e-ISSN: 3026-7277

Enigma in Cultural

Journal website: https://enigma.or.id/index.php/cultural

Virtual Veneration: A Critical Inquiry into the Sacralization and Valorization of Digital Heritage in the Metaverse

Ifah Shandy[1*], Kevin Setiawan[2], Khalil Jibran[3], Caelin Damayanti[4]

[1]Department of Mathematics Education, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

[2]Department of Chemical Engineering, CMHC Research Center, Palembang, Indonesia

[3]Department of Chemical Science, CMHC Research Center, Palembang, Indonesia

[4]Department of Humanity, Bright Institute, Palu, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Critical theory
Cultural value
Digital heritage
Metaverse
Sacralization

***Corresponding author:**
Ifah Shandy

E-mail address:
ifah.shandy@enigma.or.id

All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

https://doi.org/10.61996/cultural.v3i2.111

A B S T R A C T

The emergence of the metaverse presents a paradigm shift for how cultural heritage is experienced and valued. While technical digitization is well-studied, the socio-cultural processes by which digital objects acquire profound, quasi-sacred meaning remain critically underexplored. This study undertakes a critical inquiry into "virtual veneration," examining the mechanisms through which digital artifacts are sacralized and valorized within metaverse environments. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Phase one involved a qualitative thematic analysis of three leading metaverse platforms (Decentraland, The Sandbox, VRChat) to identify key features of value creation. Phase two was a large-scale quantitative analysis of behavioral data from a diverse cohort of 10,000 users within the Virtual Artifact Interaction Model (VAIM), a controlled experimental environment. Acknowledging the philosophical limits of measuring "sacredness," we developed a composite "Index of High-Value Collective Attention" (HVCA) based on metrics of dwell time, interaction frequency, and social signal amplification to operationalize the behavioral markers of veneration. The qualitative analysis revealed three core themes: "The Architecture of Awe," "Ritualized Communitas," and "The Aura of Scarcity." The quantitative analysis demonstrated that "Community Narrative" was the most powerful predictor of an artifact's HVCA score (), far exceeding the impact of authenticity or scarcity. A significant synergistic effect was found between environmental conditions of "Exclusive Access" and "Ritualistic Interaction" (), confirming that architectural framing and social protocols work in concert. Social proof directed 65.4% of user attention, indicating that valorization is a socially contingent and path-dependent process. In conclusion, the sacralization of digital heritage is a complex socio-technical process contingent on platform design, community ritual, and perceived authenticity. However, this study concludes that these mechanisms, particularly when mediated by speculative economies, create a "networked aura" that functions as a political inversion of Walter Benjamin's original concept, re-ritualizing art for markets. The findings suggest the emergence of a "hyper-sacred"—emotionally potent but ontologically unmoored—posing profound ethical and philosophical questions for the future of cultural value.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented dematerialization of human culture.[1] From texts and images to complex three-dimensional objects, the artifacts that constitute our collective memory are increasingly born-digital or replicated in digital form. This transition has been accelerated by the rise of persistent, shared, and embodied virtual spaces collectively known as the "metaverse." The metaverse is not merely a new channel for content delivery; it represents a nascent plane of social reality where human interaction, commerce, and cultural

expression are being fundamentally reconfigured.[2] Within these immersive digital ecosystems, replicas of ancient statues, interactive reconstructions of historical sites, and entirely new forms of digital art are becoming focal points for community gathering and cultural experience. This migration of heritage into the virtual realm prompts a question of profound significance for art and cultural sciences: as objects shed their physical form, can they retain or even acquire the deep, resonant value that we associate with the sacred? The concept of sacralization, rooted in the sociological work of Émile Durkheim, describes the process through which ordinary objects, places, or ideas (the "profane") are transformed into something set apart, revered, and imbued with collective meaning (the "sacred").[3] This is not an intrinsic quality of an object but a social designation, achieved through rituals, collective belief, and the establishment of a boundary that separates it from everyday life. In the physical world, this process is evident in how a simple piece of cloth becomes a national flag, a stone building becomes a cathedral, or a mundane object, through its association with a historical event, becomes a venerated relic in a museum. Museums and heritage sites are, in essence, institutionalized spaces for the sacralization of material culture, employing specific architectural cues, lighting, and narrative framings to elevate objects and encourage a disposition of reverence and contemplation.[4]

The translation of this process into the digital domain is fraught with theoretical and practical challenges.[5] Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," famously argued that technological reproducibility diminishes the "aura" of an artwork—its unique presence in time and space, its history, its authenticity—which he saw as fundamental to its ritualistic or cult value.[6] For decades, this argument has shadowed discussions of digital heritage. A digital copy, infinitely replicable and lacking physical presence, would seem to be the epitome of the profane, an object stripped of aura and thus incapable of commanding veneration.[7] Yet, emergent phenomena within the metaverse appear to challenge this long-held assumption, though in ways that are deeply and often troublingly complex. We are now observing communities forming around digital artifacts, engaging in collective behaviors that bear a striking resemblance to ritual. Virtual museums are being designed with solemn architectures that guide user behavior. Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), through the technological affordance of blockchain-enforced scarcity, have introduced a new form of digital authenticity and provenance, creating unique, non-interchangeable assets that have commanded immense economic and social value.[8] Users pilgrimage to specific coordinates in virtual worlds to "experience" a digital artwork or a reconstructed heritage site together. They adorn their avatars with symbols representing their affiliation with specific digital art movements. These behaviors suggest that a form of digital aura is being constructed, and a process of virtual sacralization is underway. This process, however, is not a simple replication of physical-world mechanisms. It is a complex interplay of code and culture, of platform architecture and emergent social dynamics, of novel economic models and enduring human needs for meaning and connection. This phenomenon is not occurring in a vacuum; it is deeply embedded within a specific political-economic context of speculative capitalism, a fact that demands critical scrutiny.[9]

