

The Digital Reproduction Mechanisms of Buddhist Rituals in Mobile Media Environments

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Buddhist rituals are digitally reproduced within mobile media platforms such as short video apps and livestreaming services. Drawing on theories of mediatization, ritual studies, and digital religion, it examines the structural transformation, semiotic reconfiguration, and reception dynamics of Buddhist practices as they migrate into technologically mediated spaces. The study explores how traditional ritual elements are selectively encoded, visually reconstituted, and reinterpreted through digital affordances, revealing new forms of religious communication and participation. Through analysis of case studies from platforms like Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili, the paper argues that mobile media not only serve as vectors for ritual dissemination but also as agents of ritual innovation, where user interaction, algorithmic visibility, and platform aesthetics co-construct the sacred. The research contributes to broader understandings of how religion adapts in the digital age and how digital environments reshape embodied spiritual experiences.

Keywords: Buddhist Rituals; Mobile Media; Digital Religion; Mediatization; Ritual Reconfiguration; Livestreaming

1. Introduction

The advent of mobile media technologies has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of religious practice, community formation, and ritual transmission. Unlike earlier broadcast models of religious communication—such as radio sermons or televised rituals—mobile media are highly interactive, participatory, and algorithmically personalized. This shift enables users not merely to consume religious content passively, but to engage with it dynamically through likes, shares, comments, and virtual donations. The result is the emergence of a new “ritual interface,” where mobile screens mediate not only access to sacred content but also co-produce the very conditions under which religious meaning is generated. In East Asia, where Buddhism maintains vibrant

ritual traditions deeply embedded in local cultures, the penetration of mobile apps such as Douyin (TikTok China), Kuaishou, and Bilibili has created novel environments for the performance, reinterpretation, and circulation of Buddhist rituals. On these platforms, users can witness monks conducting livestreamed chanting sessions from temples, engage in online merit-dedication ceremonies, or interact with algorithmically recommended videos featuring recitations of sutras or symbolic ritual acts such as lighting virtual incense. Some accounts are managed by monastic institutions aiming to expand outreach, while others are driven by individual practitioners or influencers who integrate Buddhist imagery and speech into broader lifestyle content.

This transformation reflects not just a change in format, but a deeper mediatization of religion—the process by which religious practices, symbols, and institutions adapt to the logic, aesthetics, and constraints of contemporary media platforms (Hjarvard, 2008). In this context, Buddhist rituals are no longer confined to temple grounds or fixed calendars. They are reconfigured for digital attention economies: optimized for brief engagement, tailored to platform-specific metrics (likes, shares, watch time), and often entangled with commercial or entertainment-oriented motives. As rituals are re-encoded in audiovisual formats, their components—visual symbols, gestures, chants—are subject to reassembly and reinterpretation by both content producers and viewers.

From a scholarly perspective, these developments raise important theoretical and empirical questions. How are Buddhist rituals encoded and represented in mobile media? To what extent do digital affordances—such as looping video, user comments, or virtual gifts—reshape ritual form and function? In what ways do users engage with these rituals, and how does their participation shape religious meaning and experience? What are the implications for long-standing notions of ritual authority, authenticity, and transmission in Buddhism, especially when lay creators may command greater visibility than ordained clergy? These questions are particularly salient in the case of Chinese Buddhism, where state control over religious institutions coexists with increasing digital innovation at the grassroots level. The rise of short video and livestreaming platforms has introduced new tensions between institutional regulation and individual creativity, between orthodoxy and popular reinterpretation. It has also redefined ritual space, displacing the centrality of temples and enabling users to access rituals from home, work, or on-the-go. As such, the study of Buddhist rituals on mobile media offers not only insights into the evolving role of religion in digital society but also provides a valuable lens for examining broader shifts in mediatized culture, spiritual practice, and socio-technical imaginaries.

In this study, I investigate the digital reproduction mechanisms of Buddhist rituals across mobile media platforms, focusing on the interplay between traditional symbolic elements and digital affordances. By combining digital ethnography with semiotic and discourse analysis, I aim to uncover how sacred practices are visually and sonically re-coded, how audiences engage in participatory ritualism, and how new hierarchies of visibility and meaning are constructed. Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing field of digital religion studies, offering a grounded understanding of how Buddhist ritual adapts, persists, and transforms in the mobile-mediated age.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical underpinnings that guide the study of Buddhist rituals in mobile media environments. Drawing from mediatization theory, ritual studies, and digital religion frameworks, it situates the transformation of religious practices within broader sociotechnical and cultural shifts. These perspectives help interpret how ritual content is restructured, how religious authority is negotiated, and how sacred meaning is both preserved and reconfigured in mobile-mediated contexts.

2.1. Mediatization of Religion

Mediatization refers to the historical process through which various sectors of society — including politics, education, and religion — are increasingly shaped by media logics (Hjarvard, 2014; Krüger, 2018). In the domain of religion, this process involves the adaptation of religious institutions, discourses, and practices to the operational norms, aesthetics, and affordances of contemporary media technologies. Mediatization does not imply mere transmission of content but entails structural transformation: religious phenomena become recontextualized within media systems.

