Spektrum Iran | Vol. 39 | Issue 1 | Winter & Spring 2026 | pp. 121-158 |

Original Research Paper

Transformation of cultural rituals in contemporary Iran: The role of Instagram in reshaping the celebration of traditional occasions

Javad Madahi Mashizi [1*]

1 Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

Received: Sep., 11, 2025 **Accepted:** Nov. 26, 2025

Abstract

The expansion of social media, particularly Instagram, has played a significant role in transforming the ways cultural rituals are experienced and represented in contemporary Iran. This study aims to elucidate the role of Instagram in the transformation of traditional rituals and to examine the impact of this platform's media logic on the form, meaning, and modes of enactment of cultural occasions. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, and its data were collected through semi-structured interviews with active Instagram users who participated in this research. Purposive sampling was employed, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which was ultimately achieved after 15 interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the Braun and Clarke approach. The findings indicate that Instagram, as an active cultural intermediary, has contributed to the mediatization of rituals, the aestheticization of ceremonial practices, shifts in patterns of social participation, the individualization of ritual experience, transformations in symbolic meanings, and the strengthening of influencers' roles in redefining the ways rituals are performed. The results suggest that traditional rituals have moved beyond exclusively place-bound and collective frameworks and, within the context of the network society, have been transformed into visual, performative, and to some extent individualized experiences. In this process, rituals are not merely represented but are also reconfigured through interaction with Instagram's image-driven logic. Based on the findings, a form of "digital rituality" has emerged within the context of contemporary Iranian culture, in which traditional elements have become intertwined with new media mechanisms. This study demonstrates that understanding cultural transformations and the redefinition of identity in contemporary Iranian society is not possible without considering the role of digital platforms.

Keywords: cultural rituals, Instagram, digital rituality, network society, thematic analysis

* Corresponding Author ✉ madahi1980@uk.ac.ir https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3438-0588

How to Cite this Article:
Maddahi Meshizi, J. (2026). Transformation of cultural rituals in contemporary Iran: The role of Instagram in reshaping the celebration of traditional occasions. *Spektrum Iran*, 39(1), 121-158.

https://doi.org/10.22034/spektrum.2026.593273.1078

© 2026 The Author(s). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

مقاله پژوهشی

تحول آیین‌های فرهنگی در ایران معاصر: نقش اینستاگرام در تغییر شیوه برگزاری مناسبت‌های سنتی

جواد مداحی مشیزی [*1]

1 استادیار، گروه علوم اجتماعی، دانشگاه شهید باهنر کرمان، کرمان، ایران

دریافت: ۱۴۰۴/۰۶/۲۰؛ **پذیرش:** ۱۴۰۴/۰۹/۰۵

چکیده:

گسترش رسانه‌های اجتماعی، به‌ویژه اینستاگرام، نقش مهمی در دگرگونی شیوه تجربه و بازنمایی آیین‌های فرهنگی در ایران معاصر ایفا کرده است. هدف این پژوهش تبیین نقش اینستاگرام در تحول آیین‌های سنتی و بررسی تأثیر منطق رسانه‌ای این پلتفرم بر فرم، معنا و شیوه برگزاری مناسبت‌های فرهنگی است. این مطالعه با رویکرد کیفی انجام شده و داده‌های آن از طریق مصاحبه‌های نیمه‌ساختاریافته با کاربران فعال اینستاگرام (مشارکت کنندگان این پژوهش)گردآوری شده است. نمونه‌گیری به‌صورت هدفمند انجام گرفت و گردآوری داده‌ها تا دستیابی به اشباع نظری ادامه یافت که در نهایت با انجام ۱۵ مصاحبه حاصل شد. داده‌ها با استفاده از روش تحلیل مضمون بر اساس رویکرد براون و کلارک تحلیل شدند. یافته‌های پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که اینستاگرام به‌عنوان یک میانجی فرهنگی فعال موجب رسانه‌ای‌شدن آیین‌ها، زیبایی‌شناختی‌شدن مناسک، تغییر الگوهای مشارکت اجتماعی، فردی‌شدن تجربه آیینی، تحول در معانی نمادین و تقویت نقش اینفلوئنسرها در بازتعریف شیوه‌های برگزاری آیین‌ها شده است. نتایج نشان می‌دهد که آیین‌های سنتی از چارچوب‌های صرفاً مکان‌مند و جمعی فاصله گرفته و در بستر جامعه شبکه‌ای به تجربه‌ای بصری، نمایشی و تا حدی فردمحور تبدیل شده‌اند. در این فرایند، آیین‌ها نه‌تنها بازنمایی می‌شوند، بلکه در تعامل با منطق تصویرمحور اینستاگرام بازپیکربندی می‌گردند. بر اساس نتایج، نوعی «آیین‌مندی دیجیتال» در بستر فرهنگ معاصر ایران شکل گرفته است که در آن عناصر سنتی با سازوکارهای رسانه‌ای جدید درهم‌تنیده شده‌اند. این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که فهم تحولات فرهنگی و بازتعریف هویت در جامعه امروز ایران بدون توجه به نقش پلتفرم‌های دیجیتال امکان‌پذیر نیست.

واژه‌های کلیدی: آیین‌های فرهنگی، اینستاگرام، آیین‌مندی دیجیتال، جامعه شبکه‌ای، تحلیل مضمون

* نویسنده مسئول

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3438-0588

madahi1980@uk.ac.ir

https://doi.org/10.22034/spektrum.2026.593273.1078

Spektrum Iran | Jg. 39| Nr. 1| Winter und Frühling-2026| S. 121-158 |

Original-Forschungsarbeit

Der Wandel kultureller Rituale im gegenwärtigen Iran: Die Rolle von Instagram bei der Transformation traditioneller Formen des Feierns

Javad Madahi Mashizi [1*]

1 *Assistenzprofessor, Fachbereich Sozialwissenschaften, Shahid Bahonar Universität Kerman, Kerman, Iran*

Eingegangen: 11. Sep. 2025 **Angenommen:** 26. Nov. 2025

Zusammenfassung:

Die zunehmende Verbreitung sozialer Medien, insbesondere von Instagram, hat eine bedeutende Rolle bei der Veränderung der Art und Weise gespielt, wie kulturelle Rituale im gegenwärtigen Iran erlebt, praktiziert und dargestellt werden. Ziel dieser Studie ist es, die Rolle von Instagram bei der Transformation traditioneller Rituale zu erklären und den Einfluss der medialen Logik dieser Plattform auf die Form, Bedeutung und Praxis kultureller Anlässe zu untersuchen. Die Untersuchung folgt einem qualitativen Forschungsansatz. Die Daten wurden durch halbstrukturierte Interviews mit aktiven Instagram-Nutzerinnen und -Nutzern (den Teilnehmenden der Studie) erhoben. Die Auswahl der Befragten erfolgte mittels eines gezielten Stichprobenverfahrens; die Datenerhebung wurde bis zum Erreichen der theoretischen Sättigung fortgeführt, die schließlich nach 15 Interviews erreicht wurde. Die Auswertung der Daten erfolgte mithilfe einer thematischen Analyse nach dem Ansatz von Braun und Clarke. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Instagram als aktiver kultureller Vermittler zur Mediatisierung von Ritualen, zur Ästhetisierung ritueller Praktiken, zur Veränderung von Mustern sozialer Teilhabe, zur Individualisierung ritueller Erfahrungen, zur Transformation symbolischer Bedeutungen sowie zur Stärkung der Rolle von Influencerinnen und Influencern bei der Neudefinition ritueller Praktiken beiträgt. Die Untersuchung verdeutlicht, dass traditionelle Rituale zunehmend ihre ausschließlich ortsgebundene und gemeinschaftliche Struktur verlieren und sich im Kontext der Netzwerkgesellschaft zu visuellen, inszenierten und teilweise individualisierten Erfahrungen entwickeln. In diesem Prozess werden Rituale nicht lediglich dargestellt oder reproduziert, sondern im Zusammenspiel mit der bildzentrierten Logik von Instagram neu konfiguriert. Auf Grundlage der Ergebnisse lässt sich feststellen, dass sich im Kontext der gegenwärtigen iranischen Kultur eine Form der „digitalen Ritualität" herausgebildet hat, in der traditionelle Elemente mit den Mechanismen neuer Medien verflochten sind. Die Studie zeigt, dass ein Verständnis kultureller Transformationen und der Neubestimmung von Identität in der heutigen iranischen Gesellschaft ohne die Berücksichtigung der Rolle digitaler Plattformen nicht möglich ist..

