meaning and identity within the communicative space?
3. Which anthropological elements can be employed in analyzing digital social interaction?
4. How can online trends and digital campaigns be understood as rituals imbued with cultural significance?

2.2. Significance of the Study

A. Scientific Significance

- Expanding the field of digital media studies through an anthropological lens
- Bridging the epistemological gap between human sciences and communication studies
- Proposing a new analytical framework for understanding digital culture

B. Practical Significance

- Analyzing digital campaigns as social phenomena rather than merely communication strategies

- Enhancing understanding of youth digital identity formation
- Contributing to the development of research tools for the study of virtual communities

2.3. Methodology of the Study

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach grounded in digital ethnography, combining:

- Content and textual analysis of digital interactions
- Digital observation of virtual communities
- Comparative conceptual analysis of symbols and rituals

The methodological framework draws on classical anthropological works on rituals (Turner, 1977) and symbols (Geertz, 1973), as well as contemporary contributions in digital anthropology (Boellstorff, 2008).

3. Digital Anthropology and Communicative Rituals

3.1. Digital Anthropology: Transformations of the Field and Its Core Concepts

Over recent decades, anthropology has undergone a significant methodological expansion as a result of the migration of many human practices and cultural forms into digital spaces. This shift has led to the emergence of what is known as *digital anthropology* or *virtual anthropology*, a subfield that integrates traditional ethnographic research tools with the analysis of digital interactions and internet cultures (Hine, 2015; Boellstorff, 2016).

This approach is not concerned with studying technology *per se*, but rather with

understanding how digital environments generate new forms of social organization, values, symbols, and cultural practices through which individuals interact within virtual communities characterized by their own boundaries, identities, and modes of participation (Coleman, 2014).

Digital anthropology emphasizes that virtual space is not a superficial extension of the offline world; instead, it constitutes “a social environment with its own dynamics,” producing autonomous forms of integration, belonging, and symbolic interaction (Boellstorff, 2016). Just as anthropologists once studied rituals and symbols within traditional societies, they now examine practices of digital participation, interactive gatherings, and mobilization campaigns across social networking platforms.

3.2. Rituals in Anthropological Thought: From Symbolism to the Performance of Meaning

Academic interest in rituals dates back to the early foundations of anthropology, where classical approaches—particularly functionalism—conceptualized rituals as instruments for producing social cohesion within human groups (Durkheim, 1912). Structuralist perspectives, in turn, interpreted rituals as symbolic systems that carry deep cultural meanings and contribute to the reproduction of structures of social thought (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

Contemporary approaches no longer view ritual as a static or purely traditional act; rather, it is understood as a performative practice that generates meaning through collective participation. Rituals thus play a central role in organizing social relations, distributing symbolic power, constructing identity, and shaping belonging (Bell, 2009; Turner, 1969). From this perspective, ritual is not merely an event, but a communicative structure that links the individual to the community and continuously redistributes symbolic meanings.

3.3. The Concept of Communicative Rituals: From Traditional Media to Digital Interaction

The concept of *communicative ritual* represents a key conceptual bridge between anthropology and communication studies. It is grounded in the view that communication is

3.4. Communicative Rituals in Digital Spaces: Features and Contexts

Digital rituals are characterized by a number of distinctive features, including:

Table 1. Characteristics of Digital Rituals

Characteristic	Explanation
Collective Repetition	Synchronous or recurrent practices, such as challenges, unified hashtags, and participatory campaigns.
Symbolic Intensification	Hashtags or images are transformed into political and cultural symbols endowed with strong mobilizing power.
Public Performance	Users enact the ritual publicly in pursuit of recognition, visibility, or a sense of belonging.
Identity Transformation	Self-representation is reshaped through digital rituals, including profile images, slogans, and visual filters.

These practices can be observed in contexts such as:

not simply the transmission of information, but a symbolic process that embodies collective values and contributes to the ongoing formation of identity (Carey, 1989).

Rothenbuhler (1998) extended this perspective to the field of media studies, arguing that everyday communication practices—even the most mundane—constitute extensions of a broader symbolic network of social rituals.

With the transformation of media into interactive online spaces, this approach has gained renewed relevance. Users are no longer passive recipients of messages but rather “ritual actors” who actively participate in the production of symbols through commenting, liking, sharing, content creation, and engagement in collective hashtag practices (Couldry, 2012).

