

## Commodification of Spirituality and the Spiritual Healers' Labor on Facebook

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Facebook is home to a plethora of spiritual healers who use the social media platform for giving advice, selling products, and offering their services. In this ethnographic study, we examine the Facebook endeavors of Estonian spiritual healers. The study discusses the different forms of commodified spirituality, the affective and aspirational labor of healers put into creating those commodities, and the role social media affordances play in shaping these practices online.

*Keywords: spiritual commodities, spiritual labor, digital labor, new spirituality, Facebook*

“If you are sick, go and find a doctor’s grave and drink a sip of ghost’s water,” reads one of the posts of Rasmus (personal communication, November 13, 2021), an online healer and voodoo shaman, on the wall of his Facebook page. Giving such advice has become a daily activity for spiritual healers, many of whom are now on Facebook. These people create social media groups and pages, post articles, videos, and comments, and carry out private healing sessions from a distance. They promise relief for the sick and the unfortunate and aim to teach the uninformed. Typically, they espouse an assortment of health-related beliefs, originating from local folk culture or global wellness movements, leaning toward herbal remedies or channeled energies (Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020). Similarly, the healers represent a whole spectrum of different takes on vaccinations and mask wearing, on COVID-19 causes and treatments—while a Reiki master organizes protests against COVID-19 restrictions, and a neo-Pagan calls for better cooperation between the proponents of biomedicine and those of its alternatives. As a result of the pandemic, health-related discussions have grown increasingly visible among the spiritual healers on social media.

Although researchers have underlined new spirituality’s and its practitioners’ shift toward online channels (Gregory, 2018), the dynamics of new spirituality on social media have not been discussed in depth. This ethnographic study seeks to understand the commodification of spirituality and how it has been shaped on and by Facebook. In this article, we ask which commodities spiritual healers produce, which forms of labor have been put into creating those commodities, and finally, how those practices have been shaped on and by Facebook affordances. The study builds mainly on in-depth interviews with

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spiritual healers who have used Facebook for professional purposes before and during the COVID-19 outbreak, and is thus tied to the specific temporal setting of the pandemic.

### **Commodification of Spirituality and Spiritual Labor**

New spirituality is a buzzing phenomenon that draws on several traditions and embraces ideas from secular to sacred, from health and wellness to Voodoo, and is practiced via self-help groups, meditation retreats, fortune-telling books, and many more diverse avenues. Scholars have observed that the advent of the highly diverse new spirituality parallels the growth of neoliberal capitalism (Heelas, 2009; Possamai, 2003; Redden, 2016). Because of its complexity and interdisciplinarity, the postmodern and pluralistic manifestation of beliefs and related practices has been described in market terms, with much of the literature on religious pluralism using figurative phrases like "spiritual supermarket" (Greenfield, 1975) or "spiritual marketplace" (Roof, 1999). The spiritual market has been argued to make up for the lack of hierarchy and structure of new spirituality that a religious institution would have, and hence helps to sustain the otherwise noninstitutional phenomenon and support the practicing specialists (Chandler, 2016).

The spiritual supermarket is made up of spiritual commodities that can be exchanged. We refer to the commodification of spirituality as a process whereby spirituality is transformed into a product or service. Scholarly literature extensively discusses the commodification of spiritual objects, places, and rituals that were once detached from market dynamics but now hold exchange value (Usunier, 2014, p. 30), without necessarily diminishing the effort's spiritual worth (Crockford, 2020). However, as spirituality builds on practitioners' ideas, beliefs, and capacities to communicate these, it is equally important to consider the commodification of individuals themselves through self-branding, where individuals strategically craft a coherent and marketable self-image to establish connections that possess market worth (Baym, 2015). For example, by leveraging social media platforms, lifestyle gurus effectively position themselves as consumable products, appealing to an audience seeking their expertise and desired lifestyle (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 79). This strategically curated identity on social media also contributes to the strengthening of religious authority and the preservation of legitimacy (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). Spiritual practitioners see their enterprises as manifestations of their spiritual ideals and an essential part of their spiritual journey (Bowman, 2013). In many cases, commodification of spirituality helps spiritual practitioners gain resources to achieve other religious goals (McKenzie, 2013).

If spiritual commodities are built on spiritual ideas, one may also consider the types of activities that are invested in producing these commodities. According to Karen Gregory (2018), engaging in the spiritual marketplace online and producing spiritual commodities necessitates novel types of labor. Individuals now have to curate their social media profiles, utilizing these platforms to establish connections, promote their services, and potentially cultivate a distinct personal brand. Gregory (2014) characterizes the labor of spiritual practitioners as affective (following Hardt, 1999) and emotional (drawing on Hochschild, 1983), where the practitioners aim to evoke feelings of excitement, satisfaction, and ease in their clients, and their performance of emotions becomes a key aspect of their work. Further, these practitioners can also be regarded as aspirational laborers (Gregory, 2018; in line with Duffy, 2017), as they hope that their endeavors will eventually earn them an income. In addition to the labor of the spiritual practitioners, the term "spiritual

labor” has been employed in organizational research to refer to the harnessing of employee spirituality as a valuable resource, as well as a new work responsibility (Karjalainen, 2022). Spiritual labor emerges when the mediating organization (e.g., a Christian boarding school) imposes a set of formal and informal rules and expectations on workers, exerting pressure on them to align with these expectations (McGuire, 2010). In this study, we combine the two approaches, conceptualizing the labor of spiritual healers as an affective effort involved in commodifying spirituality, but also taking into account how spirituality is a resource for the mediating institution. However, we will argue that unlike in explicit and structured organizations, the organization that mediates, shapes, and uses this spirituality as an asset is the digital platform (in this case, Facebook) and its affordances.