Schlüsselwörter: kulturelle rituale, Instagram, digitale ritualität, Netzwerkgesellschaft, thematische Analyse

* Korrespondierender Autor ✉ madahi1980@uk.ac.ir https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3438-0588

Wie dieser Artikel zu zitieren ist:
Maddahi Meshizi, J. (2026). Transformation of cultural rituals in contemporary Iran: The role of Instagram in reshaping the celebration of traditional occasions. *Spektrum Iran*, 39(1), 121-158.
https://doi.org/10.22034/spektrum.2026.593273.1078

© 2026 The Author(s). Dieser Artikel ist unter der Creative-Commons-Lizenz Namensnennung 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) lizenziert.

1. Introduction

Cultural rituals and ceremonial practices are among the most significant elements shaping the collective identity and historical memory of any society. In Iranian society, rituals such as Nowruz, Yalda Night, Muharram observances, Sizdah Bedar, and other national and religious ceremonies are not only prominent manifestations of Iranian culture but also serve profound social functions, including strengthening social cohesion, fostering a sense of collective belonging, transmitting cultural values across generations, and preserving emotional bonds within the contexts of family and neighborhood (Shayegan, 1383, p. 45). Within the socio-cultural fabric of Iran, where tradition and modernity are engaged in a complex interplay, these rituals have consistently functioned as dynamic and meaning-generating elements.

However, culture and its constituent elements are not static phenomena; rather, they are continuously reshaped through interaction with social, economic, and technological transformations. In recent decades, the expansion of communication technologies and the emergence of digital media have been among the most influential forces driving such cultural change. The development of the internet and social media has dramatically altered patterns of human communication and has given rise to a form of digital culture (Castells, 2010, p. 78). In Iranian society, Instagram, due to its visual and interactive nature, has become the most widely used social platform and has provided a new space for the representation of traditional rituals, both national and religious (Rezaei & Ahmadi, 1397, p. 62). For instance, Iranian users extensively share images and videos of Nowruz haft-sin tables, Muharram mourning rituals, Yalda Night celebrations, and other traditional occasions on this platform. This development raises an important question regarding the ways in which these rituals are represented within the Instagram environment.

The distinctive characteristics of Iranian society—including its young population, turbulent contemporary history, rich ethnic and cultural diversity, and particular media environment—suggest that the transformation of rituals in this context should not be understood merely as a reflection of global trends, but rather as a response to the specific historical, social, and political conditions of this society. In this regard, the active role of Iranian users in producing, disseminating, and

reinterpreting ritual-related content is of particular significance. Instagram users are not simply passive consumers of ritual content; rather, through specific modes of photography, narrative construction, and hashtag use, they participate in the reproduction and redefinition of cultural rituals. For example, the styles of decorating the Nowruz haft-sin table or the ways in which chest-beating and chain-beating ceremonies during Muharram are represented have been significantly influenced by patterns reproduced and circulated by users on Instagram. As Jenkins argues, new media, by enabling active user participation, have generated a form of "participatory culture" in which users play a role not only in consuming content but also in producing and reproducing it (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3).

Moreover, the spread of Instagram has affected not only the representation of rituals, but also the ways in which individuals participate in traditional occasions. Rituals that were previously conducted primarily in physical settings and within the framework of face-to-face interactions have now had part of their experience transferred to the virtual sphere. For example, participation in Muharram mourning ceremonies is no longer confined to physical presence in tekyehs and husseiniyehs; by sharing stories and posts from these events, users enact a new form of ritual participation whose nature differs from that of traditional participation (Giddens, 1991, p. 103). Similarly, the experience of Yalda Night is no longer limited to a family gathering, but has also acquired a dimension of public display on Instagram. This shift in patterns of participation raises important questions about its implications for the social functions of rituals, including social integration and collective solidarity (Turner, 1982, p. 94).

From a theoretical perspective, media are not merely tools for the transmission of information; they also play an active role in shaping cultural meanings and representing social realities (Hall, 2013, p. 55). This is directly related to the transformation of the symbolic and cultural meanings of traditional rituals in the process of media representation. Within the Instagram environment, the symbolic meanings of rituals—whether notions such as rebirth in Nowruz, sacrifice and martyrdom in Muharram, or gathering and joy in Yalda Night—become subject to reinterpretation and transformation. For example, when the haft-sin table is transformed from a symbol of blessing and renewal into a "visual

product" for display on Instagram, or when Muharram mourning is reduced from a collective act of faith to content intended to attract likes and followers, ritual symbolism becomes emptied of meaning and rituals are commodified. Such a transformation of meanings may have profound implications for the structure of collective identity, social cohesion, and the cultural memory of Iranian society.

The central issue of this study is not merely the "change" of rituals, but the problematization of these changes within the specific context of Iranian society. At first glance, the representation of traditional rituals on Instagram may appear to be positive and indicative of cultural dynamism; however, this phenomenon may also entail several negative consequences for Iranian society, which makes a critical examination necessary. These consequences include: the commodification of rituals, where they are transformed from symbolic and solidarity-building practices into "display commodities" whose value is defined more by their "display ability" and "likelihood of attracting likes" than by their deeper cultural significance; a crisis of meaning and symbolic emptiness, where rituals often retain their form while losing their deeper content and meaning; the weakening of social and solidarity-producing functions, as virtual interactions cannot fully replace the collective and embodied experience of rituals; the creation of a generational divide, as the older generation often cannot connect with the digitalized forms of these rituals; cultural standardization and the erosion of local diversity, as the algorithmic logic of Instagram tends to standardize rituals into uniform forms; and a potential impact on Iranian cultural identity, as the transformation of rituals in digital space may intensify cultural identity crises and weaken the connection of younger generations with their cultural roots.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Instagram is not only a factor of change in cultural rituals, but may also provide a platform for their preservation and expansion. The widespread circulation of content related to cultural traditions and ceremonies on Instagram can increase public awareness of these rituals and strengthen the cultural memory of society (Jenkins, 2006, p. 140). However, the key question is to what extent, in the context of Iranian society, the destructive aspects of these transformations—particularly commodification, weakening of social solidarity, and identity crisis—outweigh their constructive aspects, and

what consequences this transformation will have for social cohesion and Iranian cultural identity.

Despite the importance of these developments, existing studies indicate that the relationship between Instagram and the transformation of cultural rituals in Iranian society has not yet been examined in a comprehensive and systematic manner. Many previous studies have either focused on the general impact of social media on culture or merely described cultural changes, without analyzing the problematic dimensions of these changes for Iranian society. As a result, it remains unclear exactly how Instagram influences the representation, experience, and performance of traditional occasions, and what consequences these changes have for cultural meanings, social functions, collective cohesion, and cultural identity in Iranian society.

Accordingly, the main problem of the present study is to examine the role of Instagram in changing the ways traditional occasions are experienced and celebrated in contemporary Iran. More specifically, it seeks to answer the following question: How does Instagram affect the ways traditional rituals are experienced, represented, and performed in Iran, and what consequences do these effects have for social cohesion, cultural identity, and collective memory in Iranian society? Drawing on qualitative interviews and the experiences of Iranian users, this study aims to show how Instagram contributes to the representation of cultural rituals, the redefinition of their modes of celebration, and the formation of new patterns of cultural participation—while also emphasizing both its positive and negative implications for Iranian society.

The significance and necessity of this study stem from several factors. First, changes in the ways cultural rituals are experienced and performed may affect their social and identity-related functions. In the past, rituals were grounded primarily in collective presence and direct interaction; in the context of Instagram, however, part of this experience has been transformed into mediated representation and digital display. As Giddens (1991, p. 64) argues, transformations associated with modernity and new media alter experiences of time, space, and social relations, and these changes in turn affect the formation of identity and cultural relationships. Second, the necessity of this study also stems from a clear gap in the existing literature. Although recent years have witnessed a growing body

of research on Instagram and culture, relatively few studies have directly and qualitatively examined Instagram's role in the transformation of rituals and traditional occasions in Iran. Third, the importance of this study is closely tied to the cultural conditions of Iranian society in the age of globalization. The expansion of global communication and the development of digital media have intensified cultural interactions and facilitated the circulation of new lifestyle patterns across societies. Understanding how Instagram shapes this process can therefore assist researchers, cultural policymakers, and cultural practitioners in developing more effective strategies for preserving, strengthening, and reproducing cultural heritage within the context of new media.

