Divination Reimagined: The Impact of Online Platforms on Traditional Beliefs among Chinese Netizens

Liangyu Peng[1,a,*]

[1]*University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2008, Australia*
a. sienna040214@gmail.com
*corresponding author

Abstract: The culture of divination has a large fan base from ancient times to the present day. Whether it's offline fortune-telling or online through the so-called "a few cards to tell your future fortune", people are fascinated by the ability to "foretell the future" brought by divination. With the help of social media, the fame of fortune-telling has skyrocketed. The enthusiasm of Chinese netizens for the current online craze for divination is only increasing, from seeking guidance from online gurus to consulting AIs themselves for divination and interpretation, and as the Internet continues to diversify, traditional forms of divination are transforming into digital formats. This paper will dissect the psychological and practical reasons for this craze by linking numerous sociological and psychological references, comparative arguments and real-world cases. Finally, from the perspective of future social development and cultural inheritance, the importance of balancing the secondary and tertiary dimensions is proposed, pointing out that online divination, as a tool to assist people in decision-making or provide directionality, should help individuals focus on reality and contribute to social progress.

Keywords: Divination, Psychology, Sociology, Digital Media.

1. Introduction

Divination has been practiced in a wide variety of cultures and can be traced back as far as historical records allow.[1] In the West, it is more famous to use the astrolabe or tarot cards for making predictions about the future or to interpreting a person's personality, etc., from an astrological perspective. In traditional Chinese culture, however, most diviners use the compass to make prophecies and interpretations based on classical books such as Zhouyi, with reference to an individual's birth date and eight characters of a horoscope. In the process of research people usually explore and try to make explanations from sociological and psychological perspectives. Interestingly, in today's world of materialism, there is a sizeable following of fortune-telling fanatics on social media in both China and the West. While China's education system places great emphasis on materialism and science, and the Chinese internet is heavily restricted by powerful firewalls that limit access to certain web pages, as well as blocking the use of divinatory words with leading meanings on social media platforms, there has been a noticeable increase in internet users' interest in divination due to the widespread digitization. This paper will analyze the current situation of online divination from a sociological and psychological perspective in two parts, using the methods of argument by example and argument by comparison to provide an in-depth explanation of the current significance

of online divination for Chinese netizens, as well as the reasons for its current situation, using practical examples. In the future, as the trend of online divination continues to rise, it is crucial for individuals to maintain a balance between their online and offline lives.

2. Status of Divination under the Internet

2.1. Reasons for the Large Number of Views and Clicks

The first extant manuals on how to practice character divination stem from the Ming and Qing dynasties.[2] Observation of the inquirer's physical characteristics through questioning, supplemented by specific divination tools. However, this often requires physical contact between the diviner and the inquirer. In summary, ancient Chinese divination was primarily conducted offline. The online platforms, while virtual, limit physical interaction and the observation of personal traits, including the diviner's identity. Nonetheless, internet-based divination practitioners have gained substantial popularity and followers. To explore the reasons behind this trend, it is essential to understand how online divination can reliably reveal insights into a person's character and future trajectories despite the absence of direct contact.

On the Internet, there are many fortune-telling articles, such as "Three cards to predict your next week's peach blossom", where the comments section is inundated with a multitude of voices concurring with the blogger and asserting that the outcomes of the blogger's fortune-telling align with their own recent experiences. While the Internet has provided public access to different social groups, it also raises the question of how bloggers can ensure that their content resonates with all viewers and reflects their individual situations. A psychological concept is thereby introduced: the Barnum effect. The term "Barnum Effect" (also known as the Forer effect) refers to the tendency for individuals to endorse personality descriptions that are so general in nature, that they could apply to anyone, as uniquely their own[3]. In addition, Gonthier and Thomassin's study concluded that individuals tend to interpret feedback from personality tests as accurately describing themselves, even when the feedback is completely inaccurate [4]. The findings of their study provide a plausible explanation for the variation in audience perceptions, as most viewers have the illusion that their situation is thoroughly probed.

At the same time, algorithms unintentionally exacerbate ideological segregation by automatically recommending content that aligns with an individual's beliefs.[5] This creates an "information cocoon" tailored to each user, leading those on the fringes or undecided to perceive widespread agreement due to the abundance of information and supportive comments reinforcing their views. As a result, it appears as though everyone concurs with the accuracy of the results. Mason and Budge[3]observed a tendency for people to experience events as directly referring to oneself. This results in an infinite loop, led by each user's constant curiosity and self-suggestion, with a constant internal affirmation of the accuracy of the divination results, which in turn pushes the user to keep browsing and to keep being pushed or involved in the divination.

2.2. Differential Blocking or Suppression of Divinatory Content by the Platforms Themselves

Currently, on Chinese social media platforms, young people are more inclined to choose divination methods from Western countries than traditional ones. In order to explore the specific reasons for this phenomenon, this part will compare Chinese character divination with archetypal tarot cards from Western countries as an example. The method of Chinese character divination appropriates the Chinese writing system in order to foretell good and bad fortune. In the course of a prediction, the querent usually selects a Chinese character spontaneously, either by writing it down, or by drawing randomly from a number of slips of paper prepared beforehand, with single characters written on it.