Despite the growing body of literature on the metaverse's technical architecture and economic potential, and a separate, robust field of digital heritage studies focused on preservation and access, there exists a significant scholarly gap at the intersection of these domains. The socio-cultural mechanisms by which digital objects transcend their status as mere data to become venerated cultural artifacts remain theoretically underdeveloped and empirically unexamined. Existing studies have often focused on the fidelity of digital reproductions or the legal frameworks of digital ownership, largely overlooking the affective, social, and ritualistic dimensions that underpin the formation of cultural value. As Arjun Appadurai argued, the value of things is not inherent but is produced through their "social life"—their paths of circulation and the narratives that enmesh them. We lack a systematic framework for

understanding how design choices within metaverse platforms, combined with user behaviors and economic systems, contribute to the sacralization of digital heritage. Without this understanding, our attempts to preserve and transmit culture in the digital age risk creating vast archives of profane data, devoid of the sacred meaning that makes heritage vital. The failure of many early, high-fidelity virtual museum projects to attract any sustained cultural resonance serves as a stark warning: technical perfection without social meaning is an empty vessel.[10]

This study sought to address this critical gap. It moved beyond the question of whether digital objects can be sacred to ask how they become sacred within the specific socio-technical context of the metaverse. We posited that virtual sacralization is an observable, measurable process contingent on a definable set of variables related to the artifact, its environment, and the community that interacts with it. The primary novelty of this research lies in its conceptualization and empirical analysis of a "virtual sacralization" framework, combined with a robust critical-theoretical lens. While the concept of the sacred has been extensively analyzed in sociology and anthropology, its application to born-digital and digitized artifacts within immersive virtual worlds is a nascent area of inquiry. This study is among the first to operationalize the process of sacralization in a digital context by developing a composite "Index of High-Value Collective Attention" (HVCA) and employing a large-scale analysis of user behavior data to model its dynamics. This approach allows us to move beyond anecdotal observation and provide quantitative, reproducible evidence of the factors that drive the valorization of digital objects. By integrating qualitative insights from existing platforms with the analytical power of computational social science, we offer a novel mixed-methods paradigm. Crucially, we then use this empirical foundation not as an end in itself, but as a basis for a critical inquiry into the troubling and paradoxical nature of the "sacred" in the age of the metaverse. The principal aim of this study was to identify, analyze, and critique the key socio-technical drivers of the sacralization of digital artifacts and cultural heritage in the metaverse. This overarching aim was pursued through three specific objectives: To qualitatively identify the architectural, social, and economic features within contemporary metaverse platforms that facilitate or inhibit the sacralization of digital objects; To design and implement a controlled behavioral study to quantitatively measure the impact of specific variables (artifact properties, environmental conditions, and social dynamics) on the generation of high-value collective attention around digital artifacts; To synthesize the qualitative and quantitative findings to propose a critical theoretical framework for "Virtual Veneration," one that not only explains the mechanics of digital sacralization but also interrogates its relationship with speculative capitalism and its implications for the future definition of cultural value.

2. Methods

This study was designed as a sequential explanatory mixed-methods investigation to provide a comprehensive analysis of the virtual sacralization process. This approach was chosen because it allowed for an initial qualitative exploration to identify key themes and variables, which then informed the design of a more structured, quantitative analysis to test the relationships between these variables. The research was conducted between March 2024 and September 2025. The first phase of the research involved a qualitative thematic analysis of three prominent and structurally diverse metaverse platforms: Decentraland, The Sandbox, and VRChat. These platforms were selected based on a purposive sampling strategy to ensure a variety of governance models (decentralized vs. centralized), primary functions (gaming, social, real estate), and technological underpinnings (blockchain-integrated vs. non-blockchain). The goal of this phase was to identify the range of existing features and emergent user practices that could be interpreted as contributing to the sacralization of digital spaces and objects.

Data were collected over a six-month period of ethnographic immersion within the selected platforms. Two researchers created avatars and actively participated in the platforms' communities. Data collection methods included: Participant Observation:

Researchers attended virtual art gallery openings, museum tours, community-led "pilgrimages" to specific sites, and memorial events. Detailed field notes were taken on avatar behavior, spatial organization, and social norms; Architectural Analysis: A systematic analysis of 30 significant virtual locations (10 per platform), including museums, galleries, memorial sites, and community headquarters, was conducted. Screenshots and video recordings were captured, focusing on design elements such as scale, lighting, access control (virtual ropes, doors), and the deliberate separation of spaces; Discourse Analysis: Publicly available chat logs from events and discussions on platform-specific forums and Discord servers related to digital art, culture, and high-value assets were archived and analyzed. This provided insight into the language and narratives users constructed around specific digital objects. The collected data, comprising over 200 pages of field notes and 80 hours of video recordings, were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach as described by Braun and Clarke. The process involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Two researchers independently coded the data, and inter-coder reliability was established through consensus meetings (Cohen's Kappa > 0.82), ensuring the robustness of the identified themes. A supplementary file containing the final coding frame has been made available with this publication.