This study sets out to investigate how Instagram influences the representation, experience, and performance of traditional rituals in contemporary Iran. The primary objective is to explain the platform's role in transforming the ways cultural occasions are celebrated and lived. This overarching aim is pursued through four specific objectives: examining how traditional rituals are represented on Instagram; exploring how users contribute to the reproduction and redefinition of these rituals; analyzing the changes in patterns of participation in traditional occasions within the Instagram environment; and investigating the transformation of the symbolic and cultural meanings of rituals through their representation on this platform.

The central research question asks what role Instagram plays in reshaping the experience and performance of traditional occasions in Iran today. To address this, five subsidiary questions have been developed: How are traditional rituals represented on Instagram? In what ways do users participate in reproducing and redefining cultural rituals? What shifts have occurred in patterns of participation in traditional occasions due to Instagram use? How does the platform's representation of rituals affect their symbolic and cultural meanings? And how do users narrate their experiences of participating in traditional rituals within Instagram? By exploring these questions, the study seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between digital media and cultural transformation in Iranian society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic Studies

The transformation of cultural rituals in contemporary Iran, particularly under the influence of digital social networking platforms, has in recent years attracted the attention of scholars in sociology, communication studies, and cultural studies. Prior to the emergence of digital social media, Iranian researchers generally examined the transformation of rituals within the framework of the transition to modernity and broader structural changes in society. For example, Zokaei et al. (2016), in a study on the transformation of wedding ceremonies in Tehran, showed how processes of urbanization and individualization had affected the traditional forms of this ritual. Fazeli (2013), in his book *Cultural Studies of Everyday Life in Iran*, also addressed changes in patterns of cultural consumption in occasions such as Nowruz and religious festivals, and examined the role of traditional mass media in these transformations.

With the arrival of the internet and digital media into Iran's cultural sphere, researchers gradually began to pay attention to the impact of these developments on rituals. In a study entitled "Representation of Muharram Mourning Ceremonies in Cyberspace," Motamedi-Nejad and Rezaeizadeh (2017) demonstrated how blogs and early social networking platforms diversified modes of participation in this religious occasion. The study by Karimi and Shah-Qolian (2018) likewise indicated that the circulation of images and reports of religious rituals in cyberspace had led to the emergence of new forms of "performative religiosity."

From around 2016 onward, with the rapid expansion of Instagram users in Iran, greater scholarly attention was directed toward this platform. Rahmani and Mohammadpour (2019), in a qualitative study involving 30 active Instagram users in Tehran, found that Instagram had become an important tool for the "display of family rituals." Yazdanpanah (2020), in her research on young users in Tehran, showed that Instagram not only represents rituals but also contributes to shaping new norms for their performance. Some studies have focused specifically on the impact of Instagram on religious rituals. Sajjadi and Norouzi (2021), in a content analysis of 500 Instagram posts with hashtags related to Muharram and Safar, found that the representation of these ceremonies on the platform

had given rise to "digital mourning rituals," in which traditional elements are combined with modern visual formats. Ghasemi et al. (2020), in a field study conducted in Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad, also showed how the widespread circulation of images of religious processions and mourning ceremonies on Instagram had produced an implicit competition for the "visual spectacularization" of these rituals. National rituals such as Nowruz have likewise been influenced by Instagram. In a study entitled "Digital Nowruz: The Reconstruction of Nowruz Rituals on Instagram," Mirzaei and Farhangi (2022) analyzed the content of posts related to Nowruz. Their findings indicated the emergence of "new performative rituals," such as the widespread sharing of images of haft-sin tables, which in some cases had moved away from traditional elements and become more oriented toward visual appeal for Instagram audiences. Akbari (2021), in a study of families in Tehran, also found that the pressure to post "memorable" images of Nowruz celebrations on Instagram had led to changes in the manner of their performance and even in the costs associated with these rituals.

2.2. International Studies

The study of cultural rituals' transformation under the influence of digital technologies and social networking platforms has garnered significant attention in international literature over the past two decades. International research in this area relies primarily on several theoretical frameworks. First, the concept of "identity performance," rooted in the work of Goffman (1959) and expanded by scholars such as Baym (2015) in the context of social networks, argues that social networks have become stages for the performance of individual and collective identities, and cultural rituals are reconstructed within these spaces. Second, the theory of "mediatization," developed by Hjarvard et al. (2015), examines the structural impact of media on changes in social and cultural forms.

A number of studies have addressed the impact of Instagram on everyday rituals and personal occasions. Marwick and Boyd (2011), in their seminal research on social networks, demonstrated how sharing images of life events on visually-oriented platforms leads to the creation of "new digital rituals" for occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and holidays. Laumann et al. (2018), in a comparative study of American and European Instagram users, found that the pressure to produce visually

appealing content from ceremonies like weddings has had a direct impact on related industries and has even led to a globalized standardization of the "Instagram wedding." The transformation of religious rituals under the influence of social networks has also been the subject of numerous studies. Campbell (2017), in the book *When Religion Meets New Media*, examines the phenomenon of "networked religion," showing how participation in religious rites through platforms like Instagram both helps expand faith communities and shifts the nature of participation from purely in-person to a hybrid of in-person and digital. Gillard (2020), in a study on the representation of Ramadan ceremonies on Instagram among Muslim communities in Europe and North America, points to the phenomenon of "digital fasting display," arguing that posting images of iftar tables and religious ceremonies has not only made the act of religiosity more public but has also led to the creation of new aesthetic norms for these rituals.

Examining the impact of Instagram on national and cultural rituals in various societies constitutes another segment of the international literature. Miller et al. (2016), in their extensive anthropological project on Instagram use in eight countries around the world, point to numerous cases of local ritual transformation under the influence of this platform. Chen (2019), in a study on the Chinese New Year celebration on Instagram, showed how related hashtags have helped create a "shared ritual space" among Chinese speakers scattered across the world, but simultaneously, some traditional symbolic elements have been simplified or distorted in digital representations. Several researchers, inspired by the concept of "communicative rituals" (Couldry and Hepp, 2018, p. 18), have analyzed the ritualistic content of Instagram. Papacharissi et al. (2020) have applied this framework to analyze Instagram challenges related to charitable causes, showing how these challenges reconstruct traditional collective rituals in a digital and global format. A portion of the international literature has also criticized the effects of social networks on cultural rituals. Turkle (2011), in *Alone Together*, warns that replacing deep ritual interactions with superficial displays in virtual space can lead to the erosion of authentic social bonds. On the other hand, studies such as Diaz-Andreu et al. (2021) on indigenous communities in Latin America have shown that Instagram can act as a tool for cultural resistance and the revitalization of rituals at risk of being forgotten.

A review of domestic and international studies indicates that although numerous researches have been conducted on social media, cultural identity, and lifestyle changes, there is a significant research gap on two levels: First, at the theoretical level, existing studies have primarily focused on broader frameworks such as "identity performance" or "mediatization" and have paid less attention to the systematic analysis of the transformation of symbolic meanings, social functions, and identity consequences of traditional rituals when confronted with the logic of visually-oriented platforms. Second, at the practical and methodological level, independent studies that specifically and qualitatively examine the role of social networks in changing the ways traditional occasions are performed within the Iranian context are very limited. This gap makes the necessity for independent and in-depth research, which can simultaneously explore the theoretical and fieldwork dimensions of this transformation in Iranian society, more evident.

3. Theoretical Framework

Examining the transformation of cultural rituals in the context of social media requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining both the social functions of rituals and the role of media in the representation and reinterpretation of culture. In the present study, the theoretical framework is organized around three principal axes: ritual theory, cultural representation theory, and network society theory, with additional perspectives from participatory culture and late modernity.