In the case of Buddhism, which has historically depended on oral chanting, visual iconography, and embodied ritual performances, mediatization through mobile platforms introduces a reordering of communicative priorities. Practices that once relied on spatial co-presence—such as prostrations, sutra recitations, or merit-making ceremonies—are now re-presented through short-form videos, live broadcasts, and algorithmically circulated clips. These media forms recondition temporal structures (e.g., from cyclical temple calendars to on-demand viewing), aesthetic presentations (e.g., vertical framing, visual filters, and sound overlays), and interaction patterns (e.g., through bullet comments and digital donations).

Hjarvard (2012) distinguishes between “banal religion,” where religious symbols are embedded in popular culture, and “institutional religion,” where mediatization challenges traditional authority. Mobile Buddhist content often straddles this boundary—monastic chanting sessions may be interspersed with motivational speech or lifestyle vlogging, blending sacred and secular motifs. This hybridity illustrates how the logic of media—favoring brevity, visuality, and engagement—reshapes religious expression, even as it retains core symbolic elements.

Furthermore, the mediatization of Buddhism reveals a power redistribution between institutional and individual actors. As religious authority migrates from the monastery to the mobile screen, new “digital clergy” emerge—lay practitioners, influencers, and tech-savvy monks—who gain ritual legitimacy through follower counts and platform algorithms. This dynamic challenges the hierarchical structure of traditional sangha communities and raises questions about authenticity, lineage, and doctrinal fidelity.

2.2. Ritual Theory and Digital Performance

Ritual theory offers essential insights into the symbolic, performative, and embodied nature of religious practice (Grimes, 2004; Grimes, 2012; Grassie, 2025). Rituals are not simply scripted

behaviors but complex acts of world-making: they organize time, structure meaning, and reinforce social cohesion. Catherine Bell's (1992) concept of "ritualization" emphasizes the strategic and dynamic ways rituals establish distinctions between the sacred and the profane through embodied practices. These insights are indispensable when evaluating how Buddhist rituals are modified in digital formats.

In mobile-mediated contexts, the performative dimension of ritual is both transformed and recontextualized. What Grimes (2012) calls the "performance turn" in ritual studies foregrounds how rituals function through enactment — yet in digital spaces, enactment becomes virtual, asynchronous, and screen-mediated. Here, gestures such as offering incense or bowing are visually represented rather than physically enacted by the viewer. This results in what can be termed a disembodied embodiment — the body of the practitioner is visible, but the viewer's participation is symbolic or emotional rather than physical.

This transition raises important questions about ritual efficacy. Classical ritual theory often hinges on co-presence, repetition, and intentionality. But can a livestreamed sutra chanting, viewed on a smartphone, generate the same karmic merit as temple attendance? For some users, the answer lies in subjective intentionality and affective resonance; for others, the loss of ritual gravity and bodily discipline signals a dilution of meaning.

Moreover, digital rituals are often fragmented and stylized. They may emphasize aesthetic spectacle — close-up shots of mandalas, ASMR-like chanting acoustics, ambient soundtracks — over liturgical completeness. This visual and sonic stylization reflects both platform demands and audience preferences, transforming ritual into both devotion and digital art. In this sense, digital rituals blur the boundaries between ritual, performance, and entertainment, a phenomenon that ritual theorists must reckon with in the age of social media.

2.3. Digital Religion and Sacred Media

The third pillar of this framework is the emerging field of digital religion, which investigates how religious life adapts and evolves in digital environments (Campbell, 2012; Helland, 2016). Heidi Campbell's distinction between "religion online" (traditional content hosted on websites) and "online religion" (religious engagement occurring within digital culture) is particularly relevant here. Buddhist practices on Douyin and Bilibili are not mere reproductions of offline rituals; they constitute new forms of digital religiosity embedded in the logics of user-generated content, social networks, and platform economies.

Mobile media serve as both vessels and environments for religious practice. Their affordances — ephemerality, immediacy, portability — shape the kinds of religious engagements that are possible. Unlike traditional temples, mobile media do not require sacred architecture or liturgical training; instead, they offer tools for anyone to become a ritual creator, editor, or commentator. This democratization of religious expression coexists with increasing mediation by algorithms, which determine which rituals are seen, by whom, and how often.

The notion of the "digital sacred" challenges conventional ideas of where and how the sacred is instantiated. Sacredness becomes increasingly situational, co-produced through symbolic

gestures, collective witnessing, and affective intensities within networked publics. For example, the act of sending a virtual lotus flower during a livestream chanting session can become a ritual gesture imbued with meaning — even if it lacks the material tangibility of a temple offering. Likewise, comment threads may function as digital prayer spaces, with users collectively typing “Amitābha” or leaving emojis of incense sticks to participate in a shared devotional act.

However, the digital sacred is also precarious. It is subject to platform governance, commercial incentive structures, and cultural appropriation. Sacred content may be flagged by moderators, demonetized, or repurposed for entertainment, raising ethical questions about the commodification and profanation of ritual. Thus, scholars of digital religion must attend not only to the creative potential of online rituals but also to their vulnerabilities within commercial ecosystems.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design that aligns with the goal of uncovering how Buddhist rituals are digitally restructured, performed, and experienced on mobile media platforms. As the object of inquiry is not solely the observable content but also the symbolic systems, participatory behaviors, and meaning-making processes embedded in digital ritual practices, qualitative methods are especially appropriate for grasping the nuances of ritual transformation in technologically mediated contexts.

