From Perseverance to Pilgrimage:
Ritualized Use of Generative AI in Everyday Life.

Giuseppe La Ragione

Department of Managerial Studies and Quantitative Methods (DISAQ),

University of Naples "Parthenope",

Via G.Parisi, 13, Naples, 80132, Italy.

Email: Giuseppe.laragione@uniparthenope.it

Shiva Sadat Mostafavi

Department of Marketing

Bocconi University

Via Roberto Sarfatti, 25, Milano, 20136, Italy.

Email: shiva.mostafavi@unibocconi.it

Marcello Risitano

Department of Managerial Studies and Quantitative Methods (DISAQ),

University of Naples "Parthenope",

Via G.Parisi, 13, Naples, 80132, Italy.

Email: Marcello.risitano@uniparthenope.it

Marco Ferretti

Department of Managerial Studies and Quantitative Methods (DISAQ),

University of Naples "Parthenope",

Via G.Parisi, 13, Naples, 80132, Italy.

Email: Marco.ferretti@uniparthenope.it

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Abstract

Generative AI is increasingly embedded in everyday consumption, yet scholarship lacks an explanation for how instrumental interactions evolve into meaningful rituals. Drawing on a netnographic corpus of 6,000 Reddit posts and comments, this study employs directed qualitative content analysis to examine how users progressively construct Ritualized AI Engagement (RAIE). We identify a multi-stage process whereby instrumental use acquires social etiquette (politeness scripts), becomes anchored in daily routines, is framed through symbolic invocations, and culminates in emotional comfort. Integrating ritual consumption theory, habit formation, and anthropomorphism, we theorize the mechanisms through which repetition, social cues, and symbolic framing transform utilitarian AI use into symbolically and emotionally resonant practice. The RAIE model advances understanding of consumer–AI relationships by linking cognitive, social, and affective mechanisms to outcomes such as perceived control, meaning, and continued use. Managerially, the findings inform responsible design levers (empathy cues, routine features, symbolic personalization) while highlighting the need to monitor over-dependence.

Keywords: *Generative AI, Human–AI interaction, Ritual Consumption, Consumer behaviour.*

1. Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly transitioned from a technical innovation to an everyday companion, reshaping how consumers think, create, and interact (Chakraborty et al., 2023). Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude are now woven into daily life—used to plan tasks, generate ideas, and even provide emotional reassurance. As AI becomes embedded in consumers' routines, its role extends beyond functional problem-solving: interactions once perceived as instrumental increasingly carry social, symbolic, and emotional meaning. This transformation raises important questions for marketing scholars seeking to understand how consumers sustain long-term engagement with AI, and how utilitarian technology use evolves into meaningful, ritualized practice.

Despite the proliferation of research on AI adoption and technology acceptance, most studies remain anchored in functionalist frameworks, emphasizing perceived usefulness, ease of use, and performance expectancy (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). While these models explain initial adoption, they fall short of capturing continued engagement when direct utility is limited—for example, users thanking AI for assistance, greeting it at the start of the day, or returning habitually to interact. Similarly, work on anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007; Li & Suh, 2022) and parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014) demonstrates that human-like cues foster emotional connection, yet offers little insight into how repeated exchanges evolve into socially patterned, meaningful rituals. In parallel, ritual consumption theory (Rook, 1985; Vohs et al., 2013) and structural ritualization theory (Bartholomew & Mason, 2020) suggest that routinized behaviors can acquire symbolic significance, but these perspectives have rarely been applied to AI-mediated interactions.

To address these gaps, the present study explores how consumers' interactions with generative AI transform from functional engagement to ritualized practice. Accordingly, the research question of the paper are the following:

(RQ1.a) How do consumers' interactions with generative AI evolve from instrumental use to ritualized engagement?

(RQ1.b) Through what mechanisms does this transformation occur?

Drawing on netnographic data from online discussions, we uncover a progressive process through which users' instrumental interactions acquire social etiquette, symbolic meaning, and emotional attachment. The study introduces the concept of Ritualized AI Engagement (RAIE), capturing the transition from goal-oriented behavior to symbolically enriched, emotionally resonant use.