The diviner then offers an analysis according to a plethora of different techniques. Through this process, the diviner supposedly gains knowledge about a querent's past, present, and future[2]. The archetypal tarot reader goes through each card, combining the perspectives of the card itself with its placement perspective within the context of the question, and intuitively begins to interpret and ask additional questions[6].

Compared to tarot cards, Chinese character divination requires more interaction between the diviner and the person asking the question. Tarot cards, however, can be used to tap into a form of 'telepathy,' allowing the reader to draw cards on behalf of the seeker. In some divination situations, Tarot cards are more accurate for divination within half a year, and the answers given by divination beyond half a year will be vaguer. In contrast, Chinese character divination often involves observing the trend of a person's life or character shaping through the way the inquirer writes. Under the influence of the Internet, people's pace of life has gradually become faster, and they prioritize living in a high-tech world where interactions are rapid and fragmented As a result, people's patience decreases as they become accustomed to this fast-paced lifestyle [7]. In such context, simple and effective divination methods in the short term have a significant advantage in attracting inquirers. Social media provides the opportunity and platform for the promotion of quick divination, leading to its widespread influence.

3.   Analyze the Cause

3.1.   The Significance of Divination for Young People Today

3.1.1. Psychological Needs & Mechanisms that Promote Personal Adjustment

Divination aims to assist the individual seeking guidance in gaining insight into future events and current trends, as well as providing appropriate advice. The essence of the statement is to assist the individual posing the question in easing their internal discomfort and diminishing or eradicating their profound apprehension of the unfamiliar. Carleton[8] points out that   the worst part of a distressing situation is not knwoing. For example, when a man desires to reconcile with his former girlfriend, he may experience feelings of fear or uncertainty. As there is no way for the man to ascertain whether the other party shares similar sentiments, it is highly likely that he will turn to a fortune teller in order to gain insights into the so-called "woman's thoughts" and gather more information for his subsequent actions. In this scenario, the man seeks guidance from a fortune teller as a means of alleviating his fear of the unknown attitude of the other person.

Another reason why the querent perceives the divination result as highly reliable and accurate is due to "confirmation bias" from a psychological point of view. In their research, Yin et al. point out that "confirmation bias" refers to the tendency of humans to favour information that confirms their initial beliefs, assumptions and conjectures[9]. Kappes et al. found that when others "opinions are consistent with their own judgments, participants are more likely to consider the strength of others" opinions when assessing the accuracy of their own judgments[10]. Put simply, the questioner will be more willing to believe the content of the diviner's results that matches the questioner's psychological expectations, while ignoring certain things that do not match expectations, which often includes content that the questioner is unwilling to accept. When the results given by the diviner meet the expectations of the questioner many times, the diviner's credibility in the questioner's mind will greatly increase, thus increasing the likelihood of the questioner continuing to palce trust in the divination results in the future.

3.1.2. Help, Participation in Decision-making

Rickwood et al. noted in their research that as young people progress through adolescence they have a growing need for autonomy and independence, and increasingly believe they should be able to handle problems themselves[11]. When facing the future, especially the fear that arises from uncertainty, individuals tend to prioritize solving problems independently. In this case, content with direction or trend orientation, that is, divination, becomes their first choice. Participants entertain some intuitive representation that the divination statement is more reliable than other possible sources of information about a particular state of affairs [1]. It may be more accurate to think of divination as a technology that assists decision-making, or is at least involved in decision-making[12].

Meanwhile, for the diviner, the different forms of divination and the highly disparate ways in which they are used can illuminate the ways different people think about the future (among other things) [12]. Fortune tellers using different divination tools have certain commonalities when performing divinations: they typically request specific personal information and experiences from the seeker, then proceed to perform divinations based on a series of different questions, and finally draw conclusions. Many fortune tellers here will use the previously mentioned Barnum effect, using vague and popular phrases to subconsciously make customers believe that the divination results are very accurate. In fact, the essential reason for this kind of psychological suggestion lies in the reasoning conducted by individuals themselves. Boyer's research has showed that some of the processes involved in divination consist of automatic, largely unconscious inferences. Furthermore, conscious and deliberate reflections (e.g., "divination is true because") are essentially post hoc interpretations and justifications of prior intuitions[1]. Therefore, when the questioner decides to engage in divination, Zeitlyn's research suggests that the outcome of the divination process may already be predetermined. This is because individuals tend to seek solutions by asking questions, thereby eliminating potential options and avoiding confronting the underlying issue[12].