3.1. Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

The research is grounded in constructivist epistemology, which assumes that reality is co-constructed by actors, contexts, and interpretive frameworks. In line with this perspective, digital rituals are not treated as mere reflections of traditional practices, but as socio-technically situated performances that acquire new meanings through platform-specific conventions, audience interactions, and algorithmic mediation. The methodology therefore emphasizes thick description, contextual analysis, and the interpretation of symbolic forms in digital environments.

3.2. Digital Ethnography and Data Collection

The core method employed is digital ethnography (also known as netnography), a research approach that adapts ethnographic techniques to study cultures and practices as they unfold in digital settings (Caliandro, 2016; Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020). Fieldwork was conducted over an 18-month period between January 2022 and June 2024, during which time the researcher systematically observed and recorded Buddhist ritual content on Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou, the three most prominent Chinese mobile media platforms with active religious content communities.

More than 180 videos and livestream sessions were collected, spanning a range of ritual types, including:

Morning and evening chanting ceremonies

Online merit-dedication rituals for the deceased

Livestreamed repentance ceremonies

Lay-led devotional vlogs incorporating Buddhist chants, incense offerings, and scripture reading

Hybrid rituals combining meditation, motivational speech, and scripture excerpts

These videos were documented alongside metadata such as the upload date, user identity (anonymous or public), number of likes, shares, and comments, as well as any associated hashtags, titles, and captions. Screenshots and transcripts were saved and coded for analysis.

In addition to visual data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 content creators and 8 regular viewers. These participants were recruited through platform messaging, with invitations framed as academic inquiry into religious media practices. The interviews aimed to uncover creators' motivations, understand their sense of ritual legitimacy, and examine how audiences interpret and engage with the content. Questions addressed topics such as perceived authenticity, affective experience, spiritual intent, and views on the blending of ritual and entertainment.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The collected data were analyzed using a combination of content analysis, semiotic interpretation, and discourse analysis, enabling a multi-layered understanding of how rituals are digitally mediated.

Visual codes were examined in terms of camera angle, lighting, ritual objects, color schemes, and framing choices (e.g., inclusion of altar vs. focus on speaker's face).

Speech acts were coded according to their liturgical function (e.g., invocation, dedication, recitation, sermon) and delivery style (intonation, pace, affect).

Spatial settings were analyzed to assess how digital rituals reconstruct sacred space—whether set in temples, home altars, outdoor locations, or digitally composited environments (e.g., green screen temples).

User interaction features such as danmu (bullet comments), digital gifts (e.g., virtual incense, lotus flowers), and real-time feedback during livestreams were analyzed as forms of co-ritualization or affective participation.

Platform affordances were considered in light of their impact on ritual form: the vertical video format on Douyin, the community commentary culture on Bilibili, and the gift economy and fan-based interaction model on Kuaishou.

3.4. Sampling Strategy and Case Selection

Given the massive scale of content across platforms, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted to focus on accounts that explicitly presented their content as Buddhist or ritualistic. Selection criteria included:

Self-identification as monastic or lay Buddhist

Use of Buddhist ritual terminology in video titles or descriptions

High levels of audience engagement (minimum 10,000 views or 100+ comments)

Recurrence of ritual performance across multiple videos

This sampling approach ensured the inclusion of both institutional and grassroots actors, allowing for a more representative picture of how digital ritual authority and participation are distributed.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The research follows ethical guidelines for digital fieldwork, including informed consent, anonymization, and respect for spiritual content. For publicly available videos, data were treated as part of the public domain, but identifying user information was anonymized in analysis and presentation. For interviews, participants were informed of the study's academic purpose and signed consent forms agreeing to audio recording and transcription. Care was taken to approach sacred materials with cultural sensitivity and to avoid reductive or instrumental interpretations of ritual acts.

4. Re-encoding the Ritual: From Temple to Timeline

The migration of Buddhist rituals from physical temples to mobile media timelines involves a profound transformation in how the sacred is visualized, sequenced, and sonically constructed. While traditional rituals were performed in a specific spatial and temporal context, the mobile media environment necessitates new forms of mediation, shaped by platform aesthetics and user expectations. This section analyzes how Buddhist rituals are re-encoded through three key lenses: visual symbolism and camera aesthetics, temporal fragmentation and sequencing, and audio enhancement techniques.

4.1. Visual Symbolism and Camera Aesthetics

Visuality plays a central role in the digital representation of Buddhist rituals. On mobile media platforms, creators emphasize core symbolic elements—monastic robes, burning incense, gilded statues, mandalas, and elaborate altars—to immediately evoke the sacred. These elements are not only preserved but often heightened through cinematic techniques that aim to enhance viewer immersion.