### **Digital Commodification and Digital Labor**

Digital practices and communication, too, are increasingly conceptualized through the lens of commodification and systems of exchange. Although the participants produce digital commodities, their practices on social media can be described as forms of digital labor, especially in the creative sector (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). These practices include connecting and interacting with other users, or creating content activities that create data that can be sold to advertisers or that create the general use value for the platform (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). Digital labor is often described as undercompensated, but beneficial for the platform’s, brands’, or others’ capital accumulation. Online creators need to engage in “publicity work” to seek attention from prospective employers. For example, the concept of “relational labor” (Baym, 2015) discusses how musicians need to build and sustain online relationships with fans as an extra work requirement, which blurs the boundaries between social and economical relationships. A range of strategic self-posturing on social media has been called “visibility labor” (Abidin, 2021) that may include both analog and algorithmic visibility (Bucher, 2017), as well as invisibility (Abidin, 2021; Bishop, 2019). These practices are all conducted with the hope of finding ways to get paid for “doing what you love” (Duffy, 2017), yet having little control over whether that actually happens. Overall, to understand the process of commodifying spirituality on a social media platform, one needs to consider both, the healers’ conscious initiatives in packaging and promoting spirituality, and the emerging forms of commodified spirituality that are encouraged by the mediating platform.

To analyze the role the technological infrastructure plays in shaping commodification of user practices and user labor, brings the concept of affordances to the fore. We understand affordances as particular sociotechnical conditions that shape human behavior. In the context of social media platforms, this includes platform features, functions, and rules. However, affordances are not either present or absent, but are relational and are made sense of through practice (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). More so, they are not binary, but depend on how the engaging subjects perceive the affordances: either as requesting, demanding, allowing, encouraging, discouraging, or refusing certain behaviors (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). Further, platforms encourage content that aligns with advertisers’ expectations (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020) and may deplatform users who do not meet these expectations (Rogers, 2020). Following Tiidenberg and Whelan (2019), we distinguish between technological and social aspects of social media affordances, where the latter is concerned with the particular social situation and use practices of the social media network; and the former with the interface, terms of service, features, and functions of the platform. The interplay of these affordances

induces new behaviors, discourses, and practices (Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2019). The framework of affordances helps consider how Facebook imposes its dynamics on new spirituality and its practitioners.

Overall, understanding the commodification of spirituality on social media platforms requires considering both the intentional efforts of healers in packaging and promoting spirituality, as well as the emerging forms of commodified spirituality facilitated by the platform itself. To examine how Facebook influences healers' practices and spirituality, we first analyze the commodities created by spiritual healers, then employ labor frameworks to understand their participation, and explore the perceived sociotechnical affordances (Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2019) to delve into the intricate ways in which Facebook's social dynamics and infrastructure commodify spirituality and elicit labor from spiritual healers.

### **Context: Estonian Healers on Facebook**

This research was conducted in Estonia where the spread of spiritual beliefs and practices has been substantial. As many as 34% of Estonians consider themselves as spiritual, and 59% believe in people with supernatural abilities (Kantar Emor, 2017). Estonians' religious affiliation is therefore best characterized by "believing without belonging" (Ringvee, 2011, p. 45). The noninstitutional approach to religion and beliefs fosters the proliferation of various spiritual guides, self-styled experts, and lifestyle gurus who mix and match beliefs and practices that are typically chosen and tailored to satisfy individual needs (Uibu, 2016, p. 16). The spiritual healers, witches, teachers, and gurus make up the creative and innovative core of new spirituality (Uibu, 2016).

The phenomenon is not necessarily new, as already during the Soviet period, folk healers shared health tips in the media (Kõiva, 2015). Still today, media plays a significant role in popularizing spiritual practices among Estonian people, and in the age of social media, many of the older healers as well as new ones have started working or promoting themselves online. Facebook, which is the most popular social media platform in Estonia (685,000 users, the population of Estonia is 1.3 million; Kemp, 2022), is home to a plethora of neo-Pagan, spiritual, and self-help groups and pages, out of which the few largest have a membership of more than 30,000 each.

Here, witches, sages, shamans, and the like gather to give advice to other spiritual seekers, people with health and well-being issues, or those with an interest in mystical ideas (Renser, 2021; Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020). In this sense, we find that the healers in these groups can be compared with general lifestyle gurus (Baker & Rojek, 2020) who are often unlicensed practitioners offering emotional support, self-discovery tips, and guidance in well-being by mixing their own experiences with myth and popular science. The unlicensed practitioners and lay people on social media have made medical pluralism increasingly apparent and have become even more influential during the COVID-19 pandemic (Uibu & Koppel, 2021).