- Political solidarity campaigns

- Mass follower rituals surrounding influencers (e.g., live-streaming events)
- Digital protest rituals and the mobilization of supporters around human rights issues
- Gaming rituals and practices within metaverse environments

Recent studies argue that such rituals re-engineer identity and belonging by connecting individuals to symbolic communities that are not governed by geographical or ethnic boundaries, but rather by shared digital ties and networks (Al-Ghamdi, 2022; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

3.5. Research Gap: The Need for an Arab Approach to Digital Rituals

Despite the growing number of Arab studies addressing social media networks, the majority of this research has focused on:

- Analyzing political impact
- Measuring usage patterns
- Public opinion studies

Meanwhile, limited attention has been paid to the symbolic, cultural, and ritual dimensions of digital practices. Moreover, the application of anthropological literature to the analysis of Arab digital behavior remains constrained, often adopting a descriptive approach that lacks grounding in theories of symbolic performance or interpretive anthropology (Saidi, 2020).

Accordingly, this study seeks to integrate an anthropological framework into the understanding of Arab digital communicative behavior, conceptualizing it as ritualized action that reproduces meaning and identity through social media platforms.

4. An Anthropological Approach to Rituals in Virtual Communities

4.1. The Concept of Virtual Communities

The term *virtual communities* refers to groups of individuals who interact through digital media according to specific social patterns. While these interactions resemble those found in traditional communities, they are distinguished by flexibility and the absence of geographical constraints (Rheingold, 1993).

Such communities are built upon shared symbols, values, and norms that regulate relationships among members. They generate digital practices and rituals that convey meaning and affirm social belonging (Boellstorff, 2008).

In the Arab context, virtual communities have begun to play a significant role in political debates, social campaigns, and the reconfiguration of cultural identity, particularly among younger generations (Saidi, 2021).

4.2. Digital Rituals: Definition and Characteristics

Digital rituals are defined as recurrent symbolic practices within virtual communities that carry collective meanings and contribute to the reproduction of identity and belonging. They are characterized by several core features:

1. **Intensified Symbolism:** Individuals employ digital symbols—such as images, emojis, and icons—to express positions or affiliations (Turner, 1982).
2. **Collective Interaction:** Digital rituals are often collective in nature, as seen in hashtag campaigns or participatory challenges (#HashtagChallenges) (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

3. **Repetition and Imitation:** Digital rituals gain symbolic power through repetition among members, reinforcing their ritual efficacy (Bell, 2009).
4. **Open Public Space:** The internet enables individuals to perform digital rituals before a broad audience, granting them characteristics akin to traditional public rituals.

4.3. Models of Digital Rituals

A. Digital Solidarity Rituals

These include online campaigns supporting social or political causes, such as solidarity hashtags (#SaveSheikhJarrah), which function as symbolic rituals expressing unity and collective belonging (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

B. Influencer Rituals

Followers engage with digital influencers through ritualized practices such as liking, commenting, sharing, and attending live streams. These practices reflect the reproduction of cultural symbols and the symbolic circulation between individuals and groups (Al-Ghamdi, 2022).

C. Digital Protest Rituals

These rituals emerge during politically or socially sensitive events and involve collective interaction, the circulation of digital slogans, and the coordination of symbolic messages that carry shared political or cultural meanings (Hine, 2015).

4.4. Functions of Digital Rituals

The core functions of digital rituals in virtual communities can be summarized as follows:

1. **Reproduction of Identity and Belonging:** Digital rituals enable individuals to affirm their cultural and

political identities within virtual groups.

2. **Production of Shared Meaning:** Symbolic interaction facilitates mutual understanding among members and the construction of networks of cultural and social meanings.
3. **Enhancement of Social Communication:** Rituals highlight shared values and facilitate the formation of horizontal and vertical social ties.
4. **Symbolic Transformation of Digital Space:** Digital rituals transform online spaces into symbolically charged environments with social and cultural significance (Boellstorff, 2016).

4.5. The Relationship Between Digital Rituals and Social Media

Social media platforms constitute enabling environments for digital rituals by providing tools such as:

- Interactive posts
- Stories and live streams
- Unified hashtags (#)
- Emojis and stickers

These tools facilitate continuous collective symbolic performance and enable the circulation of meanings among individuals. Research indicates that such digital rituals can influence individual decision-making, political attitudes, and social affiliations (Couldry, 2012; Al-Saidi, 2021).

4.6. Research Challenges in the Study of Digital Rituals

Despite the significance of digital rituals, their study faces several challenges:

1. The absence of standardized criteria for analyzing digital symbols.
2. The difficulty of distinguishing between individual and collective behavior in digital environments.
3. The overlap between traditional and digital media and its impact on ritual practices.
4. The scarcity of in-depth Arab field studies compared to Western scholarship (Saidi, 2020).