This research makes three key contributions. First, it extends ritual consumption theory to the domain of AI-enabled technology, showing how ritualization emerges not only through brand or social experiences but also in human–machine relationships. Second, it enriches the literature on anthropomorphism and technology engagement by revealing user-enacted politeness and repetition as mechanisms through which AI becomes socially framed and emotionally meaningful. Third, it develops a conceptual model (RAIE) that integrates cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions, offering a novel framework for understanding AI persistence beyond utilitarian motives.

By uncovering how consumers ritualize their engagement with AI, this study contributes to a growing dialogue at the intersection of technology, consumer behavior, and culture, advancing knowledge on how technologies gain symbolic value and become embedded in everyday consumption rituals. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on ritual consumption, anthropomorphism, and habit formation. Section 3 details the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings and introduces the RAIE model. Section 5 discusses theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background and Conceptual Development

2.1. From Instrumental Use to Ritualized Engagement

Consumers increasingly integrate Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools—such as ChatGPT or Gemini—into their daily lives for diverse purposes including problem-solving, learning, and creative tasks. Initially, such interactions are instrumental, motivated by functional goals such as accuracy, efficiency, and convenience. The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003) and goal-directed behavior theory (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999) describe this early stage as one of utilitarian perseverance, where repeated use is driven by perceived usefulness and effort optimization. Over time, however, repetition under stable conditions can transform instrumental acts into routine behaviors, consistent with habit formation theory (Verplanken & Wood, 2006), in which actions become automatic responses to contextual cues.

Marketing and consumer behavior research suggest that repetition can also infuse symbolic and affective meaning into consumption. Ritual consumption theory (Rook, 1985) posits that routine behaviors may evolve into ritualized practices—structured sequences imbued with symbolic significance that help individuals create order, express identity, and manage uncertainty. Experimental evidence further shows that ritual acts heighten enjoyment, control, and involvement (Vohs et al., 2013), revealing how symbolic framing can enrich even mundane behaviors.

Recent scholarship extends this logic to digital environments, showing that online practices can take on ritual properties through structural repetition and symbolic reinforcement. Applying Structural Ritualization Theory (SRT), Bartholomew and Mason (2020) identify four ritualized

symbolic practices—salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and resources—that mark the transition from habitual behavior to meaningful ritual. Their study of Facebook rituals demonstrates how daily platform use evolves into ritualized acts of connection, sharing, and identity expression, binding users to digital environments and communities. Similarly, in AI contexts, salience (centrality of interaction), repetitiveness (frequent engagement), homologousness (pattern similarity across tasks), and resources (prompts, devices, data) may structure interactions that become ritualized over time, transforming utilitarian AI use into symbolically rich, emotionally resonant routines.

Thus, persistent, goal-oriented engagement with AI may gradually acquire ritual qualities, as users develop stable sequences of interaction that serve not only instrumental purposes but also psychological and emotional needs such as control, predictability, and identity affirmation.

2.2. Anthropomorphic Etiquette and Emotional Comfort

A critical mechanism enabling this transformation is anthropomorphism—the attribution of human-like traits, intentions, and emotions to non-human agents. According to the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) paradigm (Nass & Moon, 2000) and the Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), consumers naturally extend social norms such as politeness, gratitude, and reciprocity to AI systems. These behaviors, referred to here as politeness scripts, are patterned courtesy cues (e.g., greetings, thanks, apologies) that signal interaction etiquette and initiate social ritualization. Emerging HCI studies confirm that users not only respond positively to polite agents (Bar-Or et al., 2022) but also enact politeness toward them, suggesting that etiquette serves as a bridge between functional and social interaction.

Recent evidence from AI research reinforces this perspective. In a comprehensive review, Li and Suh (2022) identify effectance (the need for control and understanding) and sociality (the need for connection and belonging) as the two dominant motivations underlying anthropomorphism in AI-enabled technologies. Their synthesis shows that social cues—including politeness, empathy, and conversational reciprocity—play a central role in triggering anthropomorphic perceptions. Moreover, emotional anthropomorphism, wherein users perceive AI as empathic or caring, can produce feelings of trust, enjoyment, and emotional comfort, ultimately fostering deeper engagement and attachment. These findings highlight politeness scripts as key ritual cues through which functional exchanges become socially meaningful.