However, a common narrative, frequently encountered in media and represented by the health care workers, casts the healers in clear opposition to biomedicine. The daily news picks and shows scandalous examples and failures of folk healing (Mägi, 2018), in contrast to frequently portraying healers in a more positive light in their entertainment sections. Similarly, the Health Board (2019) has run nationwide campaigns against folk healing. The firm stance against any alternative medicine can be traced

back to the health policies of the Estonian government. The share of privately funded health care in Estonia is low, and most health decisions are informed by the dominant national health care system that does not accept complementary and alternative medicine (in short, CAM, e.g., such as homeopathy, chiropractic care, Chinese medicine) and does not provide any coverage for it. The chasm between the two health systems has grown wider, especially during the pandemic, increasingly heated and intense during vaccination discussions, and even more visible with the help of social media platforms.

### **Methods and Research Questions**

This study examines how spirituality has become a commodity on Facebook, investigating the products of spiritual healers, their adaptation to Facebook's norms, rules, and regulations, and the labor involved in creating these commodities.

The study mainly relies on in-depth ethnographic interviews with healers, with data from open-ended questionnaires and spiritual healers' social media content providing context and adding nuance, which we argue adds ecological validity and contributes to the overall credibility of our findings.

First, the questionnaire was sent out by Berit Renser to administrators of the three largest Facebook groups that bring together (in their own words) fortune tellers, sages, and people interested in their knowledge and advice. These groups were chosen because of their size, diversity in spiritual approaches, active participation, and accessibility, which were informed by prior engagements, experiences, and the cooperation of their administrators. The administrators answered those questions and later recommended new respondents. Through snowballing, Renser found 24 respondents who use Facebook groups and pages for offering and promoting their spiritual guidance and healing. They were largely female, aged 35–65, and with different educational backgrounds. There was a fascinating variety in how the questionnaire respondents defined themselves: clairvoyants, fortune tellers, voodoo witches, amateur shamans, therapists, cartomancers, spiritual guides, sages, wisewomen, Reiki masters, psychologists, palmists, energy counselors, taro teachers, and chirologists. Overall, they generally agreed to be referred to as "spiritual healers"—an emic term that characterizes the self-representation of the sample and that we thus use to describe the informants throughout the article. More than half of them derived their primary income from being a spiritual healer; others also pursue jobs such as in bookkeeping, IT, handicrafts, teaching, construction, or receive an old-age pension. All participants were asked if they were willing to be interviewed and to recommend other eligible spiritual healers they knew who were active on social media. Drawing from Renser's previous ethnographic research with Estonian spiritual healers and new-spiritual social media groups, we found that the respondents represented the diverse range of spiritual healers and their online practices.

Second, 11 out of all questionnaire respondents agreed to a follow-up interview by Renser. They had all picked and mixed (Hamilton, 2000) their own selection of spiritual-esoteric ideas and practices and did not adhere to any one preference; neither did they identify as followers of one specific religious doctrine. Although health is not necessarily the most relevant topic for all the interviewees, they had all engaged in alternative medicine and traditional healing to a greater or lesser degree, and their work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, their commonalities lay in their social media practices, as all of them were using Facebook to communicate with their clients, all of them used Facebook groups

for discussing spiritual topics, and most of them had their own Facebook pages. These were semistructured interviews with open-ended questions that were built on the questionnaires. The interview guide and questionnaire had two primary focal points. First, Renser inquired about their spiritual practices, encompassing their self-identification, the incorporation of different traditions, the goods or services they offered, their interpretations of their activities (such as considering them hobbies, work, or something else), and the nature of their relationships with clients. Second, a series of questions were dedicated to their utilization of Facebook, including their methods, motivations, and platforms of engagement, their perceptions of online opportunities and limitations, their level of awareness about their social media activities (e.g., following trends, analyzing statistics, competition, and meeting user needs), their understanding of social media in the context of their healing work, and how this understanding had evolved in recent years.

Renser used open coding and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in NVivo to analyze and identify significant topics in the healers' interviews and questionnaire responses. Several themes emerged from the data that was categorized as the following: being visible (including marketing efforts, self-branding, newsjacking, and creating public relationships) and invisible (including hiding content, closing communities, and blocking people); managing emotions (including taking care of own emotions, emotions of others, and creating emotional content); managing relationships (including being available, managing relationships within communities); sharing views (including writing spiritual content, commenting on posts, especially including trending topics, such as the pandemic); building a business (including managing finances, future aspirations, and products and services). After conducting further analysis, these initial themes were subsequently clustered together into two broader analytical categories of affective and aspirational practices.

Third, Renser conducted digital ethnographic observation (January 2021–May 2022) to further understand the healers' practices; she followed their social media posts on their personal, page, and group walls to juxtapose, contextualize, and validate the healers' comments in the interviews. She chose the visual material in the article to illustrate the categories found during the analysis and to show some varied styles of communication of different healers. She roughly re-created the screenshots of the original posts following the logic of ethical fabrication (cf. Markham, 2012; Tiidenberg, 2017) to de-identify users.

In addition to the mentioned data sources, Renser consulted with the national daily newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* that is part of the Facebook's nonpartisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) to understand how far their reach extends, as well as to familiarize with Facebook's rules about health and COVID-19-related content. All respondents' names mentioned throughout the article have been changed and details modified to guarantee the healers' privacy. The healers have given their consent to proceed with the research.