For example, slow-motion is commonly used during key ritual moments such as incense offering or prostration, allowing viewers to dwell in the symbolic gravity of the action. Focus blur (shallow depth of field) draws attention to ritual objects like Buddha statues or sutra scrolls, while softening the background, thus isolating the sacred within the visual frame. Some creators also employ drone shots to capture temple architecture and ritual processions, offering a grand, almost filmic perspective.

Moreover, filters and visual effects—such as golden glows or light flares—are added in post-production to infuse videos with a transcendental aura. These techniques translate the embodied sacredness of ritual space into a stylized, mobile-optimized visual language. Platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou especially favor such aesthetic enhancement due to their visual culture of

spectacle and affective engagement. Figure 1 below compares the prevalence of visual effects across three platforms based on a coding of 60 ritual videos.

As shown, Douyin exhibits the highest integration of visual spectacle, consistent with its trend-driven algorithmic logic. Bilibili follows with more measured but still significant use of visual symbolism, while Kuaishou leans toward authentic, unfiltered aesthetics albeit with some enhancement.

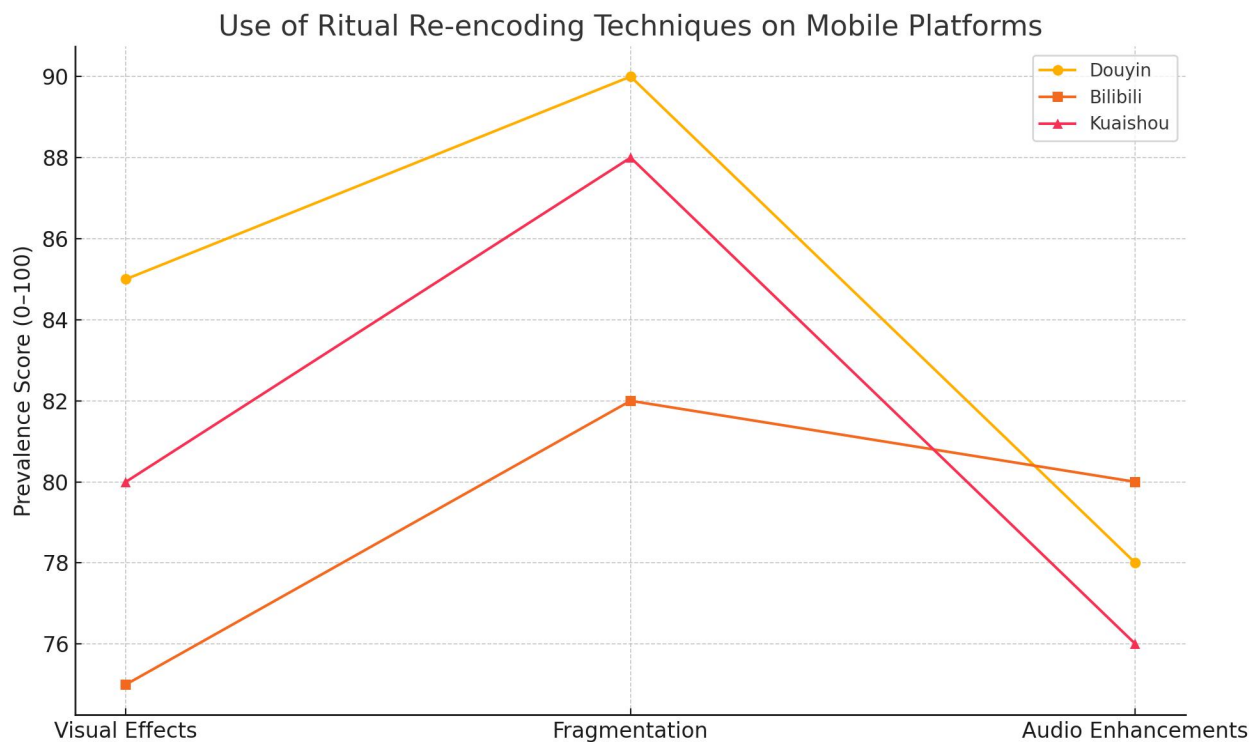


Figure 1. Use of Visual Effects, Temporal Fragmentation, and Audio Enhancements on Major Platforms
 (Scale: 0–100, based on composite scoring of techniques used in sample videos)

4.2. Fragmentation and Sequencing

Another defining characteristic of mobile media is the temporal fragmentation of content. Unlike traditional rituals that follow a structured, continuous temporal arc—often lasting from 30 minutes to several hours—digital rituals are often broken into short clips, typically ranging from 30 seconds to 3 minutes.

This fragmentation is driven by the need to maintain viewer attention, conform to algorithmic promotion thresholds, and encourage content virality. As a result, the narrative and liturgical coherence of rituals is frequently restructured. Rather than presenting the entire sutra chanting or merit-dedication sequence, creators highlight “ritual moments” such as bell ringing, incense lighting, or the recitation of a powerful verse (e.g., the Heart Sutra or the Amitābha mantra).

Interestingly, this format allows for ritual modularity, where users can engage with different parts of a ritual based on personal needs or time constraints. For example:

A viewer might watch a 1-minute recitation before bed for calm.

Another may play a short repentance clip in the morning as part of a routine.