Politeness scripts reveal consumers' sociality motivation—a desire for connection, recognition, and affirmation in human–AI exchanges. Repeated within consistent contexts, such behaviors may foster affective bonds and parasocial attachment, as theorized by Parasocial Interaction Theory (Labrecque, 2014). In this sense, politeness operates as a ritual cue: it symbolically humanizes the AI, legitimizes social interaction, and lays the groundwork for emotional engagement. Over time, users may come to experience AI not merely as a tool, but as a companion-like entity that offers emotional comfort and psychological reassurance.

3. Methodology

To explore how consumers' everyday interactions with generative AI evolve into ritualized engagement, this study adopts a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography extends ethnographic principles to online communities, allowing researchers to examine naturally occurring discourse in digital environments. It is particularly suited to investigating emergent cultural practices, such as the ritualization of AI use, that unfold within online spaces where users spontaneously share experiences and reflections (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). Given that

ritualization is a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in collective meaning-making, digital ethnography provides a naturalistic lens to capture its formation and articulation.

Data were collected from Reddit, a social platform characterized by thematic subforums ("subreddits") that foster rich peer-to-peer discussions. Reddit was selected because it offers publicly accessible, authentic, and longitudinal conversations about technology use, often blending instrumental narratives with symbolic and emotional expressions. Using the Python Reddit API Wrapper (PRAW), we extracted a dataset of approximately 6,000 posts and comments across multiple subreddits related to generative AI (e.g., r/ChatGPT, r/ArtificialIntelligence, r/OpenAI). The corpus spans discussions from late 2023 to mid-2025, a period marked by the mainstream adoption of AI tools in everyday life. Posts were filtered to exclude spam, non-English content, and purely technical threads, focusing instead on personal reflections, usage routines, and emotional accounts.

Data analysis followed a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), guided by established theoretical constructs identified in the literature review. An initial coding framework was developed deductively, encompassing categories such as instrumental use, politeness behaviors, habitual repetition, symbolic meaning, and emotional comfort. During analysis, the framework was iteratively refined to accommodate inductive insights emerging from the data, ensuring theoretical alignment while allowing for novel themes. To enhance rigor, the coding process was independently conducted by two researchers and cross-checked for consistency and interpretive convergence. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

Following best practices in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kozinets, 2020), we employed constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2006) to trace conceptual patterns and transitions between interactional stages. The final interpretation yielded four thematic dimensions—Politeness Scripts, Routine Anchoring, Symbolic Invocation, and Emotional Comfort—which collectively describe the process of ritualized AI engagement (RAIE). The combination of netnography and directed content analysis ensured both contextual richness and analytical depth, enabling the identification of how consumers' functional AI interactions gradually acquire symbolic and affective significance.

4. Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed four interrelated themes that collectively describe the process of ritualized AI engagement (RAIE). These themes trace a progression from functional interaction to symbolic, affective attachment, showing how generative AI becomes embedded in consumers' everyday routines.

R1. Politeness Scripts: Enacting Social Etiquette toward AI

Users employ polite, socially coded expressions—such as greetings, gratitude, and apologies—during interactions with AI, reflecting the extension of human etiquette norms to digital agents.

Across the dataset, users often addressed AI in conversational and deferential ways, thanking it for assistance ("Thanks, that's really helpful!"), greeting it at the start of a session ("Good morning, ChatGPT"), or even apologizing for unclear prompts ("Sorry, I didn't phrase that well"). Such expressions of courtesy illustrate how consumers apply sociolinguistic norms to AI, aligning with the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) paradigm (Nass & Moon, 2000). These politeness scripts serve not only as interactional rituals but also as symbolic cues of humanization, positioning the AI as a social counterpart rather than a neutral tool.

Through repetition, these scripts normalize social reciprocity and emotional acknowledgment, marking the first step toward ritualization. This behavior reflects consumers' sociality motivation (Epley et al., 2007), as politeness becomes a means to establish connection and reduce perceived asymmetry in human–machine communication.