First, Victor Turner's ritual theory provides an important framework for understanding the social functions and symbolic meanings of rituals. Turner conceptualizes rituals as symbolic acts through which social values and identities are reproduced and through which individuals experience a shared sense of social belonging (Turner, 1982, p. 20). In Turner's view, rituals not only reflect the cultural structures of a society but also provide a basis for the formation of social solidarity. His concept of "communitas" refers to the sense of unity and solidarity that emerges among members of a community in the course of collective ritual practice (Turner, 1982, p. 45). From this perspective, rituals such as Nowruz, Yalda Night, and religious ceremonies in Iranian society are not merely symbolic phenomena; they also play a significant role in reinforcing cultural identity and social ties. More

specifically, Turner's concepts help identify the traditional functions of these occasions prior to the expansion of Instagram—including the production of cohesion, the reproduction of identity, and the creation of a shared emotional experience—and then examine which of these functions have been weakened, strengthened, or transformed in the shift to virtual space.

Second, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation draws attention to the role of media in the production and reinterpretation of cultural meanings. From Hall's perspective, media do not merely reflect reality; rather, they participate in the production of meaning through symbolic systems (Hall, 2013, p. 18). Hall emphasizes that media do not simply mirror culture, but actively construct meaning through framing, angle selection, and signifying practices (Hall, 2013, pp. 19–22). Within this framework, the images, videos, and narratives circulated on social networking platforms may be understood as part of a process of cultural representation through which the meanings attached to rituals and traditional occasions are reinterpreted.

Third, Manuel Castells's theory of the network society explains the broader structural context of these transformations. Castells argues that new communication technologies have given rise to a network-based social structure in which cultural and social interactions are increasingly organized through media systems (Castells, 2010, p. 92). Under such conditions, social networking platforms have become among the most important spaces of cultural interaction, enabling individuals to participate in the production, representation, and reinterpretation of culture. This theory helps explain why users now share their personal experience of a ritual in the form of Instagram posts or stories, and how such acts are tied to the platform's networked architecture—including followers, likes, and algorithmic visibility.

Alongside these perspectives, Henry Jenkins's concept of participatory culture is important for analyzing the role of users in digital environments. Jenkins argues that in new media environments, users are not merely consumers of content; they also participate in the production and reinterpretation of cultural meanings (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Consequently, social media users play an active role in the reproduction and redefinition of cultural rituals by sharing images, narratives, and personal experiences related to cultural occasions.

Finally, Anthony Giddens's perspective on the transformation of social relations in modernity is also important for understanding these changes. Giddens argues that modernity and the expansion of new media have transformed the experience of time, space, and social relations, and that these transformations also affect the formation of identity and cultural relationships (Giddens, 1991, p. 64). From this perspective, changes in the experience and representation of traditional rituals on social networking platforms may be understood as part of broader cultural transformations in the digital age.

Overall, the integration of these theoretical perspectives makes it possible to analyze the transformation of cultural rituals in the age of social media in a multidimensional manner. Ritual theory contributes to understanding the social functions and meanings of rituals; cultural representation theory explains the role of media in the production of meaning; and network society theory, participatory culture, and Giddens's account of modernity together illuminate the social and technological context of these transformations. These five lenses form an analytical matrix through which each Instagram post or interview segment can be coded simultaneously in terms of changes in ritual function (Turner), changes in representation (Hall), changes in communicative context (Castells), changes in user agency (Jenkins), and changes in the meaning and selective reconstruction of tradition (Giddens).

4. Methodology and Research Approach

4.1. Research Approach

In terms of purpose, this study is classified as applied research; in terms of its nature and the methods used for data collection and analysis, it falls within the category of qualitative research. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for the study of ritual transformations and their representation in virtual space because it emphasizes the understanding of meanings, lived experiences, and the interpretation of social and cultural practices. This approach makes it possible to investigate in depth users' experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of social networking platforms on the performance and representation of traditional rituals.

4.2. Data Collection Method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviewing is a widely used qualitative research method that allows the researcher to follow a set of predetermined questions while also exploring participants' responses in greater depth and eliciting their personal experiences. This method facilitates a more nuanced understanding of individuals' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations concerning the representation and experience of traditional rituals on social networking platforms.

The interview questions were organized around four main themes: (1) users' experiences of posting or viewing ritual-related content on Instagram; (2) the platform's influence on how traditional occasions are performed; (3) participants' perceptions of changes in modes of cultural participation; and (4) users' awareness of the influence of the platform's algorithmic logic on their ritual practices. Each interview lasted approximately 35–45 minutes. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

4.3. Population and Sampling

The study population comprised Iranian users of Instagram who had experience posting, viewing, or interacting with content related to traditional occasions such as Nowruz, Yalda Night, and the rituals of Muharram. These occasions constitute some of the most significant cultural rituals in Iranian society and, in recent years, have been extensively represented on Instagram.

This study employed purposive sampling, specifically the maximum variation strategy (Patton, 2002, p. 234). In this approach, the researcher selects individuals who possess relevant experience or knowledge of the research topic and are able to provide meaningful information about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2014, p. 189). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) being an active Instagram user with at least one year of continuous activity; (b) having experience posting or interacting with ritual-related content; and (c) willingness to participate in the study on an informed basis.

Accordingly, 15 Instagram users (8 women and 7 men, aged 22 to 54) were selected as research participants. Diversity within the sample was

considered in terms of gender, age, educational background (ranging from high school diploma to doctoral degree), and type of Instagram activity (ordinary user, content creator, and micro-influencer), in order to examine a range of perspectives on the representation of cultural rituals in this space. Participant selection continued until theoretical saturation was reached; that is, when newly generated data no longer contributed any substantially new themes or concepts to the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136).

4.4. Data Analysis Method

The data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used methods in qualitative research for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within data, and it enables the researcher to extract the principal themes associated with the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The six phases consisted of: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts; (2) generating initial codes from the data; (3) searching for themes by grouping similar codes together; (4) reviewing the themes and ensuring their internal coherence and external distinctiveness; (5) defining and naming the final themes; and (6) producing the analytical report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

In this process, coding was conducted through a hybrid approach, combining deductive and inductive strategies. In other words, some codes were derived from the theoretical literature and conceptual framework (deductive approach), while others emerged directly from the data themselves (inductive approach). Through this method, patterns related to users' experiences of representing traditional rituals on Instagram, changes in the ways occasions are performed, and new forms of cultural participation in virtual space were identified and analyzed.

4.5. Strategies for Enhancing Trustworthiness

To ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation and to address concerns regarding neutrality, this study employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility: To ensure that the research findings constituted an accurate and faithful representation of the participants' experiences and perspectives, the following strategies were employed: prolonged engagement with the research topic (six months of sustained, non-participant observation of ritual-related content on Instagram), member checking (participants reviewed a summary of key points and preliminary interpretations), and peer debriefing (findings were discussed with two peer researchers in related fields).

Transferability: To meet this criterion, the strategy of thick description (Geertz, 1973) was employed. Accordingly, the findings section presents detailed information on the participants' socio-cultural background, demographic characteristics, type and level of activity on Instagram, and the situational context of the interviews.

Dependability: To ensure this criterion, an audit trail was maintained. All stages of the research, including methodological decisions, the step-by-step coding process, changes made during analysis, and documentation of member checks and peer review, were recorded and preserved in written form. In addition, a researcher reflexive journal was prepared.

Confirmability: To meet this criterion, the following strategies were employed: researcher reflexivity (using the reflexive journal to record and examine assumptions, beliefs, and value positions), external audit (an independent researcher reviewed a random selection of codes, subthemes, and related quotations), and documentation with data references (all themes were supported by multiple direct quotations from participants).

4.6. Ethical Considerations

In this study, the following ethical principles were observed: (1) obtaining informed consent from all participants through the provision of a research information sheet and the collection of signed consent forms; (2) ensuring anonymity and confidentiality by removing identifying information and using substitute codes (e.g., P-1, P-2, and so forth); (3) guaranteeing participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences; and (4) storing the data in a secure environment and deleting the audio files after transcription.