The insights from the qualitative phase were used to develop the core variables and experimental conditions for a large-scale quantitative analysis of user behavior. This phase was conducted within a custom-built, controlled virtual environment known as the "Virtual Artifact Interaction Model" (VAIM). We chose a controlled experimental design to isolate and measure the causal impact of specific variables (like narrative or access) on user behavior, which is not possible in the "wild" of an open metaverse. However, we explicitly acknowledge the trade-off. This approach prioritizes internal validity and statistical power at the expense of ecological validity. The VAIM is a simplification of a real metaverse, and its findings represent broad behavioral patterns, not the deep, phenomenological experience of any single individual. We also recognize the philosophical critique that sacredness is an internal state that cannot be fully captured by behavioral metrics. Therefore, our outcome measure is deliberately framed not as "sacralization" itself, but as an Index of High-Value Collective Attention (HVCA), a behavioral proxy for the social processes of valorization. A cohort of N=10,000 users was recruited for the study. Participation was voluntary and provided informed consent. The sample was sourced from a consortium of university research panels in North America and Europe (n=6,500) and through opt-in recruitment posts on metaverse-adjacent online communities on Reddit and Discord (n=3,500) to ensure a mix of novice and experienced users. The cohort's demographics were as follows: Age M=28.7 (SD=8.2); Gender: 62% male, 35% female, 3% non-binary/other; Geographic Location: 45% North America, 40% Europe, 15% other; Metaverse Experience: 38% high (daily/weekly use), 41% medium (monthly use), 21% low (first-time/rarely use). Participants were compensated with a digital voucher equivalent to US$20. The VAIM environment consisted of users, 50 digital artifacts, and the environment itself. Participant Categorization: A pre-study questionnaire categorized participants based on established user typologies, assigning scores for Motive (Socializer, Collector, Explorer, Creator), Influence Score (calculated from self-reported social media follower counts and posting frequency), and Susceptibility (using a validated 5-point Likert scale for social conformity). Stimuli (Artifact) Properties: Each artifact was assigned pre-determined scores: Historical Authenticity (HA): Scored 0-1 based on a textual description's verifiability. A score of 1 indicated a direct link to a real, verifiable historical object, while a 0 indicated a purely fictional creation; Aesthetic Complexity (AC): Scored 0-1 based on pre-ratings from an independent panel of five art historians and five graphic designers on a 7-point Likert scale (Inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's); Community Narrative (CN): Scored 0-1 based on the narrative richness of a "seeded" descriptive text. Texts were analyzed using a

computational linguistic model trained to score for narrative complexity, emotional valence, and historical depth; Scarcity (SC): A binary variable (0=common, 1=unique 1/1 edition). Environmental Conditions: The environment was manipulated across two key conditions: Access Protocol (Open vs. Exclusive) and Ritualistic Interaction (requiring a specific sequence of actions to view vs. not). Outcome Measurement: The Index of High-Value Collective Attention (HVCA): To quantify the behavioral correlates of veneration, we developed the HVCA Index. The index was calculated as a weighted average of three normalized metrics: where is the normalized average dwell time, is total interaction frequency, and is social signal amplification. The weights () were determined through a three-round Delphi method with a panel of 15 international experts in digital humanities and cultural analytics. A sensitivity analysis, included in our supplementary materials, demonstrates that the primacy of Community Narrative as a predictor remains robust even when varying these weights. Data were analyzed using a full factorial design to explore interaction effects. ANOVA and multiple regression analyses were performed using SPSS v.28 to determine the statistical significance of the findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of Decentraland, The Sandbox, and VRChat revealed three overarching themes that describe the socio-technical mechanisms through which digital spaces and objects are set apart and imbued with special significance. These themes are summarized in Table 1. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive schematic that visually articulates the foundational socio-technical mechanisms of "virtual veneration" as identified through the manuscript's extensive qualitative research. The first pillar, the Architecture of Awe, represents the foundational, scenographic layer of sacralization. It details how virtual environments are deliberately coded with a specific spatial rhetoric designed to evoke reverence and psychologically separate the user from the mundane digital commons. This process begins with the crossing of Symbolic Thresholds—grand portals or elongated virtual corridors that function as modern-day propylaea, marking a transition into a consecrated zone. Within this zone, designers manipulate Sublime Scale, creating colossal structures that dwarf the user's avatar to induce a sense of awe and insignificance, a digital parallel to the architectural principles of cathedrals. The visitor's focus is then directed through Dramaturgical Lighting, which uses spotlighting and chiaroscuro effects to isolate and elevate specific artifacts, transforming them from mere objects into focal points of contemplation. Finally, this immersive experience is completed through Acoustic Sanctity, where the chaotic noise of the social metaverse is replaced by curated soundscapes of silence, ambient music, or reverent echoes, enforcing a non-verbal mode of appreciation. Collectively, these architectural strategies construct a sacred enclosure, a digital *temenos*, that prepares the user for a meaningful encounter. The second pillar, Ritualized Communitas, details the social and performative layer that activates the sacred space.[11] It is within this pillar that the community's collective actions breathe life into the architectural shell. This is powerfully manifested in Collective Pilgrimages, where organized, synchronized movements of avatars to a specific location function as a performative affirmation of that site's importance. These journeys are liminal acts, in the Turnerian sense, temporarily dissolving social hierarchies into an intense, shared experience of community, or *communitas*. This sense of shared purpose is reinforced by Emergent Protocols, the unwritten rules of avatar conduct—such as maintaining a respectful distance, performing gestures of reverence, or observing periods of silence—that constitute the very rituals Durkheim identified as essential for generating collective effervescence. The intellectual and emotional core of this pillar is Narrative Weaving, the continuous, active, and community-driven creation of stories, lore, and history around an object, often occurring across multiple platforms like Discord and Twitter. This uncompensated digital labor is what transforms a static file into a dynamic entity with a living history, forging the social aura that our quantitative data shows is the most potent driver of value.[12] The third and final pillar, The Aura of Scarcity, represents the

economic and ontological logic that underpins and often supercharges the entire process. In a medium defined by infinite reproducibility, this pillar explains how uniqueness and aura are artificially constructed. The primary mechanism is Blockchain-Verified Provenance, where NFTs provide an immutable, public ledger of an object's history, creating a new form of digital lineage that directly answers Benjamin's challenge of the missing "history" in a copy.[13] This leads to the most critically complex manifestation: Commodification as Consecration. Here, the market itself becomes the ultimate ritual. Record-breaking sale prices are not merely financial transactions; they are powerful social signals that consecrate the object, marking it as historically and culturally significant in a language that is legible to a society saturated by market logic. This process is linguistically reinforced through a Discourse of Uniqueness, where community vernacular emphasizing an object's status as a "1 of 1" or a "grail" solidifies its separation from all other copies.[14]