### **Commodification of Spirituality on Facebook**

In the following sections, we first discuss the healers' reasons for participation on Facebook; we then look at their spirituality in its commodified forms and how it aligns with the perceived platform affordances. Finally, we will show how, in the healers' experience, Facebook as a platform and the spiritual social spaces that it hosts afford particular (spiritual) labor practices.

### ***The Healers' Aspirations: Reasons for Participation on Facebook***

Before discussing the healers' labor practices and spiritual commodities, we need to understand how the healers discuss their spirituality. The essence of the healers' spirituality can be found in their self-descriptions that connect them to a greater whole, some higher power and reflect personal experiences (McGuire, 2010). The interviewed spiritual practitioners claim their knowledge comes from such sources as auras, energies, matrices, feelings, visions, and voices in one's head. As a result, they see themselves as privy to special information and are generally convinced of their extrasensory abilities, validating in their view their particular interpretation of spiritual matters. For example, Marta and Kaspar explain that they receive the knowledge and information through a direct mind link with a spiritual "information net" that is described as a spiritual counterpart of Internet, while Arvi receives answers from a pendulum that not only predicts the future but also helps to assess the quality of Facebook content. Thus, they all follow different and various traditions, but are all sincere in their aspirations, contrary to the popular discourse in Estonia of healers being con artists.

Based on the interviews, it is evident that spiritual healers pursue specific objectives and ambitions. These individuals are compelled to share their abilities and also view healing as a personal mission or calling, as consistently expressed throughout the interviews. Perceiving themselves as possessors of elevated and spiritual wisdom, participants like Marta are driven by a sense of duty to impart their knowledge to their followers, as an integral part of their missionary endeavors.

It is a mission, for sure. And a full-time job. Well, being a healer is the same as you always being a woman. It's not like if you're tired, then you're not a woman. Whatever the case, you are a woman nevertheless, you can't get over it or around it, you simply are. (Marta)

Similarly, Egge feels the responsibility to share her wisdom: "Why should I keep this information to myself that I have been sent? I'm not being selfish. I want to share it with others so they can also become more open-minded" (Egge). Embracing the notion of an existential responsibility, they feel compelled to educate individuals, contribute to the community, disseminate information, and extend assistance to those requiring support. Additionally, they aspire to challenge what they interpret as misconceptions and provide their expert perspectives instead. The healers are hence actively engaged in online discussions, and their self-realization seems to stem especially from those feelings of fulfillment when a person or group has been pleased, their mind changed, a problem or a spiritual mystery has been solved, or an enlightening truth has been found. Thus, akin to "doing what you love" (Duffy, 2017), the healers are "doing what you believe in" and are spiritual and committed to their beliefs in all situations, during and outside work hours (McGuire, 2010).

Simultaneously, a significant number of these healers view their pursuits as businesses or ventures hoping for their growth, or at the very least, as sustainable side hustles aimed at transforming their mission into a source of income. Healers like Holger believe that Facebook (both as a datafied infrastructure and as a network of social spaces) affords (Davis & Chouinard, 2016) commodifying spirituality in the form of goods, services, and self-brands, and this helps them reach their twin aspirations of educating users and creating income.

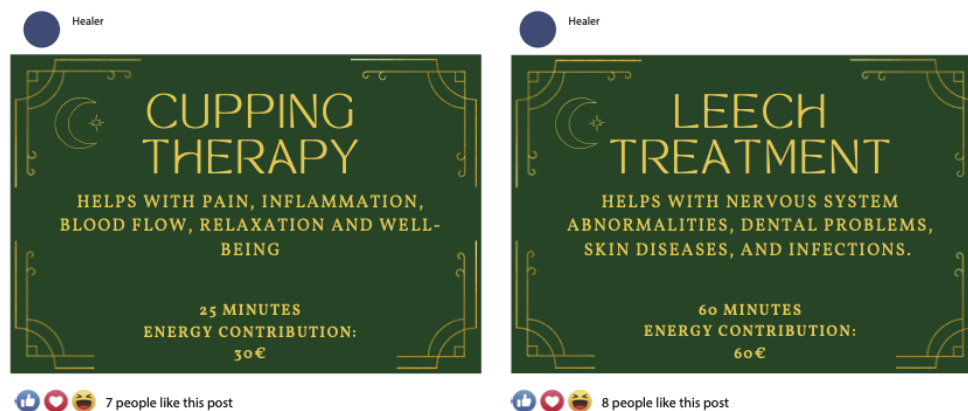
One goal is to be present in the picture. After all, Facebook is a marketing channel. So I reflect my own journey there. I have been doing it for years now. It is a Socratic-style philosophy of walking through marketplaces and explaining my worldview. (Holger)

The healers do not see anything wrong with selling their spirituality; neither do they think it diminishes their spiritual worth (Crockford, 2020). Therefore, for spiritual healers, their aspirations extend beyond either solely spreading their message or solely generating revenue; they are focused on both and do not see a problem in the convergence of the two.