4.7. Participants' Demographic Characteristics

In this study, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of users' experiences regarding the representation and transformation of cultural rituals on Instagram, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 users of this social networking platform. The sample consisted of 8 women and 7 men, reflecting a relatively balanced participation of the two groups. The participants ranged from 20 to 41 years old, with a considerable proportion consisting of young users in their twenties. In terms of educational background, most participants had higher education experience and included university students as well as holders of bachelor's and master's degrees. Considerable variation was also observed in participants' type of activity on Instagram; some were ordinary users, others were content creators, and some were directly involved in the organization of cultural or religious ceremonies. The duration of Instagram use among participants ranged from 4 to 10 years, indicating that most had relatively long-term experience with the platform.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Presentation of Findings

Analysis of the interview data led to the identification of six main themes that reflect different dimensions of this cultural transformation. These themes are: (1) Mediatization of traditional rituals; (2) Aestheticization of cultural occasions; (3) Changing patterns of social participation; (4) Individualization of ritual experience; (5) Transformation of the symbolic meaning of rituals; and (6) The role of influencers in redefining cultural rituals. Table 1 presents the final coding structure and the organization of the extracted codes into subthemes and main themes.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Participants and Their Type of Activity on Instagram

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Education	Type of Activity on Instagram	Duration of Instagram Use
Interviewee 1	Female	23	B.A.	Ordinary user; posts occasion-related content	6 years
Interviewee 2	Male	27	B.A.	Ordinary user; shares images of family ceremonies	7 years

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Education	Type of Activity on Instagram	Duration of Instagram Use
Interviewee 3	Female	22	University student	Active user of occasion-related stories	5 years
Interviewee 4	Male	30	M.A.	Ordinary user; shares experiences of traditional ceremonies	8 years
Interviewee 5	Female	26	B.A.	Lifestyle content creator	6 years
Interviewee 6	Male	29	B.A.	Content creator focusing on rituals and traditions	7 years
Interviewee 7	Female	24	B.A.	Content creator focusing on Yalda and Nowruz table arrangements	5 years
Interviewee 8	Male	35	M.A.	Cultural activist; involved in organizing religious ceremonies	9 years
Interviewee 9	Female	33	B.A.	Cultural activist in ritual-related programs	8 years
Interviewee 10	Male	38	B.A.	Involved in organizing Muharram ceremonies	9 years
Interviewee 11	Female	21	University student	Young user active in posting occasion-related stories	4 years
Interviewee 12	Male	20	University student	Young user; reposts ritual-related content	4 years
Interviewee 13	Female	25	B.A.	Active user sharing family ceremonies	6 years
Interviewee 14	Male	41	M.A.	Adult user; mainly views and occasionally posts ritual-related content	10 years
Interviewee 15	Female	37	B.A.	Adult user; posts images of family ceremonies	9 years

5.1.1. Theme 1: The Mediatization of Traditional Rituals

One of the most important changes in how traditional occasions are experienced and performed is the mediatization of rituals within the Instagram environment. Many cultural rituals and occasions that were previously experienced mainly in family settings and face-to-face interactions are now represented through images, videos, and digital narratives on social media. In this context, Instagram has become a platform for displaying and circulating ritual experiences, and users share their personal experiences of these occasions with a broader audience by documenting and publishing ritual moments.

Based on the interview analysis, the mediatization of rituals is not limited to the publication of images and videos; rather, it has gradually become part of the very process of celebrating occasions. In other words,

in many cases, the experience of rituals now takes shape simultaneously with their online representation, and part of the meaning and significance of the ceremony is defined through the process of sharing it with others on social media.

This intertwining of "performance" and "representation" is clearly reflected in the participants' statements. One interviewee explains:

> "Now, when an occasion like Yalda Night or Nowruz is celebrated, many people think from the very beginning about what photo to take or what story to post. In fact, part of the ceremony has become showing it on Instagram as well" (M-1, female, 23).

This statement reveals two simultaneous transformations: first, a change in the temporal sequencing of ritual experience, meaning that the media act of recording and publishing no longer occurs at the end of the ceremony, but from the outset becomes an organizing element that affects the arrangement, dress, and even timing of the event. Second, it redefines the "ceremony itself." The participant makes clear that Instagram display is no longer something external or additional to the ritual, but has "become part of the ceremony." In other words, the ritual now consists of two inseparable components: "physical performance" and "digital representation," neither of which is complete without the other.

As the data also show, this transformation is not limited to the mode of performance; it has also altered the audience of rituals. Another participant states:

> "Before, ceremonies were mostly among family members, but now many people like to share moments from the occasion with others too. For example, they post a picture of the Yalda table or a video of the celebration on Instagram so that their friends can see it" (M-5, male, 26).

This quotation raises three analytical layers. At the first level, there has been a change in the "scale of the audience"—from "family members" (a limited, defined group with emotional ties) to "friends" and "others" (a broader, more heterogeneous network characterized mainly by weak ties). At the second level, a shift has occurred in the "motivation for participation": the phrase "like to share ... with others too" suggests that sharing is no longer a supplementary action, but has itself become an

independent desire and motive within ritual experience. At the third level, the quotation shows that being seen by the social network, and not only being physically together, has become one of the meaning-making elements of traditional occasions; it is as if the ritual remains incomplete without networked feedback.

Overall, these findings indicate that social media have redefined the boundary between the private and public dimensions of rituals. Rituals that were previously experienced within the framework of limited family relations are now, through digital representation, exposed to the observation and interaction of a much broader audience. As a result, traditional occasions have acquired a media function in addition to their earlier cultural and social functions.

5.1.2. Theme 2: The Aestheticization of Cultural Occasions

A significant transformation in the conduct of traditional occasions is the increased emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of these rituals within the Instagram environment. Participants in this study noted that the publication of photos and videos related to occasions such as Nowruz, Yalda Night, or family ceremonies on this social network has caused users to pay more attention than ever to the arrangement, color schemes, and visual appeal of ritual elements. In this context, traditional rituals are considered not only as cultural experiences but also as "visual stages" for representation in the digital sphere.

Based on the interview analysis, this aesthetic turn is not limited to a heightened sensitivity toward arrangement; it has gradually altered the operational priorities of the rituals themselves. In other words, Instagram's visual logic—with its emphasis on pictorial attractiveness, color harmony, and "shareability"—has now become a primary criterion in the preparation and performance of traditional occasions; a criterion that sometimes takes precedence over symbolic and spiritual aspects.

This shift in performative priorities is clearly reflected in the participants' statements. One interviewee explains:

> "Now, many people try to arrange their Yalda or Haft-sin tables in a very special and beautiful way because they know they are going to take a photo of it and post it on Instagram. Sometimes, even before the ceremony starts, more time is spent on the arrangement just so the photos turn out better" (P-3, female, 22).

This statement reveals two simultaneous transformations: first, a shift in the logic of ritual arrangement, meaning that the criterion of "how the photo turns out" has become a decisive factor in how traditional tables are prepared. Consequently, the placement of ritual elements is no longer determined solely by their symbolic significance but by their visual impact within the camera frame. Second, there is a change in the "temporal economy" of the ceremony: the participant specifies that "more time is spent on the arrangement"—implying that the visual preparation phase consumes an increasing portion of the ritual's time, potentially detracting from the collective and spiritual interactions of the event.

As the data suggest, this evolution is not restricted to the individual level; a competitive social dynamic is also at play. Another participant narrates:

> "When we see different photos of Yalda or Haft-sin tables on Instagram, we subconsciously try to make ours like them. It's as if a kind of competition for being more beautiful has been created" (P-9, female, 33).

This quotation presents three analytical layers: At the first level, a subconscious emulation occurs—users do not necessarily make a conscious decision, but "subconsciously" accept and reproduce the published visual styles as aesthetic benchmarks, indicating a deep internalization of Instagram's visual norms. At the second level, a homogenization of ritual styles emerges: the phrase "we try to make ours like them" suggests that local and familial diversity in ritual performance is declining, as a limited set of visual patterns that succeed on the platform gradually become universal standards. At the third level, the logic of competition replaces the logic of collective participation: the participant speaks of "a kind of competition for being more beautiful"—a dynamic in which the value of the ritual is measured not by the depth of the shared experience, but by the degree of its visual appeal compared to others.

In summary, these findings indicate that Instagram is not merely a platform for representing rituals but, by shaping aesthetic patterns, it actively intervenes in the performative nature of the occasions. By observing published images, users receive new ideas and templates for ritual design, which are then reproduced in the everyday experience of cultural occasions. Consequently, certain rituals have become more spectacular and visual than in the past.

5.1.3. Theme 3: Changes in Patterns of Social Participation in Cultural Rituals

The analysis of the interview data shows that the expansion of Instagram use has altered patterns of social participation in traditional occasions. Participants in this study noted that social media have enabled a form of symbolic and virtual participation that exists alongside face-to-face participation, extending the experience of cultural occasions beyond a purely physical framework. In such a context, the experience of rituals is no longer confined to bodily presence at the ceremony; rather, it continues through online interactions and adds a new dimension to social participation.