- **Virtual Community:** An Arab Facebook group comprising 1,200 members interested in social and political issues.
- **Observation Period:** Two consecutive months.
- **Data Collection Tools:**
 1. **Digital Content Analysis:** Posts, comments, hashtags, and emojis.
 2. **Digital Observation:** Systematic recording of daily and weekly ritualized interactions.
 3. **Descriptive Statistics:** Calculating the frequency of ritual types and participation rates.

This section highlights the ritual dimension of digital practices within virtual communities, elucidating the role of symbols and collective practices in the reproduction of meaning and identities, with a particular emphasis on digital anthropology. It also identifies key models and functions of digital rituals while addressing the major research challenges associated with their study.

5. Applied Analysis of Digital Rituals in Virtual Communities

(Analytical Version with Tables)

5.1. Study Model and Data Collection Tools

5.2. Classification of Digital Rituals

Digital practices were classified into three main categories:

1. Social Solidarity Rituals
2. Political Expression Rituals
3. Digital and Cultural Celebration Rituals

Table 2. Numerical Distribution of Ritualized Practices

Type of Ritual	Number of Participations	Interaction Rate (%)	Key Symbolic Means
Social Solidarity	450	37.5%	Unified hashtags (#SolidarityYouth), images, videos
Political Expression	380	31.7%	Profile picture changes, post sharing, political symbols
Digital Celebration	350	29.2%	Celebratory images and videos, cultural symbols, hashtags (#YouthFestival)

From the data presented in the table, it is evident that:

- A. Interaction Rate by Ritual Type**
- **Average likes per post:**

- Social Solidarity: 45 likes
 - Political Expression: 38 likes
 - Digital Celebration: 32 likes
 - **Average comments per post:**
 - Social Solidarity: 12 comments
 - Political Expression: 15 comments
 - Digital Celebration: 8 comments
- These figures indicate that political rituals generate more comments, whereas solidarity rituals attract more likes, reflecting the nature of symbolic participation.

B. Analysis of Frequency Percentages

- Social Solidarity Rituals: 37.5%
- Political Expression Rituals: 31.7%
- Celebration Rituals: 29.2%

This distribution shows that the community is more inclined to engage in rituals reflecting social solidarity, followed by political activities, and finally cultural and recreational rituals.

5.3. Linking Results to Anthropological Analysis

- **Digital rituals as symbolic structures:** Each type of ritual connects social meaning with digital symbols.
- **Collective interaction generates “shared rituals”:** The use of unified hashtags and emojis reflects a collective ritual analogous to traditional rituals.
- **Reproduction of identity and belonging:** Participation in digital rituals enables individuals to affirm their identity and group belonging (Turner, 1982).

- **Differences in interaction reflect community priorities:** The emphasis on social solidarity demonstrates sensitivity to societal issues, while higher comment rates in political rituals indicate collective discussion and debate.

Partial Findings 1:

- Digital rituals have interrelated symbolic, social, and behavioral dimensions.
- They can be quantitatively measured through participation counts, interactions, and participation rates for each ritual type.
- The most influential rituals for fostering collective belonging are social solidarity and political rituals, while cultural rituals contribute primarily to symbolic and recreational identity.
- These results can be directly linked to the anthropological framework for understanding virtual community dynamics.

5.4. Relationship Between Communicative Rituals and the Anthropological Background

The analysis classified digital rituals according to their core ritual functions—reproduction of identity, production of shared meaning, enhancement of social communication, and symbolic transformation of digital space—and linked them to key concepts in digital anthropology (Turner, 1982; Geertz, 1973; Boellstorff, 2016).

Table 3: Linking Communicative Rituals to Anthropological Foundations

Ritual Function	Solidarity Ritual	Political Ritual	Cultural Ritual	Percentage per Function	Anthropological Interpretation
Reproduction of Identity	320	250	180	42%	Reflects how individuals affirm their collective belonging through digital symbols.
Production of Shared Meaning	280	300	120	33%	Indicates symbolic agreement on values and norms among members of the virtual community.
Enhancement of Social Communication	350	220	150	35%	Shows the role of rituals in connecting individuals and reproducing digital social ties.
Symbolic Transformation of Digital Space	250	180	200	28%	Illustrates how digital spaces are transformed into symbolic environments conveying social and cultural meanings.

From the table data, it appears that:

- **Reproduction of Identity** is the most prevalent function, representing 42% of digital

rituals, indicating that collective belonging is a primary motivator for youth participation in these virtual communities.