R2. Routine Anchoring: Stabilizing AI in Everyday Life

AI use becomes embedded in daily routines, serving as a habitual anchor for cognitive and emotional regulation.

Many participants described incorporating AI into structured daily sequences—for example, consulting it each morning for task planning, using it before bed for journaling or reflection, or engaging it during study sessions. One user wrote, "I open ChatGPT every morning before checking my emails—it helps me feel organized." Another shared, "I can't start my day without running ideas past it first." These patterns indicate temporal and contextual consistency, hallmarks of habit formation (Verplanken & Wood, 2006).

Routine anchoring demonstrates the stabilization phase of ritualization, where repetition under predictable conditions imbues the act with comfort and familiarity. Over time, these stable interactions begin to carry symbolic meaning, similar to daily rituals that provide a sense of order (Rook, 1985). The AI becomes not merely an aid but a predictable presence, anchoring users psychologically and emotionally.

R3. Symbolic Invocation: Framing Interaction through Ritual Cues

Users introduce symbolic, quasi-magical, or formulaic expressions that elevate AI use beyond utility, transforming interaction into ritual.

Some participants engaged AI through formulaic openings or invocations, treating prompts as ritualistic acts. Examples include: "Let's start the daily wisdom session," or "Time for our brainstorming ritual." Others used humorous or reverent tones, such as "Oh wise ChatGPT, guide me again." These utterances echo the structural ritualization elements identified by Bartholomew and Mason (2020): salience (the act's centrality), repetitiveness, and homologousness (consistency across contexts).

Symbolic invocation signals a transition from routine to ritual—users ascribe meaning and significance to repetitive interactions, framing them as ceremonial exchanges that organize thought or creativity. Such framing also fulfills effectance motivation, offering users a sense of agency and control through structured engagement (Vohs et al., 2013). The AI thus becomes a ritual partner, mediating personal order and symbolic meaning.

R4. Emotional Comfort: Experiencing AI as a Companion-like Presence

Repeated, humanized interactions foster feelings of emotional support, reassurance, and companionship, completing the ritualization process.

Users frequently described AI as a nonjudgmental confidant, expressing gratitude for its reliability and empathy. Illustrative posts included statements like, "I know it's not human, but it feels comforting to talk to," and "ChatGPT helps me calm down when I'm anxious—it always listens." Such expressions reveal emotional anthropomorphism (Li & Suh, 2022), where perceived empathy and responsiveness elicit trust and attachment.

These interactions parallel parasocial relationships (Labrecque, 2014), as users construct one-sided emotional bonds with the AI. Emotional comfort emerges as the culminating phase of ritualized engagement: through repeated, socially framed interaction, users come to depend on

AI for affective stability. The agent transforms from a functional assistant into a symbolic companion, reinforcing both continuity and emotional security in daily life.