Based on the interview analysis, this transformation is not limited to the addition of a digital layer to traditional participation; it has also redefined the very concept of "presence" in ritual contexts. In other words, participation in rituals no longer requires physical co-location, and users can take part in the collective experience of occasions through digital acts such as sending congratulatory messages, reacting to stories, or sharing images. As a result, the boundary between being "present" and "absent" in cultural rituals has become increasingly blurred.

This redefinition of presence is clearly reflected in the participants' statements. One interviewee explains:

> "Sometimes it happens that we cannot attend a ceremony or a family gathering, but when we see its photos and stories on Instagram, we feel that we are somehow present in that space. Even by sending a message or reacting to the stories, we participate in it" (M-6, male, 29).

This statement reveals two simultaneous transformations: first, the emergence of an "emotional presence" alongside physical absence. The participant explicitly states that despite not being physically present, he "feels" present in the space. This "sense of presence" suggests that the digital representation of rituals can substantially fill the gap created by physical absence and create a form of emotional closeness for the user. Second, there is an expansion in the scope of participatory action: the participant refers to "sending a message or reacting to stories" as forms of "participation," indicating that seemingly minor and low-effort digital actions—such as liking or commenting—are now accepted and legitimized in users' minds as genuine forms of ritual participation.

As the data show, this transformation is not limited to individual experience; it has also altered the social structure of participation. Another participant states:

> "Now, when a ceremony is held, it is not only those who are physically there who are involved. Friends and acquaintances who are in other cities can also see it and react to it through Instagram" (P-11, female, 21).

This quotation raises three analytical layers: at the first level, a rupture has occurred in the traditional link between place and participation; participation in rituals no longer requires co-location, and "friends and acquaintances who are in other cities" can also join the circle of participants. At the second level, the circle of participation has expanded from "those present" to "observers": by stressing that "it is not only those who are physically there who are involved," the participant points to the fact that rituals now have two categories of audience—physical attendees and digital observers—and both have the right to be "involved" in the ceremony. At the third level, a redefinition of the notion of "collective gathering" is evident: the ritual "gathering" is no longer limited to individuals assembled in one place, but includes a broader network of people connected through the platform, each participating in the ceremony in their own way.

Overall, these findings indicate that Instagram, by enabling online interaction and participation, has expanded the scope of social participation in cultural rituals and transformed the experience of traditional occasions from a purely face-to-face framework into a hybrid experience of physical and digital interaction. While participation in rituals in the past was largely limited to physical presence within the group, digital interactions have now become a legitimate and meaningful part of the collective experience of occasions. This shift has expanded the audience of rituals and made it possible for more people—regardless of geographic constraints—to take part in their symbolic experience.

5.1.4. Theme 4: Individualization of the Experience of Cultural Rituals

The analysis of the interview data indicates that the extensive use of Instagram has led to a form of individualization in the experience of cultural rituals. Participants in this study noted that within the space of social networks, individuals often strive to represent their personal experience of these occasions in a distinct and unique manner. In such a

context, the experience of rituals—which was previously shaped primarily as a collective and shared experience within the framework of the family or the local community—has transformed, to some extent, into a more personalized experience, rooted in individual representation in the virtual sphere.

Based on the interview analysis, this individualization is not limited to selecting different visual styles; it has also extended to the logic of attributing meaning to rituals. In other words, the users in this study do not merely represent the ritual; rather, through choices regarding camera angles, content type, captions, and even the narrative style of the ceremony, they construct a personal narrative that reflects their individual identity, taste, and lifestyle. Consequently, beyond their long-standing cultural and social functions, traditional rituals have also become a platform for the performance of individual identity.

This shift from a "shared collective experience" to a "distinct personal narrative" is clearly reflected in the participants' remarks. One interviewee explains:

> "I think everyone tries to show on Instagram that they have celebrated the ritual in their own style. For example, the photos they post are more indicative of their own personal taste and lifestyle" (M-4, male, 30).

This statement reveals two simultaneous transformations: First, the transition from "conducting a ritual" to "performing a ritual." The participant uses the phrase "celebrated in their own style," implying that the ritual is no longer a predetermined, repetitive pattern, but a stage for individual creativity and distinctiveness. Second, the redefinition of the ritual's function as an identity showcase: the participant asserts that the posted photos are "more indicative of... personal taste and lifestyle." This implies that rituals on Instagram have acquired a dual function: on the one hand, they reproduce cultural tradition, and on the other, they serve to showcase the user's distinct "self."

As the data illustrate, this transformation is not limited to the level of individual action but is intertwined with an awareness of impression management in the networked space. Another participant explains:

> "When we post photos of these occasions on Instagram, we are actually showing what kind of lifestyle we prefer or how we want to be perceived" (M-12, male, 20).

This quote suggests three analytical layers: At the first level, representation occurs as a conscious identity-based action; by using the phrase "we are actually showing," the participant moves beyond mere description to the level of the agent's intent—posting ritual images is not a neutral act but a conscious choice to convey a specific identity message. At the second level, identity aspiration emerges: the phrase "what kind of lifestyle we prefer" indicates that Instagram representation is not necessarily a reflection of "who we are," but can be a projection of "what we want to be"—a gap between the actual self and the ideal self that the platform cultivates. At the third level, the logic of "being seen" as identity validation becomes apparent; the participant speaks of "how we want to be perceived"—an expression suggesting that in the age of social networks, individual identity is realized not just through "being," but through the process of "being seen," where the gaze of the other (the Instagram audience) plays a fundamental role in its stabilization.

In summary, these findings indicate that Instagram has provided a space where users can represent the experience of cultural rituals in the form of individual narratives. In such a context, rituals, in addition to being part of the society's collective memory and identity, also become instruments for the expression and performance of the users' individual identity. This trend represents a fundamental change in how traditional occasions are experienced and represented in contemporary Iranian society: from the collective "we" of the ritual to the represented personal "I."

5.1.5. Theme 5: Changes in the Meanings and Symbols of Cultural Rituals

The analysis of the interview data indicates that the expansion of Instagram use has not only affected the way cultural rituals are performed, but in some cases has also led to changes in, or reinterpretations of, the meanings and symbols associated with these rituals. Participants in this study noted that representing rituals on social media can cause certain symbolic elements to become more prominent while some of their traditional meanings become less visible. As a result, the ways in which cultural occasions are understood and interpreted among users are, to some extent, shaped by how those occasions are represented in virtual space.

Based on the interview analysis, this semantic shift is not limited to a mere redistribution of emphasis; it has also led to a redefinition of the

symbolic hierarchy within rituals. In other words, Instagram's visual and performative logic—centered on visual appeal and shareability—has gradually become a criterion for determining the "value" of ritual elements: what "looks good" in the frame or "gets more likes" becomes a prominent symbol, while meaningful but visually understated elements may be pushed to the margins.

This redefinition of symbolic hierarchy is clearly reflected in the participants' remarks. One interviewee explains:

> "Sometimes I feel that on Instagram the appearance of the ceremony has become more important than its real meaning. For example, for Yalda Night, most of the photos are about the table arrangement or decoration, and there is less discussion about its meaning or background" (M-7, female, 24).

This statement reveals two simultaneous transformations: first, a shift from "meaning" to "appearance"—by contrasting the "appearance of the ceremony" with its "real meaning," the participant points to a gap in which the performative aspects of the ritual have come to outweigh its semantic dimensions. Second, it shows a redefinition of ritual content: by using the example of Yalda Night, the participant illustrates that in Instagram representation, "table arrangement or decoration" (visual and decorative elements) become the main focus, while "meaning or background" (historical and philosophical dimensions) are pushed aside—indicating a change in the discursive priorities surrounding the ritual.

As the data show, this transformation is not limited to the content that is published; it also includes the internalization of such representations. Another participant describes this process as follows:

> "When we are exposed more and more to Instagram images and posts about occasions, gradually the same images we see become our understanding of that ceremony" (M-10, male, 38).

This quotation suggests three analytical layers: at the first level, a process of naturalization of representations occurs—the participant's use of "gradually" points to a slow process in which Instagram images are internalized in the user's mind not as partial and selective representations, but as the "reality" of the ritual. At the second level, direct experience is replaced by mediated experience: the phrase "become our understanding of that ceremony" indicates that for many users—especially younger generations—the ritual is no longer known through participation in the

actual ceremony, but through exposure to its digital images. At the third level, homogenization of perception becomes visible: because Instagram images often follow limited visual patterns, "our understanding" gradually becomes standardized and uniform, reducing the traditional diversity of interpretations surrounding rituals.