Some creators adopt a series-based model, releasing ritual episodes across multiple days (e.g., “7-Day Lotus Sutra Practice”), encouraging repeat visits and deepened participation. Others loop the same segment for prolonged listening (e.g., a 10-hour chanting livestream), blurring the boundary between ritual and ambient media.

While this fragmentation raises concerns about ritual dilution, it also introduces opportunities for ritual accessibility—particularly among diasporic audiences, youth, or secular users unfamiliar with full liturgies. It fosters a more personalized, fluid approach to devotion and spiritual self-care.

4.3. Voice, Chant, and Audio Enhancement

In Buddhism, sound holds profound ritual significance. Mantras and sutras are believed to carry intrinsic spiritual power, and their recitation is central to ritual efficacy. In the digital domain, this auditory dimension undergoes both preservation and innovation through sound design and audio engineering. Creators enhance chanting videos by adding:

Reverb effects to simulate temple acoustics.

Layered binaural recordings to create a surround-sound experience in headphones.

Ambient background music—such as flowing water, wind chimes, or light drones—to induce meditative states.

These sonic enhancements compensate for the loss of spatial resonance that accompanies digitization. They also cater to the affective economy of mobile media, where viewers expect content to produce emotional engagement—calm, awe, gratitude, or reverence.

Interestingly, many creators combine traditional chant with new-age or cinematic music, producing hybrid audio rituals. For instance, some Bilibili creators remix Buddhist mantras with electronic beats or instrumental compositions, appealing to younger audiences while retaining sacred sound patterns.

Interviews with viewers reveal that such enhancements often intensify perceived presence. Users describe feeling “as if in the temple” or “accompanied by the Buddha,” despite being physically alone. Thus, audio becomes a key conduit for virtual embodiment and ritual atmosphere.

However, this transformation is not without tension. Purists may view these sound manipulations as sacrilegious or distracting. The tension between doctrinal orthodoxy and affective efficacy reflects broader debates about digital mediation: does enhancement amplify the sacred or substitute it with aesthetic effect?

5. Participatory Ritualism: Users, Comments, and Algorithms

The emergence of mobile platforms has redefined what it means to “participate” in a religious ritual. While traditional Buddhist rituals rely on physical co-presence and bodily gestures such as chanting, bowing, and offering, digital platforms have enabled new forms of symbolic and textual participation. In this chapter, we analyze how users contribute to digital rituals through comment functions, algorithmic visibility, and virtual gift economies. We argue that these interactive elements create a new participatory ecology that reconfigures both ritual authority and spiritual experience.

5.1. Commenting as Co-ritualization

Among all interaction features, the danmu (bullet comment) stands out as the most distinctly “ritualized” form of viewer participation, especially on platforms like Bilibili, which popularized this feature. Unlike standard comments that appear below a video, danmu float across the video screen in real-time, synchronizing viewers’ expressions with the visual flow of the ritual. In the context of Buddhist content, danmu often includes:

Blessings (e.g., May you be safe)

Chanted phrases (e.g., Namo Amitābha)

Emoji prayers

Sutra echoes (e.g., quoting key lines such as “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form”)

This mode of textual engagement transforms passive watching into interactive co-ritualization. As multiple users type similar messages simultaneously, a digital prayer space emerges—textual, affective, and communal. The screen becomes not just a display device, but a ritual surface on which viewers inscribe meaning.

Interviews with viewers revealed that danmu fosters a sense of shared sacredness, even in solitude:

“When I see hundreds of people typing Amitābha with me, I feel like I’m in a temple hall, not alone in my room.” (Female, 26, Guangzhou)

Additionally, danmu fulfills affective and social functions:

It externalizes internal intentions, offering a performative outlet for merit-making or devotion.

It cultivates ritual atmosphere, as scrolling text enhances the sense of spiritual resonance.

It enables micro-community formation, with users replying to each other’s comments mid-ritual.

This phenomenon aligns with what media theorists call ambient intimacy—shared emotional presence in digital space. Yet it also raises questions: Is ritual efficacy diminished when textual devotion replaces embodied action? Does the gamification of danmu (with comment badges and color options) dilute sincerity?

5.2. Algorithmic Amplification and Ritual Authority

In mobile ritual ecologies, visibility is power—and visibility is not neutral. It is algorithmically produced. Platforms like Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou use engagement-based recommendation algorithms to determine which videos are promoted to wider audiences. Factors include likes, shares, comments, retention time, and recentness.

As a result, monastics with digital literacy — those who can tailor ritual performances to platform aesthetics — often achieve greater reach. A monk who chants with a clear voice, cinematic framing, and timely posting may outperform a high-ranking abbot who simply records a ceremony in static form. This leads to a subtle but profound restructuring of ritual authority:

Digital fluency becomes a proxy for spiritual visibility.

Lay practitioners, once seen as secondary in ritual hierarchy, now act as prominent mediators of sacred content.

Algorithmic popularity substitutes or at least rivals traditional lineage-based legitimacy.

To illustrate this dynamic, consider the following observed case:

A lay creator on Douyin amassed 1.2 million followers by posting short mantra clips with pop-influenced background visuals.

