The construction of spectacular religious-political Rituals in Iran; A critical study

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Article Info	Abstract
	Background: Following the Islamic Revolution and the expansion of access to visual media, the use of this media in Shia rituals, such as religious gatherings (*hey'ats*), significantly increased. In recent years, a new form of Shia ritual, referred to as "public communities", has emerged which organized by cultural institutions. These communities differ markedly from traditional Shia-Iranian rituals and have established a distinct communicative domain. **Aims:** This study aims to critically examine these events by identifying their constitutive components and analyzing the nature of their mediatization. **Methodology:** Three events held in the Iranian calendar year 1401 were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach. These Shia-revolutionary performative rituals are categorized into two main domains: the "Public construction of the ritual" and the "construction of the presence and positioning of the subject". Their media representation is also shaped by two principal categories: the "transitionalization of the communication mode" and "ideological representation". **Findings:** Our findings indicate that the organization and media representation of these events produce a spectacular pseudo-ritual that significantly diverges from traditional Shia rituals in Iran. **Conclusion:** These events have been organized and represented in ways that prioritize spectacle, visibility, and media populism, thus enabling a transformation in ritual structures and indicating a growing tendency toward mediatization in Iran.

1. Introduction

Tradition and ritual have long constituted essential mechanisms for regulating human behavior and activity in traditional cultures, consolidated through custom and convention. Many cultural theorists consider ritual a traditional system rooted in symbolic and customary actions that have evolved and endured over time (Menlimuratova, 2021). Rituals are one of the social manifestations of religion, forming a mode of communication among individuals and aiming to generate meaning through actions such as prayer, worship, sacred ceremonies, and invocations. Within a ritual, the individual is not merely a passive observer but an active participant; the subject has the agency to choose the ritual and take part in it, thereby contributing to the process of meaning construction. A ritual is a form of voluntarily performed social behavior, purposefully designed to address serious matters of life or to achieve symbolic efficacy (Rothenbuhler, 2008: 70). Through ritual practice, a unity between mind and body is achieved, and a form of self-restraint is imposed upon the individual—an essential element of social life. Members of society must adapt to various norms and constraints, and rituals act as facilitators of this adaptation.

Moreover, rituals function to bond members of a group together, reassert collective and social boundaries, and ultimately reinforce social cohesion. Through such forms of communication, community members become aware of their shared social heritage and are connected to their past and history. Rituals also play a crucial role in generating a sense of communal joy and solidarity, especially during times of hardship and collective suffering (Durkheim, 2021; Shamohammadi & Pasalari Behjani, 2012). By the rising of modernity, some thinkers—such as David Chidester—have argued that in modern societies, the dependence on shared religious believes and the rituals that express them has weakened or become meaningless. This approach views rituals as authoritarian, unquestionable, and superstitious. However, the continued persistence of rituals across diverse societies has demonstrated that they play communicative roles, such as reducing anxiety and insecurity brought about by modern life, generating emotional intensity, and offering moments of freedom from everyday life constraints (Somiala, 2021: 52–54).

In addition to their historical embeddedness, rituals are also marked by a strong spatial dimension. As Walter Benjamin notes in his theory of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, the authenticity and traditional value of an artwork are closely tied to the atmosphere and sense of presence it evokes in a specific space. From his perspective, religion defines the contextual value of an artwork—it`s worth lies not in its visibility but in its ritual function. For example, in ancient Greece, the unique value of an artwork was shaped and affirmed by ritual practice. Thus, the significance of the work resided in its essence, not its exhibition; in other words, ritual meaning construction

is inherently place-based, and mechanical reproduction strips it of this ritual value (Benjamin, 1969: 222–224).