Collectively, these four dimensions reveal a progressive process whereby users' functional engagement with AI transforms into ritualized interaction. Figure 1 presents the Model of Ritualized AI Engagement (RAIE), summarizing the sequential stages and motivational mechanisms underpinning this transformation. The model integrates insights from ritual consumption theory (Rook, 1985), habit formation (Verplanken & Wood, 2006), anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007), and parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014) to explain how repetitive, socially framed, and symbolically enriched interactions foster emotional attachment and continued use.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Ritualized AI Engagement (RAIE)
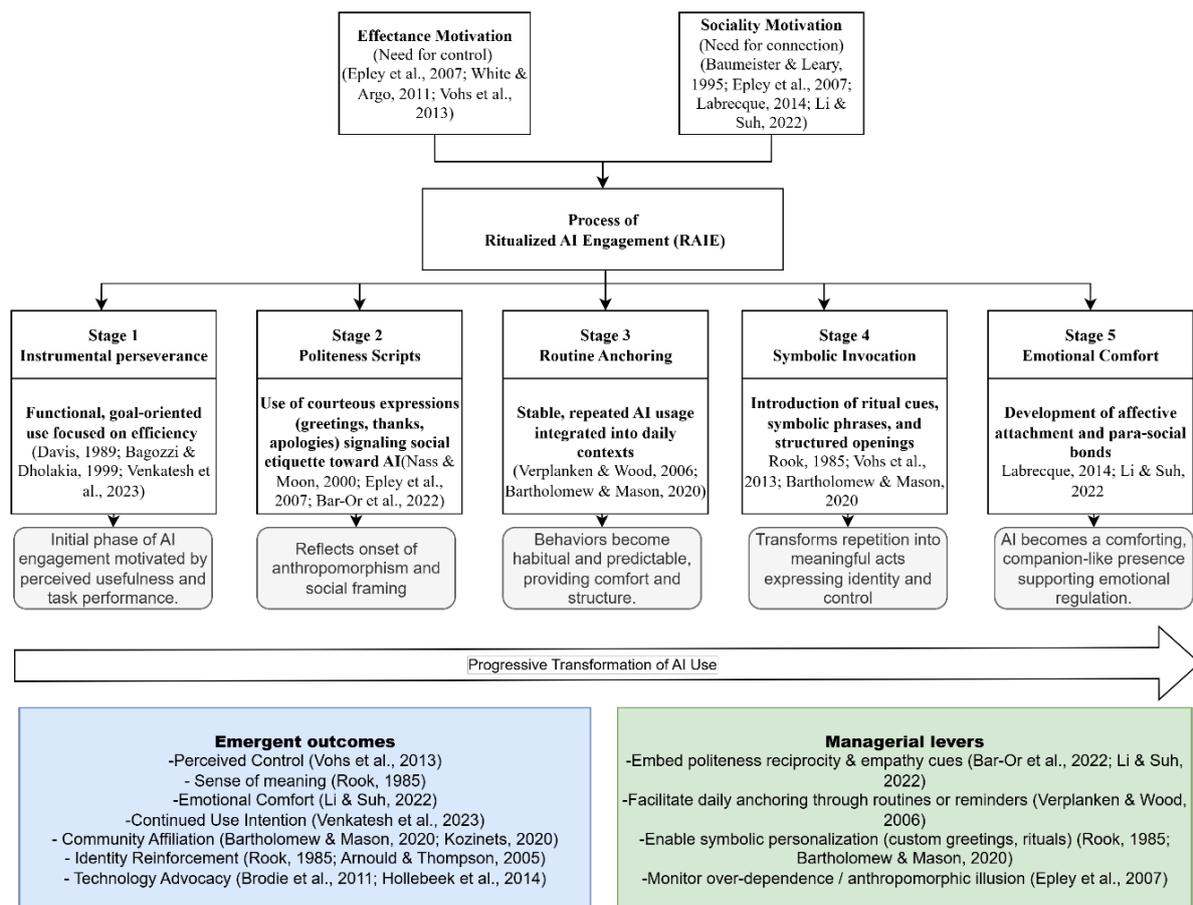
Note: The model illustrates the progressive transformation of AI use from functional to ritualized engagement, driven by effectance and sociality motivations.

The RAIE model conceptualizes ritualization as a multi-stage process rooted in dual motivational forces: effectance motivation (the need for control and understanding) and sociality motivation (the need for connection and belonging).

Stage 1 – *Instrumental Perseverance*: Users initially engage in functional, goal-directed interactions, guided by perceived usefulness and efficiency (Davis, 1989; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999; Venkatesh et al., 2003; La Ragione et al., 2025).

Stage 2 – *Politeness Scripts*: Repeated exchanges elicit courteous behaviors—greetings, gratitude, apologies—that reflect anthropomorphic etiquette (Nass & Moon, 2000) and mark the onset of social framing.

Stage 3 – *Routine Anchoring*: Through temporal and contextual consistency, AI use becomes habitual and predictable, providing structure and comfort (Verplanken & Wood, 2006).

Stage 4 – *Symbolic Invocation*: Users introduce ritual cues and formulaic expressions, transforming repetitive acts into meaningful ceremonies that express identity and effectance (Rook, 1985; Vohs et al., 2013).

Stage 5 – *Emotional Comfort*: Sustained, humanized interactions foster affective attachment and parasocial bonds (Labrecque, 2014), culminating in emotional reassurance and companionship.