A respected temple’s official Bilibili account with canonical liturgies had only 30,000 followers, despite historical prestige. Figure 2 below visualizes how algorithmic reach varies across platforms and user types:

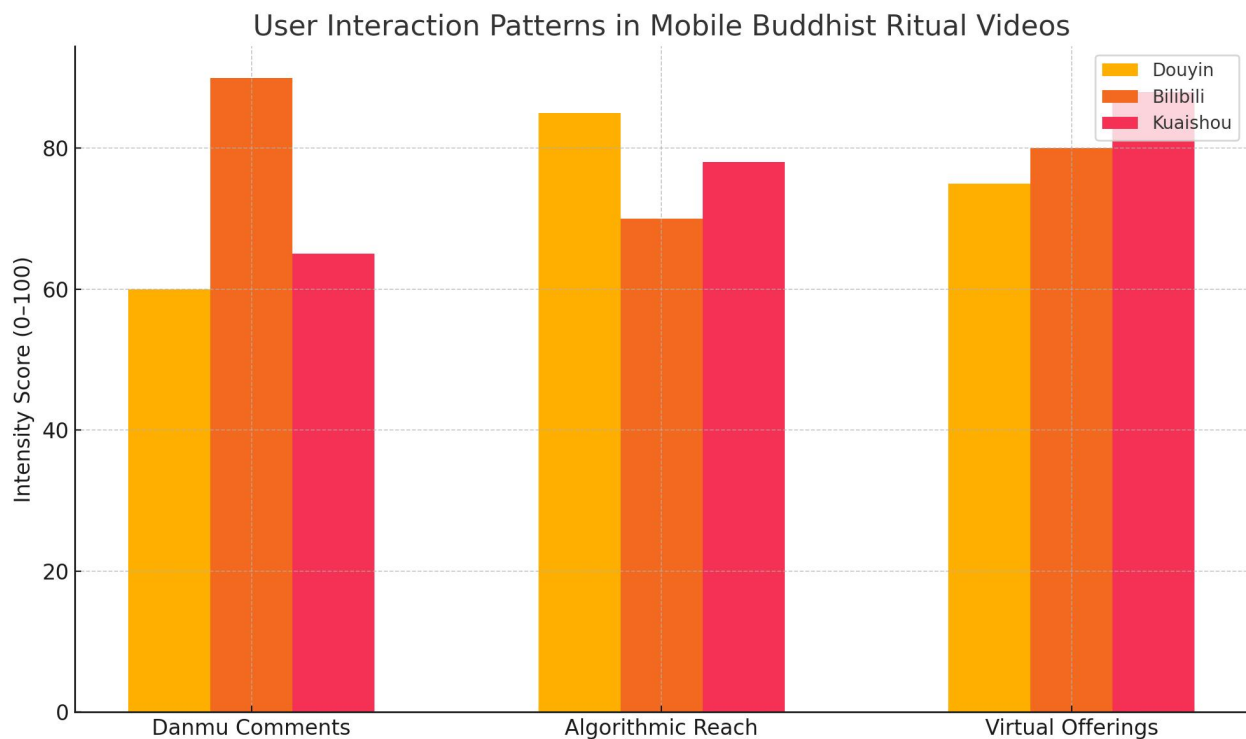


Figure 2. Comparative Influence of Algorithmic Amplification, Comments, and Virtual Offerings (0–100 Intensity Score) (Scored across 60 ritual videos per platform using content analysis criteria)

As shown, Douyin leads in algorithmic amplification, favoring viral and visually enhanced content. Bilibili excels in danmu engagement, while Kuaishou ranks highest in virtual gifting. These variations shape how ritual authority and interaction are distributed. This shift introduces debates within Buddhist communities:

Is a popular ritual video inherently more spiritually valuable?

Should digital “influencers” be treated as religious figures?

How should temples adapt to platform governance without losing doctrinal coherence?

These questions remain unresolved, yet they underscore the convergence of platform logic and religious legitimacy.

5.3. Gift Economy and Virtual Offerings

A third vector of digital ritual participation is the gift economy—the use of virtual tokens and monetary donations as symbolic offerings. All three platforms support such transactions, though with differing emphases:

Kuaishou encourages large-scale gifting via ranked “top supporters.”

Douyin offers themed gifts like “Digital Incense” or “Peace Lotus.”

Bilibili integrates gifting with danmu, allowing users to gift and comment simultaneously.

These digital gifts function as modern ritual instruments, echoing physical offerings of incense, flowers, candles, and food. For instance:

A 10-yuan lotus emoji becomes the online counterpart of a temple lotus lamp.

A “Super Chat” donation during a livestream is analogous to dropping coins in a merit bowl.

Viewers interpret these acts not merely as economic exchanges, but as acts of devotion:

“I send flowers during livestreams for my late father. I believe it helps me transfer merit to him.” (Male, 34, Chengdu)

Yet the convergence of economy and spirituality raises both opportunities and challenges:

On one hand, it democratizes support—allowing users from afar to “participate” in temple activities.

On the other hand, it commodifies ritual—risking a shift from devotion to transaction.