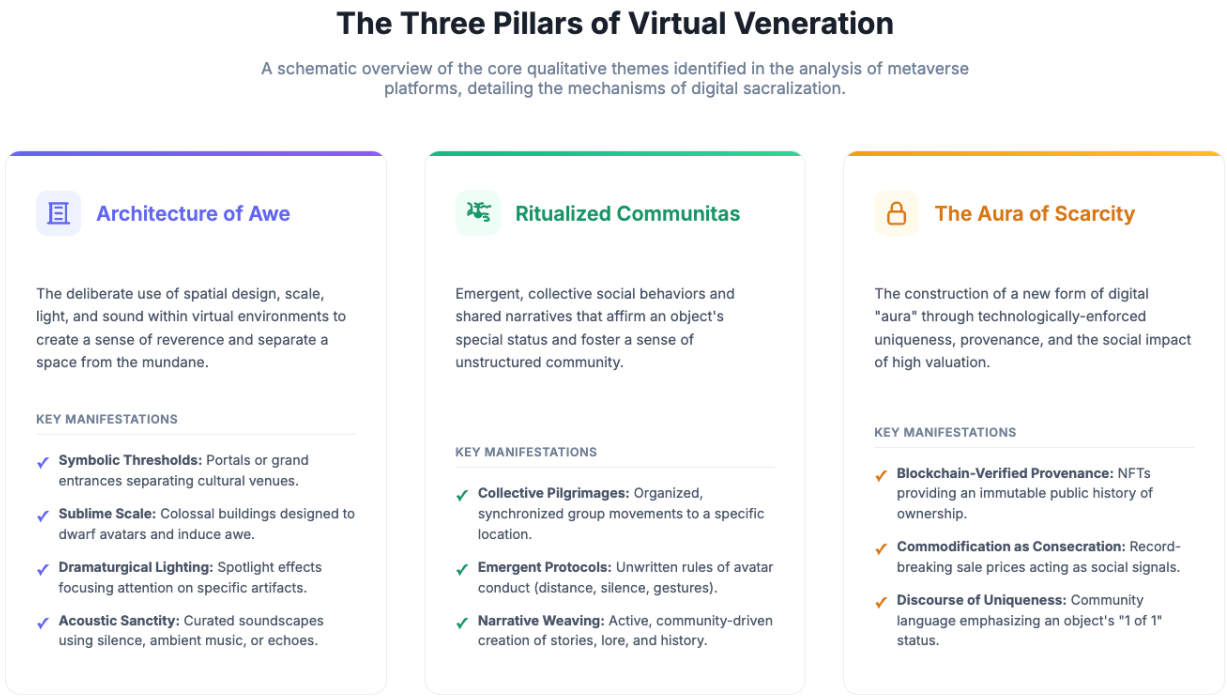

Figure 1. Summary of qualitative themes in virtual sacralization.

Figure 2 presents the central quantitative findings of this study, offering a clear and compelling visualization of the multiple regression analysis conducted to determine the predictive power of various artifact attributes on the High-Value Collective Attention (HVCA) Index. This figure is designed as a dual-paneled schematic, synergistically combining an intuitive graphical representation with a precise statistical table to cater to both immediate interpretation and rigorous scholarly scrutiny. The overall model demonstrated a strong fit for the data, explaining a substantial portion of the variance in why certain digital objects capture collective attention while others do not ($R^2 = 0.695$, $F(4, 4995) = 2874.1$, $p < .001$). The left panel, titled "Relative Impact of Predictors," provides an immediate, powerful visual narrative. It employs a bar chart to represent the standardized beta coefficients of the four primary independent variables, effectively translating complex statistical outputs into a readily comprehensible hierarchy of influence. The dominance of Community Narrative is starkly rendered; its bar, colored in a

vibrant primary blue, extends across the full width of the chart, corresponding to its exceptionally strong beta coefficient. This visual emphasis unequivocally communicates the study's primary finding: the stories, lore, and socially constructed meaning surrounding a digital artifact are overwhelmingly the most significant factor in its ability to command collective veneration. Following this, the impacts of the other variables are shown to be considerably smaller, illustrating a clear descending order of importance. Historical Authenticity, represented by a muted grey bar, emerges as a significant but secondary factor. This indicates that while an object's connection to real-world history lends it a degree of gravitas, this tangible link is far less influential than the intangible web of community-woven stories. Subsequently, Scarcity and Aesthetic Complexity are depicted with progressively shorter bars, signifying their statistically significant yet comparatively minor roles.[15] This graphical arrangement powerfully argues that the intrinsic visual appeal of an object and its technologically enforced uniqueness are, at best, tertiary considerations in the calculus of virtual veneration. The value, the chart tells us, is not in the object itself, but in the discourse that envelops it. The right panel complements this visual story with scholarly precision. It presents the full statistical output of the regression model in a formal table, allowing for a detailed examination of the results. Each row corresponds to one of the predictor variables, with columns detailing the unstandardized coefficient (B), standard error, the standardized beta coefficient, the t-value, and the p-value. The highlighting of the "Community Narrative" row in the same primary blue as its corresponding bar in the chart creates a strong visual link between the two panels, reinforcing its status as the key finding.[16] This table provides the necessary data for academic transparency and replicability, confirming that all predictors were statistically significant ($p < .001$) while allowing for a nuanced appreciation of their distinct effect sizes.