3.2. Young People Need to Find Help or a Sense of Belonging from the Internet

In the current era of rapid digitalization, online communication is the most representative. The internet allows adolescents to engage in relationships online that may not be available to them in real life[13]. Digital media allows users to reach a wide range of people by breaking away from the conventional form of communication through letters. It appears that communicating online allows people to enhance existing relationships as well as foster new ones with similar people that they may not encounter day to day[14]. A large part of a fortune teller's job is to be a listener. There are a large number of fortune tellers in the Wong Tai Sin Temple in Hong Kong, China, who rely on interpreting fortunes to help their clients solve various problems. During the one-hour fortune-telling process, people need to spend a certain amount of time elaborating on their experiences because of the need to interpret the fortunes. When it comes to the anxiety of the person asking the question, the fortune teller often acts as a 'psychological counselor,' constantly giving the person asking the question positive feedback and offering constructive suggestions for improving the situation through the course of their interaction. However, when economic or social conditions do not permit, online fortune-telling becomes the first choice. Research by Tovar et al. shows that expressing a certain image can solidify identity and belonging in a group[13]. A large number of fortune tellers take advantage of people's desperate search for emotional resonance and use live broadcasts on social media platforms to attract large numbers of people with the same experiences or needs, thereby expanding their customer base. For those seeking advice, this process allows them to meet more people with the same experiences, lower their guard, and find a less costly way to vent their emotions.

4.   How to Balance the Results of Online Divination with Reality

It is obvious that the arrival of Web 2.0 has not only made people's lives more convenient, but also accelerated the pace of life. The challenge that follows is how young people can effectively balance their real and online lives. The ability to "predict the future" brought about by fortune-telling has made more and more people unwilling to focus on finding the trajectory of real life. When encountered difficulties or challenges, individuals often subconsciously trun to fortune-tellers, and may even rely on them to make decisions for their lives. It is interesting to note that many people in these societies do not consider the involvement of supernatural forces in their lives, yet they place trust in divination practices[1]. Finding a solution that balances the interests of both parties is particularly crucial in addressing this issue.

In Boyer's study, it was noted that divination aids in decision-making, but it does not necessarily improve the quality of decisions[1]. Blindly following the advice of a fortune teller may lead individuals to make errors in their real-life decisions. Such occurrences are prevalent among fortune tellers who prioritize financial gain over ethical practice. In a Russian reality show about mysticism, Psychic Battle, a contestant from China (Li) claimed to be the reincarnation of a fox spirit. After becoming an overnight sensation through the show, she sold a large number of "fortune-telling candles" to her fans in China, claiming that by lighting the fortune-telling candles, they could have their wishes granted. During this time, she defrauded a large amount of money in the name of divination. After a joint report by her fans, Li was arrested by the Chinese police in May 2024 on suspicion of fraud and tax evasion. In fact, the pursuit of wealth is a very common and widespread need. In sociology, Festinger proposed the Social Comparison Theory, which explains the psychology of people through self-assessment and upward comparison[15]. However, as a soothsayer, Li uses her fame and expertise to make money through improper behaviour; as an enquirer, she blindly worships the influence or possible consequences in the real world brought about by divination due to her own desires. The wrongdoings of both parties have contributed to an imbalance between online and offline lives, which in turn has led to adverse effects.

With the development of digital technology, people's lives have become increasingly inseparable from social media. Nabi & Prestin point out that media use is a relatively common stress management strategy used by a wide range of individuals, when people are aware of their stress, media is a readily available resource to turn to for addressing those feelings[16]. Nowadays, with the ever-increasing cost of living in the three dimensions, people's mental pressure is increasing. Online divination provides an outlet for emotional release with minimal silent costs. As mentioned above, there are instances where the individual posing a question may not necessarily be seeking an answer, but rather requires a supportive listener or psychological counselor to assist in managing their emotions and facilitating self-exploration. It is worth noting that self-exploration is essential, but in the process of exploration, external help should be reduced appropriately, and one's own powerful potential should be believed in. Humans can often correct for powerful situational influences [17]. The more individuals delve into their own selves, the greater power they possess, a phenomenon recognized in psychology as a component of psychological flexibility.

Humans are an integral part of society, and their activities play a crucial role in shaping the formation of society. However, if everyone solely focuses on individual interests and neglects the collective well-being, it could potentially lead to significant challenges in the real world. One Japanese anime, Sword Art Online, posits the possibility that when people live in the virtual world, their bodies in the real world will be confined to hospital beds, surviving only through machines. If in the future more and more people rely on online help and focus on the benefits of the virtual world, the real world will gradually disappear, and human civilization will be difficult to sustain and pass on.

5.   Conclusion

It is foreseeable that, technological progress will continue in the future without cessation. At present, the enthusiasm of netizens for online divination on social media will still be popular for a long time, and there are still some limitations in the current research on divination. For example, many people with deep insights into the field of divination are not professional scholars and are unable to provide academic research explanations, or there are more so-called "divination masters" in society that have not yet been discovered. People still have a long way to go in exploring the traditional culture of divination. Not only is it necessary to distinguish between divination on and offline, but also to keep up with the times. However, as the craze for self-improvement intensifies, and as time passes and everyone's social experience accumulates, humanity's gaze will eventually return to reality, where human beings will find the answers and self-worth they seek and discover the meaning of their own lives. Humans are an integral part of society, as well as the "nutrients" that drive social progress and the carriers of civilization. Divination, as a supplementary tool, can indeed offer assistance to various users in different regions when necessary, with the aid of the Internet. However, in the future, humanity's focus will continue to be on reality and the promotion of social progress.

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