Content analysis shows that videos with active gifting features receive 2–3x more platform promotion, indicating a feedback loop between ritual commodification and algorithmic reward. Creators are thus incentivized to perform “giftable moments,” potentially altering the structure of rituals to highlight points of maximum user engagement (e.g., bell strikes, sutra dedications).

Moreover, top-gifting users are often publicly ranked and thanked in video captions or pinned comments, creating a meritocracy of visibility that may conflict with Buddhist values of humility and non-attachment.

6. Reception, Appropriation, and Tensions

The proliferation of Buddhist ritual practices on mobile platforms has generated diverse responses from both lay practitioners and institutional religious actors. While digital rituals offer new modes of access, expression, and community for believers, they also provoke critical questions about authority, authenticity, and commercialization. This chapter analyzes how digital rituals are received, appropriated, and debated, focusing on the interplay between grassroots engagement and institutional regulation, as well as the ethical dilemmas surrounding the commodification of sacred practices.

For lay users, the reception of digital Buddhist rituals is largely positive, though nuanced. Many report finding emotional comfort in listening to chants during periods of anxiety or grief, or while engaging in mundane routines such as commuting or housework. The ability to access ritual content on-demand, often in curated short segments, enables a form of spiritual companionship that is ambient yet meaningful. Users describe watching livestreams of chanting ceremonies before bed or playing recitations in the background while working as ways of maintaining a loose but consistent connection with Buddhist practice. In this context, rituals function not only as religious acts but also as affective tools for emotional regulation and existential reassurance.

A significant subset of users integrates these rituals into daily routines, forming what can be termed hybrid devotional practices. These are ritualized behaviors that blend Buddhist motifs with wellness routines, mindfulness exercises, and even digital media habits such as scrolling and multitasking. The traditional distinction between sacred and profane time collapses, as spiritual acts are embedded into the rhythms of everyday digital life. For some, this hybridization represents a pragmatic adaptation to modern lifestyles; for others, it signals a dilution of ritual integrity. Nonetheless, the widespread appeal of such practices suggests that users are actively appropriating Buddhist symbols and rituals to construct personalized spiritual ecologies. The chart below visualizes contrasting perspectives between lay users and institutional representatives, based on survey data and interview themes. While lay users report high levels of emotional benefit (85) and routine integration (78), Buddhist institutions express more cautious optimism, scoring lower on perceived spiritual depth and expressing stronger concern about ritual validity (85) and perceived commercialization (90). These divergences reveal deep tensions in how digital rituals are interpreted across stakeholder groups. Institutional responses to digital ritualization are notably ambivalent. On one hand, many Buddhist temples and monastic communities have embraced social media as a necessary vehicle for dharmic outreach, especially to younger generations. Temples now operate official accounts on Bilibili and Douyin, sharing sermon excerpts, chanting sessions, and even behind-the-scenes footage of temple life. These efforts align with a long-standing Mahayana emphasis on skillful means — adapting teachings to context in order to reach wider audiences.

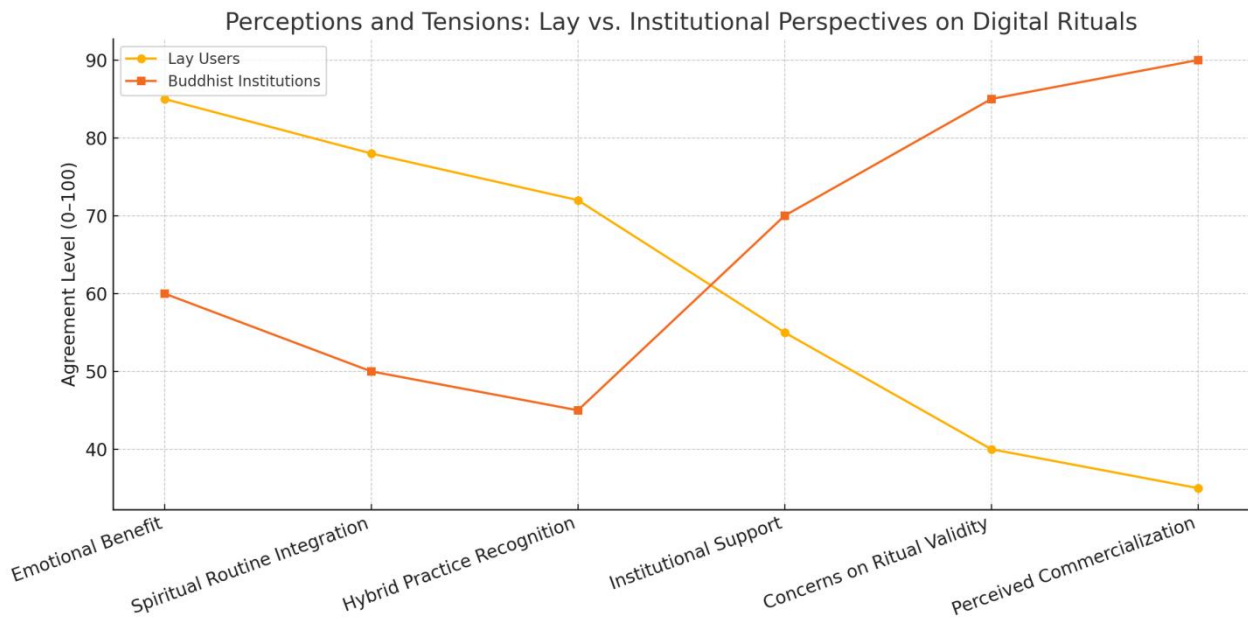


Figure 3. Perceptions and Tensions: Lay vs. Institutional Perspectives on Digital Rituals