Communication among subjects within a particular space, centered on shared believes and actions, rises what is known as "ritual communication". As James Carey explains, "The ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time. It emphasizes, not the act of imparting information, but the representation of shared believes" (Carey, 1975: 6-9). This form of communication is associated with concepts such as participation, voluntary solidarity, communal engagement, and shared faith. By considering ritual communication, the aim is not the instrumental use of communication for message dissemination but rather the internal fulfillment of the participants. The ritual model, therefore, seeks to reflect the external interpretations of observers more than the explicit intentions of senders and receivers (McQuail, 2003; Carey, 1975; 1992).

One prominent form of communication within religious institutions is ritual communication, which has been extensively practiced by Shia Muslims. Through the organizing religious ceremonies such as Friday prayers, Arbaeen processions, commemorations of the Prophet's family, local religious gatherings (*hey'ats*), and passion plays (*ta'ziyeh*), Shia communities—particularly in Iran—have promoted ritual communication. Among the most significant of these, is the mourning ceremony for Imam Hussein during the month of Muharram and on the Day of Ashura.

Following the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of a Shia Islamic state in Iran, greater emphasis was placed on Shia rituals. Numerous religious events—such as the birth and martyrdom anniversaries of the Imams—were formally integrated into the official calendar. In certain instances, even events grounded in weak historical evidence or derived from Sunni traditions were institutionalized as recognized occasions for conducting religious rituals.

Simultaneously, the two main mass media—radio and television—came under the control of the ruling political system, ushering in a new phase in the relationship between media and religion. Religious content in various formats became a staple of state media, facilitating the media representation of numerous Shia rituals, including both mourning and celebratory ceremonies. In this context, audio-visual technologies were widely integrated into Shia rituals as tools for propagation and representation.

This process has often been approached from an instrumentalist perspective, in which media are viewed as neutral conduits capable of carrying any type of content without inherent meaning (Hood, 1972, cited in Christians, 2010: 91). According to this view, media technologies serve merely as tools for realizing human objectives—both individual and collective—and their value is determined by non-

technological aims (Toosi et al., 2024). Consequently, the products of media technologies are neither essential nor intrinsic (Christians, 2010).

However, even among proponents of instrumentalism, there is recognition that media impose certain conditions and constraints. The key difference between them and essentialists lies in the former viewing media as tools while still acknowledging the need to select formats suitable to the nature of religious messages (Hosseini, 2008, cited in Fahimi-Far, 2014: 36). Essentialists, by contrast, believe that each media technology has an intrinsic nature, reflecting the core values of the civilization and cultural context from which it emerged. From this standpoint, media are not neutral means but are infused with the essence of modernity and Western civilization. This perspective posits a one-way relationship in which technology shapes society (Nosraty et al., 2025) and renders its users passiveness. If technology is active and the user is passive, it will have important ethical implications (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2021) that is the realm of philosophers and technologists to address.

Because media technologies originated in secular Western contexts, this school of thought argues that the messages they carry are inherently secular, making them unsuitable for conveying religious concepts. A commonly cited example supporting this claim is the century-long history of global cinema: if cinema were capable of effectively conveying religious content, a powerful religious movement in film would have emerged by now. The absence of such a movement, they argue, demonstrates the medium's incapacity to communicate religious messages (Sālek, 1998, cited in Bichranlou & Haji-Mohammadi, 2011: 33).

In recent years, a growing inclination toward the mediatization and spectacularization of religious rituals in Iran has become increasingly evident, particularly through certain public gatherings. These events appear to be evolving into a new model of ritual organization. A specific genre of ritual has emerged within the Shia-revolutionary sphere in Iran—so-called "public communities"—supported by state-aligned cultural and media institutions.

These events differ from traditional Shia rituals in various ways, including their methods of organizing and engagement with media. Nonetheless, they maintain certain formal similarities with traditional ceremonies, such as the presence of *maddahs* (religious eulogists), Islamic themes, the fusion of religion with revolutionary ideology, and large-scale participation by religious people. These gatherings are significant, not only in terms of human participation and political-ideological meaning, but also in terms of media representation and their relation to Iran's traditional Shia culture.