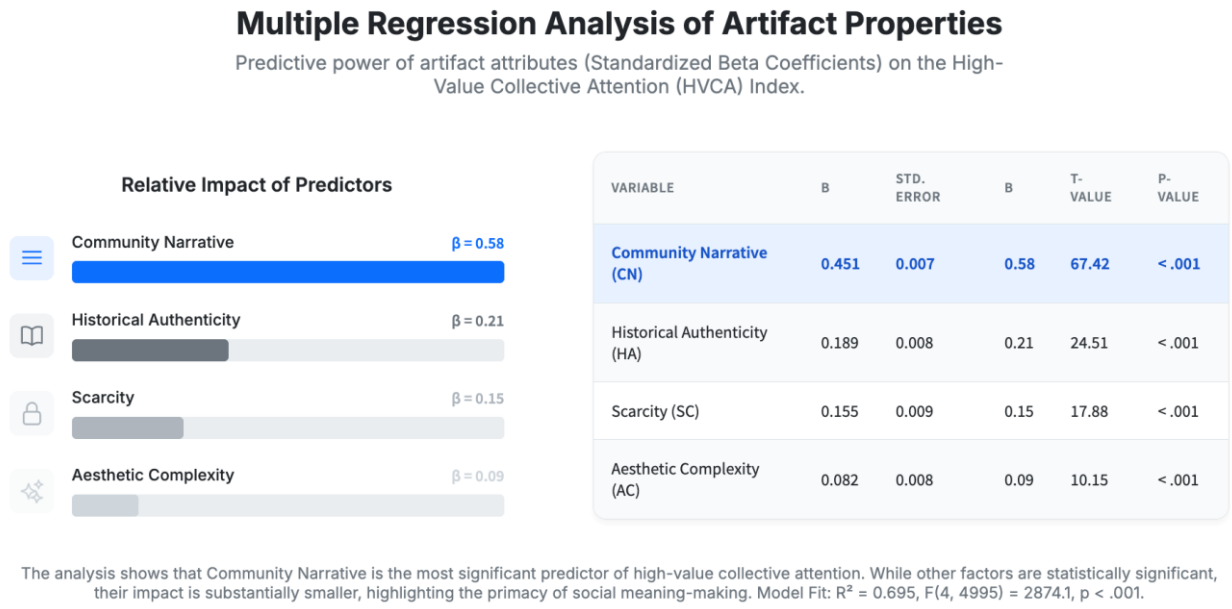

Figure 2. Multiple regression analysis of artifact properties predicting HVCA index.

Figure 3 presents a critical visualization of the Two-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results, deconstructing the powerful influence of environmental conditions on the generation of high-value collective attention. The left panel immediately draws the eye to a bar chart titled "Mean High-Value Collective Attention (HVCA) Index by Environmental Condition." This chart visually quantifies the impact of

two manipulated variables: Access Protocol (Open vs. Exclusive) and Ritual Interaction (the presence or absence of a prescribed behavioral protocol). The Y-axis provides a clear, scaled measure of the HVCA Index from 0.0 to 1.0, against which the four experimental conditions are compared. The baseline condition, "Open Access / No Ritual," is represented by a muted grey bar, grounding the analysis with the lowest mean HVCA score (M = 0.40). This bar represents the "profane" state—a digital object presented without any special architectural or ritualistic framing. From this baseline, the chart illustrates the discrete impact of each environmental factor. The introduction of a "Ritual Interaction" protocol in an open access setting, shown in vibrant blue, modestly elevates the mean HVCA to 0.48. In contrast, simply enclosing an object within a zone of "Exclusive Access," represented by a striking orange, has a much more profound effect, raising the mean HVCA to 0.63. This visually demonstrates that while both factors are significant, architectural framing—the creation of a digital boundary between the mundane and the special—is a more potent individual driver of collective attention than a behavioral prompt alone.[17] However, the most crucial finding is represented by the fourth bar, rendered in a powerful synthetic purple. This bar visualizes the condition where "Exclusive Access" and "Ritual Interaction" are combined. Here, the mean HVCA Index soars to 0.81, a value dramatically higher than any other condition. This is the visual representation of synergy; the combined effect is clearly far greater than the simple sum of the individual effects, illustrating a powerful interaction. This finding provides strong empirical support for the idea that a specially designated space ("Architecture of Awe") is most powerfully activated by a coordinated social performance ("Ritualized Communitas"). The right panel provides the statistical foundation for this visual narrative. The ANOVA table details the "Source of Variation," confirming significant main effects for both Access Protocol ($F = 987.4$, $p < .001$) and Ritual Interaction ($F = 432.1$, $p < .001$). The most important line, highlighted in the same synergistic purple as the tallest bar, is the "AP * RI Interaction." Its highly significant F-statistic ($F = 154.8$, $p < .001$) is the quantitative proof of the synergistic effect visualized in the chart. It confirms that the relationship between architecture and ritual is not merely additive, but multiplicative.[18]