### ***Commodification of Spirituality and Affective Labor***

In the following paragraphs, based on interviews, we illustrate the various commodities produced by healers during their Facebook engagements. Furthermore, we explore how these commodities aim to establish emotional connections. Subsequently, we delve into the healers' perspectives about their social media practices and present them as forms of labor where elements of spiritual labor and digital labor intertwine.

As for the services, the healers offer shamanic journeys, palmistry, energy healing, therapeutic sessions, various therapies, and fortune telling (Figure 1). These services frequently exhibit empathy, tackle common complaints, and offer enticing promises of personal well-being, providing solutions to a wide range of concerns, including relationships, careers, and mental and physical health, all with the aim of bringing meaning to their clients' lives. These services can be exchanged for value and be purchased with donations, energy contributions, or participatory contributions—common euphemisms for monetary exchanges that highlight the spiritual nature of the transaction.



**Figure 1. Folk healing introduced in a series of posts (ethical fabrications of Facebook posts using canva.com for design).**

We find that, like many social media influencers, the healers also commodify their own spiritual selves to effectively position themselves as consumable products, appealing to an audience seeking their expertise and desired lifestyle (Baker & Rojek, 2020). By using information from interviews and by observing how they interact and share things on social media, we suggest that the healers self-brand predominantly by



participating in (semi)public discussions that build relationships and create and manage emotional connections.

First, the healers engage in relational labor (Baym, 2015) to establish and maintain online relationships with their (potential) clients. They actively convey to their target audience their accessibility through discreet online exchanges, thereby fostering a perception of approachability and tailored engagement. As Liisa says: "You need to talk to your client as a friend and be available. Back when I had fewer requests, I used to answer even at night." Thus, it is not uncommon for them to publicly disclose their contact details, be it telephone numbers or e-mail addresses, extending a cordial invitation to individuals to initiate contact and partake in confidential dialogues.

The healers foster relationships through daily activities. Relational labor (Baym, 2015) can thus involve facilitating dialogue, mediating conflicts within the Facebook community, implementing community guidelines, moderating discussions, presenting themselves as authoritative figures, and ensuring that interactions among the followers align with their preferences. Engaging in relationship-building on the walls of groups or pages not only provides healers with a sense of fulfillment but also enhances their visibility, engagement, and responses in the comment sections. This can potentially lead to requests for private consultations (Figure 3).

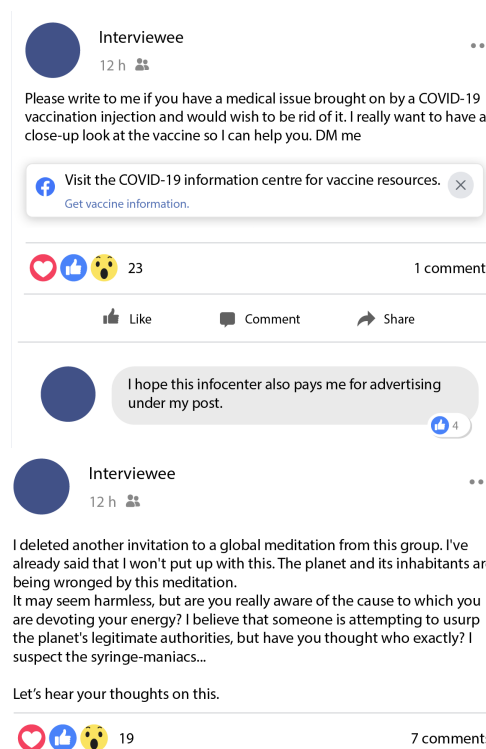
Furthermore, these interactions are often emotionally loaded. Healers accomplish creating emotional connections by posting free relatable content (e.g., daily astrology, rune and tarot readings, and being friendly and available, see Figure 2). Emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), including taking care of clients' emotions, compassion, support, affection, and being emotionally available, makes up an important part of the healer's work. The healers are aware that the audiences enjoy emotionally loaded content and are reported by the healers to be especially pleased with uplifting messages or, on the contrary, upset and engaged with polarizing ones.



**Figure 2. The healer creates regular content that would relate to the followers' daily worries during COVID-19. This content would possibly lead to private consultation and service requests (ethical fabrications of Facebook posts with open-source photo by photoboyko, n.d.).**

The healers feel that the platform entices them to build relationships around trending topics and dialogue on relevant and topical issues when they arise. During the data collection period, the most prevalent and controversial topic was COVID-19 and its related aspects, such as masks, vaccinations, restrictions, and medicine. The interviewed healers held diverse health-related beliefs, with some advocating for biomedicine, while others leaned toward herbal medicine. Similarly, the healers' beliefs ranged from strong support for medicine to complete denial of the existence of any ongoing pandemic. Regardless of their attitude, these beliefs were transformed into spiritual goods, services, and discursive self-brands—ranging from selling magic potions to advising on pharmaceuticals. However, the healers frequently face the challenge of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010), as they have to cater to diverse audiences consisting of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of individuals with varying beliefs and who express themselves vociferously. As such, speaking up on trending topics contributes to the emergence of polarizing debates among both, the healers and their followers.