Notably, these events reflect a dual approach to media: on one hand, they adopt the instrumentalist view that considers media as neutral means for representation; on the other hand, the actual media products

are shaped by the logic and nature of the media themselves. As such, these gatherings can be considered examples of constructed Shia-revolutionary spectacular rituals—rituals that are defined more by their media structures than by their traditional religious essence.

This study, therefore, seeks to identify and analyze the constituent elements of these constructed rituals and the ways in which they are represented in media. An interpretive and critical approach is necessary to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these events.
The study addresses two central research questions:

1. What are the constructive elements and components of Shia-revolutionary spectacular rituals?
2. How are Shia-revolutionary spectacular rituals represented in media?

2. Literature review
Given the novel nature of this study, there is limited prior research that directly addresses this specific topic. However, a review of existing literature on the relationship between *religious rituals* and *media* provides useful contextual background.

Maqsoudi and Alipour (2011) examined the use of symbols and rituals in Iranian state media and how these contribute to legitimizing the political system. The findings suggest that the national broadcasting intentionally uses culturally accepted symbols and rituals to enhance the legitimacy of the ruling system, strengthen the connection between citizens and political leaders, and promote public acceptance of governmental authority.

Mahdipour (2013), in a study *on Ramadan Television Program* analyzed both successful and unsuccessful experiences in religious programming and ultimately proposed a redefinition of the media–religion relationship to better serve the objectives of the Islamic Republic. Key findings include identifying tensions between religion and media, emphasizing dialogic communication, careful use of aesthetic elements, avoidance of pluralism, and the strategic construction of media rituals. The author concludes that the success of such constructed religious or quasi-religious rituals depends on two essential conditions: conformity with Islamic law (to avoid provoking religious objections) and public acceptability (to ensure audience participation).

Khaniki and Farzalian (2014) explored the motivations of audiences for watching religious television programs, especially those centered on rituals, and the extent to which such content influences religiosity. Their findings reveal a generally low interest in watching such programs, though a moderate positive correlation exists between viewership and levels of religiosity. The most cited reason for disinterest was the perceived monotony and lack of innovation in these broadcasts.

Rowshandel Arbatani et al. (2015) examined whether media can

exert cultural dominance in the representation of religious themes and how to prevent identity dissonance in mediatized rituals. They proposed a model based on a *fitrah-oriented* (innate-nature-based) approach, emphasizing a semantic shift from "audience" to "pilgrim" and from "mediatization" to "servitude."

Lundby (2020) suggest that these images often present a distorted representation of Muharram rituals, portraying Islam and Muslims as "the Other." Themes identified in this visual discourse include the violence of mourners, male dominance, the passive role of women, collective power, and the association of Shiite symbols with these traits.

Maher and Keshavarz (2017) assessed how modern media affect religiosity and processes of secularization. The results indicate that while live broadcasting of religious rituals tends to have negative effects, transforming religious content into media-friendly formats can yield both positive and negative outcomes. For devout viewers, such programs may foster spiritual enthusiasm and awareness, while for secular audiences, they may serve merely as entertainment.

Zokaei and Eslami (2020) explored how the Arbaeen pilgrimage was portrayed in Iranian media and the discourses that emerged around it. They identified six distinct discourses—*pilgrimage, phenomenon, uprising, march, walking,* and *travel*—each offering a different narrative frame. These discourses reflect diverse influences, including religious, academic, political, social, artistic, and economic perspectives.