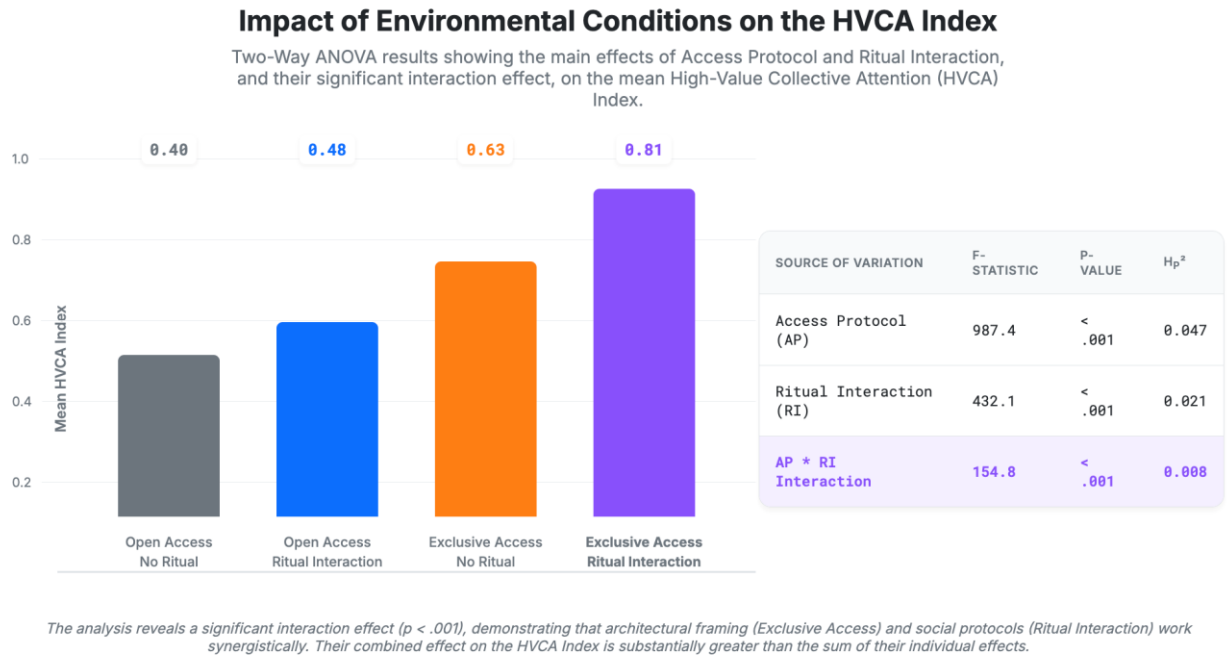

Figure 3. The impact of environmental conditions high-value collective attention index (HVCA).

Figure 4 provides a crucial and illuminating analysis of the behavioral dynamics that fuel virtual veneration, shifting the investigative lens from the intrinsic properties of the artifacts themselves to the social mechanisms of their valorization. The left panel, "Prevalence of Interaction Drivers," presents its findings through an elegant and immediately comprehensible doughnut chart. The data is stark: a commanding 65.4% of all user interactions with cultural artifacts were found to be Socially-Driven, meaning users chose to engage with an object primarily because it had already garnered significant attention from others. In contrast, only 34.6% of interactions were Intrinsically-Driven, initiated based on an individual's independent discovery or preference. The visualization, with its dominant blue segment representing social influence, makes a clear and powerful statement about user behavior. As the central annotation succinctly puts it, "Users are 2x more likely to follow the crowd." This finding provides robust empirical evidence for the concept of social proof in the digital realm, suggesting that in the often overwhelming and information-rich environment of the metaverse, the attention of others serves as the primary heuristic for navigating and assigning value.[19] However, the more profound insight is delivered in the right panel, "Potency of Interaction Drivers." This section moves beyond the frequency of behaviors to analyze their consequence, asking a critical question: Are all interactions created equal in their ability to generate value? The comparative bar chart provides a decisive answer. It illustrates that a single Socially-Driven interaction contributes an average increase of +0.0031 to an artifact's High-Value Collective Attention (HVCA) Index. In stark contrast, an Intrinsically-Driven interaction contributes a mean increase of only +0.0012. The visual disparity in the bars, coupled with the summary text noting that socially-driven interactions are "2.5x more potent," reveals a critical asymmetry in the economy of attention. Not only is it more common for users to follow the crowd, but their act of following is also substantially more effective at amplifying the object's perceived significance. Synthesized, the two panels of Figure 4 illustrate a powerful, compounding feedback loop that lies at the heart of virtual veneration. This is a classic demonstration of preferential attachment, or the "Matthew Effect": objects that acquire an initial threshold of attention are not only more likely to attract further attention, but each subsequent wave of engagement is also more impactful, causing the object's perceived value to snowball in a path-dependent cascade.[20]