Consequently, the healers assume the responsibility of managing the intense atmosphere by providing guidelines and their own active presence. As a result of consistently sharing emotional content that they believe helps build relationships with their audiences, the healers now feel an increasing need to create a more controlled atmosphere. Rasmus emphasizes the growing necessity to moderate group behavior and address conflicts, particularly those related to COVID-19—to avoid follower loss, conflict with platform rules, and general negative emotions (e.g., Figure 3).



**Figure 3. The healers react to topical content and through these activities position themselves as spiritual experts (ethical fabrications of Facebook posts).**

As Ella suggests, she is often tempted to take sides in the pandemic-related discussions to clear the heated air in her groups, but she suppresses this desire and instead calls for common ground, so as not to lose her followers and her source of income: "I'm forced to make decisions, take stances now. It's a challenge for my fiery personality—to stay calm and neutral, but I need to do it because the whole group follows my lead" (Ella).

In the case of spiritual healers on Facebook, emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983; McGuire, 2010) extends beyond one-to-one interactions. Healers often perform double shifts of emotional labor, attending to their own and clients' emotions while managing conflicts in the community. This paradoxical process involves activating emotions for attention and simultaneously maintaining them sustainably. The healers' work on social media now encompasses overseeing internal and interpersonal relationships and exerting control over the broader community sentiment.

### ***Commodification of Spirituality and Aspirational Labor***

As noted in the previous sections, the healers are motivated by building businesses and fulfilling their callings. The clearest way in which spirituality is commodified is by offering spiritual goods and services for sale. Some of the healers' products include herbal remedies, tarot cards, and runes, but these

items can also be incorporated into their services. Furthermore, the presentation of these products is often informed by the perceived sociotechnological affordances of Facebook and presented in the form of short, popular, and engaging content (Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020). The healers perceive that Facebook and the on-platform social dynamics encourage them to engage in various visibility practices, including newsjacking, continuous presence, strategic connecting, and “gaming” the algorithm.

Healers sell and promote their commodities by making them visible using social media marketing techniques. One of those ways is by sharing consumer games, as is seen in Figure 4. Similarly to social media influencers, some healers tackle the creation of social media content with a deliberate plan, clear objectives, and the ambition to achieve professional success (e.g., approach their page with a marketing plan, having at least one post per day, and creating viral giveaways; e.g., Duffy, 2017).



**Figure 4. A healer is promoting her products online through gamified activities. Copying from other sharing games, she produces a product-related lottery as it grabs attention from both users and algorithms (ethical fabrications of Facebook posts with open-source photos from Canva, n.d.).**

Furthermore, newsjacking (Hunter & Burkhart, 2013) is another way to gain visibility. It has been previously pointed out (Salemink, 2010) that the services of healers are particularly vital during uncertain periods, such as economic downturns or postwar conditions. As a result, healers have consistently dealt with pressing societal issues and remained responsive to current events. On social media, being topical means creating topical products; in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it meant offers of protection from diseases, services to remove vaccinations, and personal brands skewed toward commenting on trending issues as experts (Figures 2 and 3). For example, Arvi and Egge share their new service of “removing” vaccinations that they believe to be harmful, either by letting the vaccinated person get stung by a bee or through energy healing. Visibility techniques may also include selling products using paid

advertising, but more often, healers rely on continuous content production, commenting in social media groups, creating giveaways intended to go viral, and attempting to game the platform algorithms. For example, Liisa feels the pressure to be constantly visible for the clients and believes that continuity and availability are the keys to being remembered.

If you post twice a month, no one will care. Like, who even are you? . . . I had a small burnout period somewhere around Midsummer for about a month. Then, indeed, I felt pressure that if I didn't post, would people forget about me or what would happen?  
(Liisa)

Furthermore, the healers try to fit their content into more popular formats based on their algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) or use the metrics and feedback to their advantage. For example, Holger is well aware of the importance of friend lists for being visible and frequently prunes his list to make space for new and better connections. He aims to keep those who are active, take interest in, and engage with his content, and he adds new ones using an "imaginary algorithm."

In the beginning, I sent quite a few friend requests myself. I had an algorithm which I created in my head, so to speak, that if Facebook suggests me a friend, and we have at least 10% friends in common, I will send him a friend request. Of course, the number of friends immediately began to mushroom. (Holger)

In fact, "How would Facebook react?" is a frequent question among the healers. Toivo feels that Facebook is "watching" him and shows me Facebook's COVID-19 info center among his phone apps, which "was put there without his approval"—something that has made him a more conscious user of Facebook. In addition, third-party fact-checking performed by the editorial staff of Estonian daily newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* and fact corrections published in its digital portal, Delfi, constitute another layer of gatekeepers who flag false information, but whose existence and actual powers are unclear for the healers. Furthermore, health care organizations are also involved in the discussions of what may be published on Facebook. This includes the Estonian Health Board who has requested users who promote behavior that contravenes the national recommendations concerning COVID-19, to withdraw content. The healers prefer to find ways to comply with regulations for fear of what they call "Facebook jail," feared most since they see Facebook as a gateway to clients and social recognition. "It's like a job for me here," says Egge, who actively works toward avoiding getting her posts banned.