In sum, these findings indicate that Instagram has not only provided a platform for representing cultural rituals, but has also played an active role in the formation and redefinition of their meanings and symbols. While traditional rituals have historically carried specific historical, social, and symbolic meanings, their representation within social media may alter the way those meanings are foregrounded. As a result, some symbolic elements of rituals become more prominent in virtual space, while some of their deeper meanings receive less attention.

5.1.6. Theme 6: The Role of Influencers in the Representation and Promotion of Cultural Rituals

The analysis of the interview data indicates that another important factor in the transformation of the representation and experience of cultural rituals on Instagram is the role of influencers and high-reach users in this space. Participants in this study noted that many users, when exposed to content posted by influencers about cultural occasions, become inspired by the patterns presented by them and, in some cases, attempt to adopt similar styles in the performance or representation of rituals.

Based on the interview analysis, the influence of influencers is not limited to superficial imitation; rather, it has also led to a redefinition of the aesthetic and performative standards of rituals. In other words, by posting images and videos of occasions such as Nowruz, Yalda Night, and other cultural rituals, influencers not only create new patterns for displaying these occasions in virtual space, but also gradually institutionalize criteria in users' minds for what counts as a "proper" or "beautiful" way of performing a ritual. These criteria include the arrangement of ritual elements, the style of photography, the narrative form of the ceremony, and even the way content is presented in the form of posts or stories.

This redefinition of standards is clearly reflected in the participants' remarks. One interviewee explains:

> "Many times, when influencers post pictures of the Haft-Sin table or Yalda Night, others get ideas from those models as well. Some even try to carry out exactly the same arrangement in their own ceremony" (M-8, male, 35).

This statement reveals two simultaneous transformations: first, a shift from inspiration to precise imitation—by saying that some people "try to carry out exactly the same arrangement," the participant indicates that the influence of influencers sometimes goes beyond simple idea generation and extends to the concrete reproduction of the models presented. Second, there is a change in the logic of ritual creativity: traditionally, rituals were often performed within a flexible framework that allowed for local innovation, but the precise imitation of influencer-based models suggests that a logic of standardization is increasingly replacing local diversity.

As the data show, this influence is not limited to the level of individual action; it also helps shape the dominant discourse surrounding the representation of rituals. Another participant states:

"I think influencers largely determine what kind of images of occasions become common on Instagram. Many users also follow the same style of photographing or displaying the ceremony" (M-14, male, 41).

This quotation raises three analytical layers: at the first level, the discursive power of influencers becomes visible—by using the term "determine," the participant points to the active and directive role of influencers in shaping what becomes "common"; that is, they are not merely reflecting existing trends, but producing new ones. At the second level, a process of stylistic homogenization emerges: the phrase "follow the same style" shows that ordinary users, rather than creating their own styles, tend to adopt the patterns already defined by influencers—a tendency that reduces diversity in the representation of rituals. At the third level, the redefinition of criteria for "desirability" becomes apparent: what influencers publish gradually becomes a standard for what counts as a "good" representation of a ritual, and users, in pursuit of social approval (likes, comments), unconsciously move toward those standards.

In sum, these findings show that influencers on Instagram function as an important factor in shaping how cultural rituals are represented and experienced in virtual space, and that through the presentation of specific visual and narrative models, they influence the way these occasions are displayed and interpreted among users. The process of representing rituals

on Instagram is not merely the result of individual user action, but is to some extent shaped by the models presented by high-reach users as well.

5.2. Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that Instagram functions as more than a simple communication tool; it acts as a cultural mediator that has redefined the nature, form, and meaning of traditional rituals in contemporary Iran. The analysis of the six themes extracted from the interview's points to the emergence of a form of "digital rituality," in which the boundary between physical and virtual space, as well as between the private and the public, has become significantly blurred.

The findings related to the mediatization and aestheticization of rituals (Themes 1 and 2) indicate that media logic has come to dominate ritual logic. As participants noted, users are "thinking about photos and stories from the very beginning" (M-1), and the main criterion in arranging ritual tables is that "it should turn out well in a photo" (M-3). These data suggest that rituals, which previously had inward-looking and collective functions within relatively closed settings, have now been transformed into "visual events" designed to be seen. This finding is consistent with Hall's theory of representation: media representation is not merely a reflection of reality, but itself becomes part of the ritual reality. More precisely, a ritual is considered "complete" when its digital representation is realized in the form of a post or story—an observation also acknowledged by the participants in this study. By privileging visual dimensions, Instagram has pushed users toward a kind of staged ceremonialism in which arrangement and aesthetic appeal take precedence over symbolic depth. In this regard, participants explicitly referred to the unconscious imitation of images shared on Instagram and to a "competition to be more beautiful" (M-9), pointing to the gradual internalization of this visual logic in users' minds.

The changes observed in patterns of participation (Theme 3) support Castells's view of the "network society." The findings showed that participation in rituals has shifted from a form of "fixed physical presence" to a more fluid "networked presence." Participants described sending messages, viewing stories, and reacting to them as "a kind of participation" (M-6), and emphasized that "by watching the stories of a ceremony, it feels as if you have been present there" (M-11). These

statements clearly demonstrate that Instagram, by enabling symbolic participation through likes, comments, and shared stories, has removed the temporal and spatial limitations traditionally associated with rituals. As a result, local or family-based rituals have acquired translocal and even global dimensions: participants are no longer limited to those physically present at the ceremony; rather, anyone connected to the digital network can share in the ritual through digital acts. At the same time, however, as some interviewees implicitly suggested, this form of participation is based less on deep face-to-face interaction than on short-lived visual exchanges, which may contribute to a certain superficiality in social ties during ritual occasions.

The findings associated with the individualization of the ritual experience (Theme 4) indicate that traditional rituals have been transformed into instruments for "identity reflexivity." According to Giddens's theory of late modernity, personal identity is conceived as a reflexive project that the individual must continuously construct and maintain. The empirical data from this study substantiate this perspective within the context of contemporary Iranian rituals. Participants observed that "everyone tries to show that they have held the ceremony in their own style," and that the shared images "mostly reflect their own taste and lifestyle" (M-4). Crucially, one interviewee explicitly pointed to the underlying logic of visibility, stating that by publishing these images, users "show what kind of lifestyle they like or how they want to be seen" (M-12). These findings suggest that Iranian users employ national rituals—such as Nowruz and Yalda—as symbolic resources to construct their "personal narrative" and showcase their "lifestyle" on Instagram. Consequently, the ritual is no longer merely a collective obligation to preserve tradition; rather, it becomes an opportunity for expressing individual distinction and taste. This dynamic often highlights the tension between the "actual self" and the "idealized self" as staged in the digital performance.

The findings regarding the shifting meanings of rituals and the role of influencers (Themes 5 and 6) reveal the emergence of a new form of "cultural authority." Whereas family elders or historical texts historically held semantic authority over rituals, today digital influencers act as opinion leaders, defining new standards for how rituals should be performed and what they signify. As participant M-14 remarked:

"Influencers largely determine what kind of images of occasions become common," and ordinary users "follow the same style of photographing or displaying the ceremony." This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of Jenkins's "convergence culture," wherein user-generated content and influencer curation shift the boundaries of tradition, transforming the ritual into a commodified cultural and media product. Furthermore, drawing on Turner's ritual theory, while rituals are inherently processual and subject to transition, the transformation observed on Instagram is not merely a gradual shift, but a rapid, homogenized reinvention of ritual symbols. Importantly, the participants themselves demonstrated an acute awareness of this shift: "Gradually, the very images we see become our perception of that ceremony" (M-10). This reflection clearly illustrates the internalization of representations and the replacement of direct, lived experience with mediated experience.

5.3. Conclusion of the Discussion: Digital Detraditionalization and Reconfiguration

Taken together, this study demonstrates that the transformation of cultural rituals in contemporary Iran is a complex process of digital "detraditionalization." While Instagram has contributed to the visibility and preservation of certain rituals, it has simultaneously commodified and aestheticized them, altering the sacred and historical essence of the ritual in favor of media appeal.