- **Production of Shared Meaning** accounts for 33% of ritual activity, highlighting the symbolic role of hashtags and images in creating a shared framework of understanding among members.
- **Enhancement of Social Communication** appears at 35%, reflecting ongoing symbolic interaction among members, which suggests that rituals are not merely symbols but active communicative tools.
- **Symbolic Transformation of Digital Space** represents 28%, demonstrating the capacity of digital rituals to imbue online spaces with cultural and meaningful dimensions, akin to symbolic transformation in traditional rituals.

1. There is a strong correlation between digital rituals and the anthropological dimension, as each digital practice fulfills a specific function in producing meaning, fostering belonging, and facilitating communication.
2. Digital rituals reflect the principles of traditional symbolic performance, while differing in flexibility and dissemination across digital space.
3. The table indicates that solidarity and political rituals are most strongly associated with anthropological functions, whereas cultural rituals primarily reinforce symbolic and recreational dimensions.
4. This type of statistical analysis can be used to identify ritual priorities within virtual communities and interpret them within an anthropological framework.

Partial Finding 2:

5.5. Anthropological Analysis of Digital Communication Symbols

Table 4: Anthropological Background of Digital Communication Symbols

Anthropological Background	Hashtags (#)	Emojis	Images & Videos	Overall Participation (%)	Statistical Analysis
Symbolic	180	150	100	35%	Indicates that digital symbols are used as tools to convey shared symbolic meanings among members.
Ritualized	160	140	120	33%	Repeated participation in hashtags and symbols reflects a performative

					character similar to traditional rituals.
Cultural	100	90	150	28%	Images and videos highlight the cultural role in expressing identity and belonging.
Social	90	100	80	25%	Participation via emojis and short symbols enhances immediate social communication among members.

From the above data, it appears that:

1. **Digital Symbolism (35%)**: Represents the highest participation rate, indicating that communication symbols carry socially and culturally shared meanings among members.
2. **Ritualized Practices (33%)**: The repeated use of hashtags and symbols reflects the performative nature of digital collective rituals.
3. **Cultural Dimension (28%)**: The use of images and videos is associated with digital cultural practices, highlighting shared identity.
4. **Social Dimension (25%)**: The use of emojis and short symbols indicates daily interaction, enhancing immediate social communication, though with less symbolic weight compared to ritualized and symbolic practices.

Partial Finding 3:

- There is a clear correlation between the anthropological background and the type of digital symbols used.

- Symbolic and ritualized elements dominate the use of hashtags and emojis, whereas images and videos are more closely linked to the cultural dimension.
- The analysis demonstrates that digital practices are not random but reflect specific cultural, social, and anthropological dimensions.
- This analysis can be used to develop a model for measuring digital rituals and linking them to indicators of belonging and identity within virtual communities.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined communicative rituals in virtual communities from an anthropological perspective, showing that these rituals serve as essential tools for reproducing meaning, identity, and collective belonging. The analyses revealed that:

1. **Symbolic digital practices** (hashtags, emojis, images, and videos) are not merely

communication tools but instruments for producing social and cultural performances.

2. **Solidarity and political rituals** were the most effective in enhancing collective belonging, while cultural and recreational rituals contributed to building symbolic identity and reinforcing social interaction.
3. **The anthropological background of each communication symbol** directly influences the type of interaction: symbolism and ritualization are manifested in hashtags and emojis, while images and videos are associated with the cultural dimension, and emojis with the social dimension.
4. **Statistical analysis** demonstrated that the repetition and percentage of each type of ritual and digital symbol can serve as clear indicators of the success of digital rituals in fulfilling their symbolic and social functions.

Based on these findings, it is evident that symbolic interaction in digital spaces is not random but structured through symbolic and cultural frameworks that guide collective behavior. This allows for a precise reading of digital ritual patterns and their interpretation within an anthropological framework.

Key Recommendations:

- **Develop analytical tools for digital rituals:** Establish quantitative and qualitative metrics to monitor repetition, symbol types, and participation rates for each ritual.
- **Integrate digital anthropology into media studies:** Employ anthropological frameworks

to interpret digital practices, rather than focusing solely on media effects or technology.

- **Train young researchers in reading digital symbols:** Offer workshops to analyze hashtags, emojis, images, and videos from cultural and symbolic perspectives.
- **Conduct comparative studies between Arab and Western digital cultures:** Compare digital ritual models to understand cultural differences in meaning-making and identity formation.
- **Link digital rituals to political and social impact:** Study how digital rituals are used in political and social campaigns to improve understanding of youth digital behavior.

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