Thus, beyond visibility practices, healers work toward achieving their goals also via various (in)visibility practices. Because Arvi is aware and afraid of Facebook's fact-checkers, he is cautious about sending the researcher articles through Facebook Messenger. As a result of the Health Board's intervention, Toivo, facing a 9600€ fine, was forced to remove a Facebook event that had invited people to participate in a Reiki session during national lockdown. Respondents self-censor in fear of created and shared posts causing problems later, or, as Egge says, posting is of no use if it is taken down immediately. There is a growing awareness among healers of specific keywords that could draw Facebook's attention, and people try to censor themselves or change their ways of self-expression. One of those techniques includes hiding messages in plain sight (cf. Gerrard, 2018; van der Nagel, 2018). To avoid negative

attention, code words are used: for example, MMS has become “three-letter,” 5G is “five-gee”, single letters in “vaccine” are replaced with an asterisk. Meanwhile, the healers try to figure out where the lines are drawn and sometimes test out the possible restrictions to understand what is allowed and what is not.

In this long-running event I set up for Sunday, there’s the word “vaccine” inside the text. I honestly admit that I put the word into it to see if it would be taken down. So far it’s still up, as far as I know. But typically, others replace some letters with an asterisk or something, so that they don’t get blocked. (Egge)

Furthermore, some have opted for serving a smaller subsection of the community, dedicating themselves to select followers who support their ideas. Although platform moderation has reduced alternative health information, either deemed misleading or harmful, from the public eye, much of it has moved under the radar (Abidin, 2021). Having moved from large groups to smaller ones or to group chats, the healers may have reduced their visibility but feel more in control as they build a more homogenous audience, which allows them to cater to both followers and platform rules. Ella, who typically does not clash with Facebook’s community standards, calls her new group a “haven of peace” where, unlike in other Facebook groups, you can take a break from the COVID-19 topics. Marta, who has had problems with Facebook before, has made her Facebook group secret, to allow people to express themselves freely, without thousands watching and flagging content.

I decided to hide the group completely from the public. Anyone who needs to find it will find it anyway. We started to get annoyed when people were looking at the list of our members, because we have people who do not want to make it public knowledge that they are in such a group. There have been top bankers and police officers and university professors and medical doctors. I imagine that they are largely people who cannot really show this side of them in their professional lives. So if they feel safe in the group, they will also have courage to investigate the things that are important to them or to reveal that they also have problems which are not being shown anywhere else. (Marta)

So, the (in)visibility efforts and creation of affective content align with aspirational labor (Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017). This involves conducting effective labor like missionary work, forming authentic connections, and commenting on current topics. It also encompasses earning a living from their genuine beliefs while increasing visibility for potential clients. They carefully balance public visibility and inconspicuousness when needed. Through self-promotion and asserting their community importance, they aim to establish expertise and authority, potentially leading to prestige and income.

### **Concluding Discussion: Commodification of Spirituality and the Labor of Spiritual Healers**

The study explores the spiritual healers participation on Facebook, with a particular focus on how they practice their spirituality. We argue—in line with much recent work on content creation and its relationships with aspiration, attention, exploitation, and authenticity (Baym, 2015; Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017)—that their endeavors are forms of labor and include commodification of spirituality. However, the analysis revealed aspects of commodification and labor that are specific to the spiritual sphere, thus

contributing empirical and conceptual depth to studies of (new) spirituality and studies of social media content creation and platformed cultural production. We investigated the commodities spiritual healers produce, the labor involved, and how these practices have been shaped on and by Facebook.

First, we discussed the commodification of spirituality, which means self-branding and the ways that the healers' shape their spirituality into platform-ready goods and services. On the one hand, healers, like many social media content creators, made concentrated efforts to capture the attention of other social media users. Beyond that, however, they also came up with new, or adjusted traditional spiritual services (counseling, fortune telling, healing; cf. Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020, for more detail) to be platform-ready. A fusion of spiritual practices (tarot, runes, mantras) and common social media marketing strategies (humor, community-building through free content, gamification) created platformed syncretism, blending ideas from both spiritual philosophies and platformed cultural production. However, because of the healers' diverse viewpoints on life, including health and wellness matters, and their belief in their expertise and responsibility to share their ideas, they add to the emotionally charged atmosphere in the Facebook groups studied.

Although the language of commodification and branding invites a lens of calculated and strategic self-presentation, the healers' work is infused with a desire to "do what they believe in" and similarly to previous findings, the interviewees perceive their endeavors as embodiments of their spiritual ideals (Bowman, 2013). However, entangled with their spiritual expressions and ambitions, the healers aspire to establish businesses and believe they can do so while staying true to their calling (Crockford, 2020; McKenzie, 2013). Akin to the fashion influencers studied by Duffy (2017), who wanted to turn doing "what they love," into a profitable career, the spiritual influencers we studied believed it is possible to get paid for doing what they believe in. They pursue their business goals through a combination of visibility and invisibility tactics (Abidin, 2021), which adds to the overall diversity of spiritual interpretations about life, health, and wellness.

However, this commodification of spirituality also involves producing content in the form of data for Facebook, which is then repurposed by the platform—either sold to advertisers or used to enhance user engagement (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Fuchs & Seignani, 2013). In other words, spiritual healers commodify their spirituality through enacting their calling and participation in their communities, while the platform itself commodifies their spiritual practices for its own purposes. As spirituality becomes a data commodity, it becomes susceptible to platform rules and algorithmic feedback loops and becomes shaped by digital infrastructures and platform companies' interests.