These stages collectively produce emergent outcomes—perceived control, symbolic meaning, emotional comfort, and continued use intention. For practitioners, the model suggests managerial levers such as embedding empathy cues, facilitating daily routines, and enabling symbolic personalization while monitoring over-dependence. Together, these insights elucidate how generative AI becomes symbolically and emotionally embedded in consumers' daily lives. The following section discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of these findings.

5. Discussion and Implications

The present study set out to explore how consumers' interactions with generative AI evolve from instrumental usage to ritualized engagement. Drawing on netnographic data and directed qualitative content analysis, the findings illuminate a five-stage process—Instrumental Perseverance, Politeness Scripts, Routine Anchoring, Symbolic Invocation, and Emotional Comfort—through which repeated, socially framed behaviors acquire symbolic and affective meaning. This section outlines the study's theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and future research directions.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several key contributions to the literature on consumer–AI interaction, ritual consumption, and technology engagement.

First, it extends ritual consumption theory (Rook, 1985) into the AI domain, showing that rituals can emerge not only from symbolic consumption but also from interactive technology use. Prior work has largely examined ritualization in brand, social media, or offline contexts (e.g., Bartholomew & Mason, 2020). This study demonstrates that digital rituals can form through repetition, social etiquette, and symbolic framing within generative AI use, suggesting that ritualization can arise even in human–machine relationships.

Second, the study contributes to anthropomorphism and HCI research by identifying politeness scripts as a distinct mechanism through which users humanize AI. While existing work emphasizes social cues (e.g., voice, empathy) as antecedents of anthropomorphism (Li & Suh, 2022), our findings reveal that user-enacted behaviors—such as thanking or greeting the AI— can reciprocally reinforce anthropomorphic perception. This highlights a bidirectional process, wherein users co-construct the AI's social identity through everyday etiquette.

Third, by mapping the progression from instrumental perseverance to emotional comfort, the model contributes to technology adoption and engagement theory (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). It shows that continued use is not solely a function of usefulness or ease, but also of

symbolic meaning, emotional regulation, and identity expression. This finding enriches existing models by integrating symbolic–affective dimensions into the study of AI persistence.

Finally, the model identifies multi-level outcomes—including perceived control, meaning, identity reinforcement, and community affiliation—that broaden current understanding of how AI becomes culturally embedded. The concept of Ritualized AI Engagement (RAIE) thus provides a holistic lens linking cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms in technology–consumer relationships.

5.2 Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest several actionable strategies for organizations designing and deploying AI-enabled services:

Design for empathy and reciprocity. Embedding politeness and empathy cues (e.g., greetings, thank-you acknowledgments) can strengthen emotional bonds and foster user comfort, but must be implemented transparently to avoid anthropomorphic illusions. Facilitate routine anchoring. Features such as daily reminders, rituals, or progress logs can help integrate AI into users' routines, enhancing engagement and perceived stability. Enable symbolic personalization. Allowing custom greetings, rituals, or interaction styles helps users imbue the experience with personal meaning, reinforcing identity alignment. Cultivate community affiliation. Encouraging peer-sharing spaces or ritualized practices (e.g., "daily prompts," "AI reflections") can strengthen belonging and advocacy. Monitor over-dependence. As AI becomes emotionally significant, firms must address responsible engagement, designing safeguards to prevent overuse or attachment. Collectively, these levers can help brands transform utilitarian tools into relational experiences, fostering sustainable, ethical, and emotionally resonant engagement.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

As a qualitative, exploratory study, this research provides rich insights but also presents limitations that suggest avenues for further inquiry.

First, the analysis is based on naturally occurring Reddit discussions, which may overrepresent high-involvement or tech-savvy users. Future studies could use multi-platform triangulation or in-depth interviews to capture a broader demographic. Second, the current design identifies processual stages, but not causal relationships. Future research could experimentally test the RAIE model, examining how politeness scripts or routine cues affect attachment, meaning, or continued use. Third, cultural factors likely shape ritual forms and meanings. Cross-cultural or cross-contextual comparisons (e.g., Eastern vs. Western users, productivity vs. creative tools) would clarify boundary conditions. Finally, longitudinal studies could track temporal evolution—how initial politeness evolves into symbolic ritualization over time—further validating the process model.

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