On the other hand, numerous senior clergy and doctrinal authorities have raised alarms about the superficiality and instability of digital religious engagement. Concerns include the lack of embodied presence, the decontextualization of liturgical elements, and the difficulty of ensuring doctrinal accuracy in a decentralized, user-generated media environment. Particularly contentious is the phenomenon of lay content creators, whose popularity may eclipse that of monastics but whose ritual legitimacy is difficult to ascertain. These creators are often criticized for mixing ritual content with entertainment formats, such as incorporating Buddhist chants into music remixes, using flashy visual effects, or performing rituals in informal dress.

Institutional actors also voice concern over platform governance, where commercial priorities may clash with religious values. For example, content flagged by moderation algorithms as “sensitive” due to depictions of burning incense or funerary chants may be suppressed or demonetized. Furthermore, temples lack control over the recommendation mechanisms that determine who sees what content and when, making it difficult to ensure the pedagogical coherence of ritual messaging. This infrastructural opacity amplifies institutional anxiety over digital authority and the potential erosion of traditional disciplinary structures.

Beyond institutional critique, ethical concerns loom large. A growing body of observers, both within and outside religious communities, warn against the commodification of ritual through platform-mediated economies. As discussed in previous chapters, viewers can now purchase digital gifts during livestreams—such as incense sticks, lotus flowers, or prayer lights—which are then displayed as icons or animations onscreen. While these gestures may be motivated by sincere devotion, they are also embedded in monetized ecosystems, with platform commissions, ranking incentives, and attention-based rewards.

Critics argue that this blurs the line between devotion and transaction, creating what some have called “ritualized entertainment.” In this model, rituals risk becoming spectacles performed not

for spiritual cultivation, but for clicks, gifts, and algorithmic promotion. This shift can hollow out the contemplative core of ritual, reducing it to aesthetic performance. The loss of liturgical depth, shortened temporal formats, and emphasis on virality are seen as symptomatic of a larger crisis—where sacred meaning is subordinated to metrics of digital visibility.

Moreover, the public ranking of donors during livestreams introduces a visibility-based merit economy that runs counter to Buddhist ideals of anonymity, humility, and non-attachment. High-value givers are often named, thanked, and elevated in comment sections, reproducing social hierarchies that Buddhism traditionally seeks to dissolve. In interviews, some users expressed discomfort with this logic: “It’s like a competition for virtue—whoever donates the most gets the most blessings.”

Despite these tensions, others defend the innovations of digital ritualization. They argue that platforms have merely expanded the semiotic repertoire of Buddhism, enabling rituals to flourish in new aesthetic and social forms. From this view, digital environments are not inherently desacralizing, but contextually dependent spaces where meaning is negotiated through interaction. The question, then, is not whether digital rituals are real, but how they are made real—through intentionality, reception, and communal practice.

In sum, the reception of Buddhist digital rituals reflects a dynamic and contested landscape. Lay users embrace the emotional accessibility and practical integration of mobile rituals, often hybridizing them with secular or therapeutic practices. Institutional actors remain cautious, worried about doctrinal coherence, ethical boundaries, and the loss of liturgical gravitas. Between these poles lies a vibrant zone of appropriation, where the sacred and the algorithmic intersect, and where new ritual forms are both enabled and constrained by platform architectures. Future research should continue to monitor how these tensions evolve and how digital ritual cultures reshape the broader religious field.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that the digital reproduction of Buddhist rituals in mobile media environments constitutes not merely a change in format but a fundamental transformation in the structure, meaning, and authority of ritual practice. As Buddhist rituals migrate from temple grounds to platforms like Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou, they are reshaped by the logic of algorithmic visibility, aesthetic compression, and user interaction. Traditional elements such as chanting, incense, and symbolic gestures are visually re-encoded, temporally fragmented, and sonically enhanced to fit the attention economy of short-form and livestreamed content. This transformation enables new forms of participation—commenting, gifting, sharing—that foster a symbolic co-ritualism where lay users assume active devotional roles, often gaining ritual legitimacy through media fluency and follower metrics rather than institutional lineage. While lay audiences report meaningful spiritual experiences, emotional comfort, and hybridized practices integrated into daily life, Buddhist institutions express ambivalence, voicing concerns about ritual dilution, commercialization, and the erosion of doctrinal authority. The tension between grassroots innovation and institutional orthodoxy underscores the emergence of a contested but

dynamic ritual ecology, where the sacred is co-produced through digital interfaces and collective engagement. Ultimately, this research reveals that mobile media do not merely transmit Buddhist rituals—they reshape their ontological conditions, enabling new forms of religious agency while also confronting religious communities with critical questions about authenticity, ethics, and the future of ritual in the digital age.

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