Second, we show that the commodification of spirituality on social media constitutes a form of labor. The healers engage in various forms of digital participation, meeting the criteria for a wide array of labor types described for offline healers, care workers, and various forms of digital and content creation labor. Like esoteric practitioners characterized by emotional or affective labor (Gregory, 2014; Hardt, 1999; Hochschild, 1983), Facebook healers use their emotions to create a sense of affinity and care among their (potential) clients. However, similarly to musicians and artists, they also engage in ongoing relational labor (Baym, 2015). They need to perform dual roles of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), requiring them to engage in emotionally charged one-on-one and public sessions, and to manage their own and others' emotions. Third, similar to social media influencers who diligently produce engaging content in anticipation of future gains (Duffy, 2017), spiritual healers also engage in

aspirational labor. Furthermore, they not only perform the labor of healing but also adapt their healing practices to the platform, embodying a type of networked spiritual labor.

Although McGuire (2010) suggested that spiritual labor often arises from the tension between one's spiritual self and the guiding organizational structure, it is crucial to recognize that the spiritual healers in this article typically operate independently and lack formal organization. However, as demonstrated in this study, the notion of independence is somewhat illusory, as the platforms on which these healers operate shape their practices through rules, moderation, affordance perceptions, and algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017). The spiritual market has been argued to make up for the lack of hierarchy and structure of new spirituality, helps to sustain the otherwise noninstitutional phenomenon, and supports the practicing specialists (Chandler, 2016). We argue that in the case of the digital new spirituality, Facebook serves as the spiritual marketplace that supports the exchange of spiritual goods and services. Furthermore, the platform also shapes the presentation and production of these goods and services and the specific types of labor involved in their creation. This is achieved through the platform's sociotechnical affordances and how healers perceive and use these affordances. Therefore, the commodification of spirituality and spiritual labor on social media entails a continual process of aligning one's beliefs and striving to either adapt those beliefs to desired formats or restricting one's activities accordingly. The peculiar content produced on social media by contemporary spiritual healers is a result of their affective engagement and aspirational goals that intertwine with their perceptions of and participation on the platform. Additionally, the distinctive features and affordances of the platform play a pivotal role in enticing user behavior and consequently contribute to the formation of preferences among modern spiritual healers. This invites the question of what new spirituality looks like on different platforms and in cultures where different platforms rule. Facebook is a dominant platform in Estonia and for Estonian new-spiritual practitioners, although these communities are increasingly ambivalent toward it in light of the heightened moderation efforts and public sentiment about health-related misinformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and what is publicly perceived as increasing polarization and agitated interactional styles.

Recognizing social media as a structuring layer to the specific ways of the commodification of spirituality and the labor of spiritual practitioners allows us to consider how it molds practices according to its affordances, policies, terms of service, and so on. Future studies could take a deeper look into the platform as a new mediating force of the commodification of new spirituality and may help to understand some of the origins of the increasingly bold statements and unorthodox content that has started circulating in these spaces. Researchers can gain insights by viewing health-related social media content not only in terms of misinformation, as it is often framed, but as growing out of a belief-based endeavor where concepts, their valuations, and hierarchies are pluralistic and cultural (or even religious). It helps to acknowledge that the often polarizing and conflicting ways of expressing health-related topics are shaped and constrained by the perceived affordances of the mediating platform: algorithms and healers' algorithmic imaginaries, content moderation, and moderation lore, group norms, and so on.

Exploring specific policies on (alternative) health can reveal how the platform shapes content. Since the 2016 U.S. elections, Facebook has been put into the limelight in terms of the spread of



misinformation, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus has shifted on medical (mis)information. So far, the rocky relationship between complementary and alternative medicine has gone largely unnoticed on the platform. Although the extremes of alternative medicine or conspiratorial (combining spirituality with conspiracy; Ward & Voas, 2011) theories may be relatively easy to spot, a wide gray area lies between different approaches to medicine. For example, understanding of complementary and alternative medicine may differ across nations (e.g., Chinese medicine may be widely accepted in one country but rejected in another). Additionally, several services criticized by institutional medicine in Estonia, such as crystal treatment and energy flows, are generally harmless unless they make false promises of healing and discourage science-based treatment. Furthermore, traditional medicine is often infused with spiritual beliefs, and banning it could contravene the idea of religious freedom (e.g., ayahuasca is regarded as traditional medicine in Peru, yet a hallucinogenic drug in many other countries). The latter has been an exemplary case, as the Facebook Content Oversight Board overturned Facebook's decision to remove a post that portrayed ayahuasca in a positive way, recommending Facebook to allow its users to discuss nonmedical drug use as it was related to religious ceremonies (Lyons, 2021). Although the platform has not addressed alternative medicine in its policies, it indirectly widens the gap between biomedicine and alternatives by setting clear acceptability boundaries, driving healers to seek more homogenous, covert approaches under the radar. This offers an exciting starting point for further research about how global social media sites, such as Facebook, have the tools to check cultural categories against moral or scientific validity and regulate them accordingly.

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