However, contrary to pessimistic discourses that lament the "decline of tradition," our findings suggest that what is occurring is not the destruction of rituals, but rather their reconfiguration into a new format aligned with the digital lifeworld. These rituals remain meaningful to participants, but their meaning is now actively negotiated through interaction with social media logic.

These insights are highly relevant for cultural policymakers and social scientists. They demonstrate that the continuity of traditional culture in Iran is now deeply intertwined with the mediation of digital platforms. Consequently, any strategic planning aimed at preserving or promoting cultural heritage must place this new digital reality at the center of its analysis.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Findings

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 active Instagram users revealed six primary themes concerning the transformation of Iranian cultural rituals. Collectively, these findings point to the emergence of "digital rituality" as a new paradigm in the contemporary experience of traditional occasions. The research findings can be synthesized across three distinct analytical levels:

Transformation in the Form and Performance of Rituals: The theme of the "mediatization of rituals" demonstrates that the inherent logic of Instagram—characterized by its emphasis on visuality, aesthetic presentation, and attention economy—directly shapes how traditional occasions are performed. Users do not celebrate rituals merely for their own sake, but rather for their "mediatized representation." This shift is further reflected in the "aestheticization of cultural occasions." Within this process, the performative priorities of rituals have shifted; visual criteria suitable for digital dissemination (lighting, composition, visual cohesion) frequently overshadow traditional symbolic and spiritual dimensions.

Transformation in Patterns of Participation and Experience: The themes of "changing patterns of social participation" and the "individualization of the ritual experience" collectively indicate that rituals have transitioned from "spatially bound collective events" to "individual-centered networked experiences." On the one hand, Instagram expands the scope of participation beyond the immediate family and neighborhood to an unlimited audience (symbolic networked participation). On the other hand, this networked form of participation leads to the individualization of experience, as users personalize rituals to align with their digital identities. This duality exemplifies what Castells conceptualizes as "networked individualism."

Transformation in Meaning and Cultural Authority: The theme of "the transformation of symbolic meaning" indicates that ritual symbols acquire new semantic layers as they transition into the digital space. For instance, elements of the Haft-Sin table that possess higher visual appeal are foregrounded, while less photogenic elements may be marginalized. This process of the "mediatized redefinition of meaning" (Hall, 2013) is

reinforced by "the role of influencers in redefining rituals." By creating new patterns for celebrating these occasions, influencers act as newly emerged cultural authorities. Consequently, ordinary users appropriate these models, actively reproducing and reconstructing rituals through a collaborative process of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006).

6.2. Theoretical and Policy Implications

Taken together, these findings suggest that the transformation of cultural rituals in contemporary Iran should not be interpreted simply as the "decline of tradition," but rather as a process of "digital reconfiguration." Digital rituality represents a paradoxical condition: while rituals undergo "detraditionalization" under the influence of social media logic, they simultaneously experience "re-traditionalization" (continuity and expansion) in new formats. This dynamic aligns with Giddens's (1991) concept of "reflexivity of tradition" under the conditions of late modernity.

This study demonstrates that to understand cultural shifts in contemporary Iran, digital platforms—particularly Instagram—must be viewed not as neutral tools, but as active agents in the cultural field. Through its specific architecture (algorithms, follower counts, likes), Instagram shapes tastes, norms, and even the core meanings of traditional rituals. From a cultural policy perspective, these findings warn that cultural institutions cannot remain indifferent to platform-mediated transformations. The younger generation increasingly acquires and reproduces traditions through these digital platforms rather than through formal, state-led institutions.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

Despite efforts to conduct a rigorous and systematic study, this research faced several limitations:

1. The number of participants was limited to 15, which, although appropriate for qualitative research, restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader population.

2. The study focused exclusively on Instagram, while other influential platforms such as Telegram and TikTok were not examined.

3. The sample primarily consisted of urban and educated users, which may not fully represent the experiences of other social groups.

4. The data were based on participants' self-reports, which may involve a degree of narrative bias.

Nevertheless, the aim of the study was not statistical generalization, but rather to provide a deeper understanding of users' lived experiences in relation to digital rituals.

6.4. Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following directions are proposed for future research:

1. **Comparative Platform Analysis:** Future studies should conduct comparative analyses across various social media platforms (e.g., Telegram, TikTok, YouTube) to explore how differing platform architectures and algorithms uniquely shape the transformation of rituals.

2. **Mixed-Methods and Large-Scale Quantitative Studies:** Utilizing large-scale survey designs would allow researchers to measure the extent of public attitude shifts toward traditional rituals and statistically generalize these behavioral trends.

3. **Cross-Cultural Studies:** Comparative, cross-cultural research is recommended to examine the digital transformation of rituals in Iran alongside other transitional societies experiencing rapid digital modernization.

4. **Intergenerational Analysis:** Research focusing on cohort-specific dynamics (e.g., Generation Z, Millennials, and older generations) would help identify and analyze generational divergence in the reception, performance, and experience of digital rituals.

5. **Political Economy of Digital Rituals:** Future inquiries should independently investigate the digital economy, exploring the commercialization, monetization, and brand sponsorship of traditional cultural events on platforms like Instagram.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

Akbari, M. (1400). *The impact of social networks on the cultural consumption patterns of Tehran families during national occasions* [Master's thesis, University of Tehran].

Baym, N. K. (2015). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Campbell, H. A. (2017). *When Religion Meets New Media*. Routledge.

Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Chen, L. (2019). Digital Diaspora and Ritual: Lunar New Year on Instagram. *Journal of Chinese Overseas, 15*(2), 105–125.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Polity Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Diaz-Andreu, M., et al. (2021). Indigenous Cultural Revival in the Digital Age: A Case Study from Latin America. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 24*(2), 195–215.

Dizgai, M., et al. (1395). The transformation of wedding rituals in Tehran: A qualitative study. *Iranian Journal of Social Studies, 10*(3), 35–58.

Fazeli, N. (1392). *Cultural studies of everyday life in Iran*. Research Institute for Culture, Art, and Communication.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.

Ghasemi, V., et al. (1399). The digital representation of religious rituals: A study of three Iranian cities. *Iranian Journal of Sociology, 21*(4), 123–145.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.

Gillard, R. (2020). Performing Ramadan on Instagram: Piety, Aesthetics, and Community among Muslim Diasporas. *Social Media + Society, 6*(3), 1–12.

Hall, S. (2013). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Hinson, M. (2022). Digital Death and Performative Grief: Funeral Rituals on social media. *Mortality, 27*(1), 89–105.

Hjarvard, S., et al. (2015). *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*. Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.

Karimi, A., & Shahgholian, M. (1397). Religious self-presentation in cyberspace: A case study of Iranian Facebook users. *Cultural Research Quarterly, 11*(1), 45–67.

Laumann, K., et al. (2018). The Instagrammable Wedding: A Cross-Cultural Study of Ritual Standardization. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 18*(2), 199–218.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.

Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience. *New Media & Society, 13*(1), 114–133.

Miller, D., et al. (2016). *How the World Changed social media*. UCL Press.

Mirzayi, Sh., & Farhangi, H. (1401). Digital Nowruz: Reconstructing Nowruz rituals on Instagram. *Quarterly Journal of Communication Culture Studies, 23*(3), 61–84.

Motamednejad, K., & Rezaizadeh, M. (1396). Religious rituals in cyberspace: A case study of Muharram ceremonies. *Media and Culture Journal, 7*(2), 65–82.

Papacharissi, Z., et al. (2020). Affective Publics and Digital Rituals: The Case of Instagram Charity Challenges. *New Media & Society, 22*(2), 145–162.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Rahmani, T., & Mohammadpour, A. (1398). The representation of family rituals on Instagram: A qualitative study. *Journal of Media Studies, 12*(4), 95–115.

Rezaei, M., & Ahmadi, A. (1397). *Social networks and changing cultural patterns in Iran*. University Press.

Sajjadi, M., & Norouzi, F. (1401). The representation of Muharram ceremonies on Instagram: A content analysis of Persian-language posts. *Cultural Research Quarterly, 14*(2), 105–125.

Shayegan, D. (1383). *Fragmented identity and nomadic thought*. Farzan Rooz Publishing.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*(2), 63–75.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books.

Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. PAJ Publications.

Yazdanpanah, L. (1399). *The social construction of reality on Instagram: A case study of social occasions* [Doctoral dissertation, Allameh Tabataba'i University].