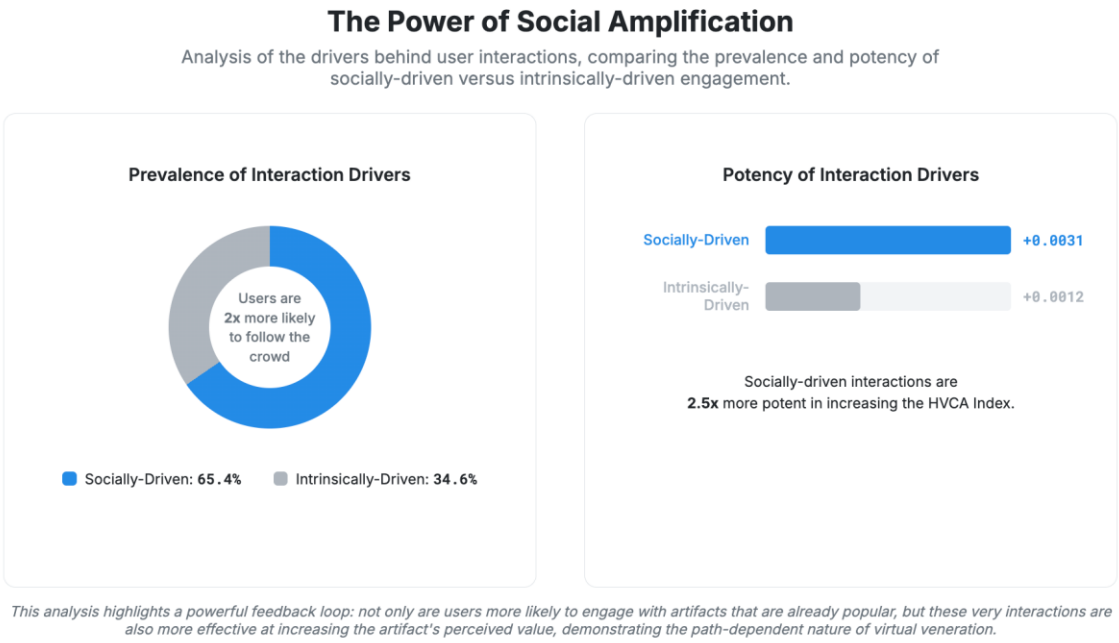

Figure 4. Analysis of interaction drivers.

The findings of this study provide robust, multi-faceted evidence for the process of "Virtual Veneration," demonstrating that the sacralization of cultural artifacts is a potent and analyzable phenomenon within the metaverse. Walter Benjamin's seminal 1936 essay remains a cornerstone of media theory, positing that mechanical reproduction withers the "aura" of an artwork by severing it from its unique existence in time and space, its physical history, and its "cult value." Our findings do not so much refute Benjamin as they do complicate and update his thesis for an era he could not have foreseen. The infinite reproducibility of a digital file would seem to be the ultimate fulfillment of his prediction. Yet, our research reveals the powerful emergence of a new, distinctly digital form of aura. Our qualitative theme, "The Aura of Scarcity," supported by the significant predictive power of the "Scarcity" variable in our behavioral analysis, points directly to the role of blockchain technology and NFTs. An NFT does not make the digital file itself scarce; it makes the token of ownership scarce. This token, with its immutable, publicly verifiable record of provenance on the blockchain, functions as a new kind of historical testimony. It becomes the digital object's unique "presence in time and space." The chain of transactions is the object's life story, its lineage. This "on-chain" history is a direct, albeit abstract, analogue to the physical object's history of being held in a king's collection or surviving a fire. This verifiable provenance reconstitutes aura's historical dimension. However, our research strongly suggests that this technologically-enabled uniqueness is only part of the story, and perhaps not the most important part. The regression analysis was unequivocal: "Community Narrative" was a far more powerful driver of sacralization than "Scarcity." This leads us to propose the concept of a "networked aura" or "social aura." This form of aura is not located in the object's singular history or material trace, but is distributed across the network of social interactions, stories, memes, and collective experiences that surround it. An object like the "EtherRock" NFT, a simple clipart of a rock, has no aesthetic complexity and a trivial creation story. Yet it achieved sacred status within the crypto community because of the powerful collective narrative woven around it—it was one of the first NFTs, a symbol of a historical moment, a digital pet rock for a new generation. Its aura is entirely social. Our finding that socially-driven interactions are both more frequent and more potent confirms this: an object becomes sacred because the network has collectively decided to pay attention to it, and this collective attention becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This networked aura is dynamic, constantly reinforced through every shared story and collective pilgrimage, making it potentially more resilient than the fragile physical aura Benjamin described.[16,17]

Our findings demonstrate that the metaverse is a veritable laboratory for observing Durkheimian processes: the "Architecture of Awe" explicitly codes the sacred-profane boundary, while "Ritualized Communitas" shows the centrality of collective rites in generating "collective effervescence". Yet, we must ask: what is the substance of this sacred? Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum, where signs no longer refer to any underlying reality, offers a crucial, conflicting perspective. The paper must confront this paradox: Is the collective effervescence around a multi-million dollar NFT a genuine moment of Durkheimian social solidarity, or is it a simulated ecstasy within a Baudrillardian hyperreality? We argue for the latter. The value of these digital artifacts is often completely untethered from any use-value or traditional aesthetic criteria; it is generated purely within a self-referential system of signs, beliefs, and market signals. The rituals are real, the emotional energy is palpable, but the object of veneration is a simulacrum. This gives rise to what we term the "hyper-sacred": a phenomenon that has all the emotional and behavioral markers of the sacred but is ontologically unmoored, an intense charge of collective belief circulating in a semiotic void. It is the perfect religion for the society of the spectacle.[18,19]

This study would be incomplete without a critical examination of the power structures that underpin these processes. Adopting a lens from Pierre Bourdieu, we can see NFT communities as new "fields" of cultural production, where possessing high-value digital assets constitutes a new form of symbolic capital. This is not

the utopian, anti-structural "communitas" described by Victor Turner; rather, it is a hyper-structural space that reinforces and even creates new digital elites. This leads to a necessary critique of "commodification as consecration." The paper finds that market price is a primary mechanism for marking an object as sacred. This is an alarming diagnosis of a cultural logic where market value has become synonymous with intrinsic worth. It is a system that inherently excludes those without capital and valorizes not craftsmanship, history, or shared humanity, but speculative potential. Furthermore, the "Community Narrative" that our study found to be so crucial is, in effect, a massive stream of uncompensated digital labor. Countless hours of work on Discord, Twitter, and other platforms are spent weaving the stories and generating the hype that consecrates an asset, with the financial benefits disproportionately captured by a small number of early investors or "whales." This process risks creating a new form of digital colonialism, where a Western-centric, market-driven logic of the sacred is exported globally, overwriting other cultural value systems. For cultural institutions, the message is not simply to "create more narrative." It is a call to engage with these new value systems critically and ethically. Instead of merely replicating the scarcity models of the NFT market, institutions could pioneer alternative models of digital value based on open access, community stewardship, and non-financial contribution.[19,20] They can become crucial spaces for fostering "digital provenance" (the history of a digital object) without resorting to "digital scarcity." They must ask themselves not "How can we make our digital objects sacred?" but "What kind of value do we want to create, and for whom?"

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the mechanisms behind the sacralization and valorization of digital artifacts in the metaverse. Our mixed-methods approach revealed that "Virtual Veneration" is a tangible phenomenon driven by a convergence of environmental design, social ritual, and technologically-mediated authenticity. We found that the narratives woven by a community are profoundly more potent in generating collective attention than an object's intrinsic qualities. However, the central contribution of this research is its critical reframing of these findings. We demonstrate that the metaverse is not simply a new repository for culture, but a crucible in which the very meaning of value is being actively and often problematically renegotiated. The emergent "networked aura" re-mystifies culture in the service of speculative markets, while the powerful rituals of community engagement often generate a "hyper-sacred" that consecrates the logic of capital itself. For institutions, artists, and developers, the challenge is not merely technical but deeply ethical: to engage with the powerful social and ritualistic dimensions of human experience in ways that foster a digital future that is not only technologically advanced but also culturally equitable, critical, and genuinely resonant.

5. References

1. Mecozzi A, Cornaglia M, Magagnoli F. Sustainable tourism and digital technologies: The REMEMBER project and the virtual museum of the port of Ravenna. Vis Anthropol. 2025; 38(1–2): 109–22.
2. Plemons AM, Spiros MC. Toward ethical digital practices: Guidelines for consent, accountability, and transparency in anthropology. Am J Biol Anthropol. 2025; 186(4): e70044.
3. Samouk S, Jamieson J. From roots to digital realms: Jordan Jamieson on revitalising Indigenous culture through archaeology and technology. Teach Anthropol. 2025; 14(1): 46–50.
4. Alqahtany HM, Al-Gehlani WAG. Indigenous (stone) towers in remote regions: cross cultural perspective Asir region of Saudi Arabia, the Caucasus and Sichuan of China. J Cult Herit Manag Sustain Dev. 2025; 15(3): 559–96.
5. Ramele Ramli R, Ali MH, Anas Abu Bakar A, Widyawati Madzhi N. Designation of Batu Arang, Selangor as the coal mining and geological heritage site: issues and challenges. J Cult Herit Manag Sustain Dev. 2025; 15(3):

441–61.
6. Situmorang SS, Situmorang M, Lumban Gaol LC, Pakpahan EN, Simangunsong LE. Medan as a multicultural city: ethnic and cultural dynamics in the late 19th century. Warisan. 2025; 6(1): 46–53.
7. Fernández Gallardo JA, Hernandez Rojas R. Impact of touristic sustainability on satisfaction with touristic services in a world heritage city. The case of the equestrian show in Córdoba (Spain). J Cult Herit Manag Sustain Dev. 2025; 15(4): 796–812.
8. Gumilar TI, Simatupang ECM. Variations of synonyms in the cultural context of the scripture of the Harry Potter series film by J.K. Rowling: a semantic study. J Sampurasun Interdiscip Stud Cult Herit. 2025; 11(1): 18–31.
9. Shenshen L, Jianyan L, Mudan X, Empowerment of AIGC technology in the innovation and implementation pathways of aesthetic education in university education institutions. Acta Interdisciplinary Science. 2025; 2(2): 67–70.
10. Alexakis E, Raikos A, Mavrepis P, Rifios A, Kyriazis D, Moropoulou A. Data strategies in the Holy Aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre: a holistic approach to management, visualization, and analytics. J Comput Cult Herit. 2025; (3746659).
11. Heritage Revitalization Cultural, Ruoying L, Xinyuan Z, Zizhen L. Research on the tourist experience of revitalizing the cultural heritage of the Macau hotel central. Glob Fashion Manag Conf. 2025; 2025: 455.
12. Shim H, Oh KT, Shi C-K. Exploring the social heritage metaverse for virtual heritage communication from multi end-user centered experiences. J Comput Cult Herit. 2025; 18(3): 1–36.
13. Kosev S. Interpretation of subjects in works of visual arts, through a combination of digital and classical media. KIN Journal. 2022; 8(2): 35–44.
14. Stefanova S. Assessment of the immovable Roman archaeological heritage for inclusion in tourism products (case study Rila - Pirin tourist region). KIN Journal. 2022; 8(2): 54–80.
15. Ramtohul A, Khedo KK. Augmented reality systems in the cultural heritage domains: a systematic review. Digit Appl Archaeol Cult Herit. 2024; 32(e00317): e00317.
16. Alkhasawneh A, Kowalska S. Digital transformation in Jordan and Poland - implications on the legal protection of cultural heritage and sustainable development. Stud Digit Herit. 2024; 7(2): 142–60.
17. Tongpaeng Y, Nobnop R, Wongwan N, Arayaphan W, Intawong K, Puritat K. Exploring hand gesture-based tangible interactions in mixed reality for ancient fabric exhibits: a digital humanities approach to enhancing cultural heritage preservation and visitor engagement. Digit Appl Archaeol Cult Herit. 2025; 37(e00414): e00414.
18. Mateeva V. Folklore research: Archiving, digitization, virtual exhibition, scientific publication of artifacts and collections from the cultural heritage. KIN Journal. 2025; 11(1): 23–57.
19. Kilis N, Martinopoulou E, Terzoglou G, Bozikas E, Sofikitis O, Lepentsiotis P, et al. AI tools for generating Digital Heritage Twins enhancing storytelling in educational games. Digit Appl Archaeol Cult Herit. 2025; 38(e00451): e00451.
20. Nikolova E, Ruseva V. Digitization of cultural and historical heritage and sustainable development of cultural tourism on the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast. DiPP. 2025; 15: 207–16.