3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on two key concepts: "society of the spectacle" and "mediatization". Guy Debor's theory of the society of the spectacle is one of the classic and significant notions in celebrity culture studies. This concept describes a media-driven, consumerist society shaped by the production and consumption of images, commodities, and spectacular events (Kellner, 2020). In articulating this notion, Debor refers that spectacle and the society built around it are not causeless phenomena. Rather, they are consequences of existing economic and political relations in modern societies. This outcome, in turn, influences all social institutions—audiences, commodities, culture, communication, media, time, and space. According to Debor, "The concept of spectacle unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena. The spectacle, understood in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a mere collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debor, 2019: 4). Debor formulates the essence and philosophy of spectacle in a reciprocal relation: "Everything that appears is good; everything good will appear" (Ibid: 5). Spectacle is a defining feature of modern society, where goals have been emptied of intrinsic value and subordinated to development;

the only goal of spectacle is itself (Ibid: 5–6). From his perspective, spectacle operates like a permanent opiate war that seeks to sedate social subjects and distract the mind from the vital responsibilities of life.

The counterpart of spectacle is the spectator—a viewer and active consumer within a social system marked by conformity, satisfaction, and commodified difference. The society of the spectacle distributes its products through cultural and consumerist mechanisms—services, entertainment, advertising, and media culture—thus extending commodification into other social domains. As media technologies expand, individuals are increasingly influenced by a multimedia culture. Spectacle gains a seductive power for the newly situated inhabitants of media-consumer societies, captivating them in a world of entertainment, information, and consumption. When the real world is reduced to simple images, these images become real entities and motivating forces for a kind of trance-like behavior. Consequently, media spectacles and consumer culture shape and mediate everyday experience (Kellner, 2020).

The second key concept is mediatization. This concept refers to the long-term interplay between processes of media transformation and broader social and cultural change. Media are playing vital role in contemporary human communication and have evolved into a structurally determinative force concerning other societal institutions such as culture and religion (Campbell, 2016).

Hjarvard argues that mediatization occurs when media institutions dominate social order and impose their media logic. This media logic refers to the institutional and technological methods of media, especially how media distribute material and symbolic resources and develop through formal and informal rules. Media logic affects not only the form of communication but also the nature and function of social relations, including those between senders, content, and receivers. From this viewpoint, mediatization is a twofold process of late modernity: on one hand, media emerge as autonomous institutions which their logic compel other institutions to conform. On other hand, media are increasingly integrated into those very institutions. Media are not merely technologies selected at will by organizations, parties, or individuals. A significant portion of media influence stems from the fact that media are integrated to the function of other institutions and have compelled other institutions to adapt to media logic, to some extent. At the same time, media constitute both a part of the societal and cultural fabric and an independent institution that coordinates mutual interactions among other cultural and social entities (Hjarvard, 2008).

Mediatization is one of the main reasons behind the formation and institutionalization of celebrity culture in society. The mediatization of the public sphere may affect significantly on the creation of media personas and the subjective social value of celebrity status. It is

therefore plausible to hypothesize that greater mediatization of social domains may intensify the celebrity culture (Driesens, 2022).

The latent implications of the mediatization concept can be linked to the idea of mediatized rituals. Today, many rituals are adorated and legitimized through media representations, and media function as independent institutions interacting with ritual-based institutions such as religion. The presence of cameras at ritual events indicates the significance of those events. However, perspectives on the relationship between media and ritual differ. Some view media as mere representations of rituals, others believe that the widespread social diffusion of rituals depends on media, while others interpret media consumption and user engagement as ritualistic acts (Grimes, 2012).

Katz and Dayan argue that the media do not merely represent rituals ad hoc, but rather certain events are institutionally framed and mediated by mainstream media in such a way that they fulfill the structural and functional roles of traditional rituals. Therefore, mass media have altered rituals, as rituals must now be structured in ways that communicate their core functions effectively through media (Katz & Dayan, 1992, quoted in Rothenbuhler, 2008: 149). In this context, audiences of mediatized rituals become surrogate participants, defining their relationship to the ritual passively and without physical presence (Grimes, 2012). Similarly, in the context of religious rituals, representative religion replaces participatory religion, where active religious practice, based on mutual recognition and interaction, builds and sustains a sense of belonging. In contrast, representative religion entails a passive form of religiosity that merely enables collective religious identity without interactive engagement (Lundby, 2020).

Technology can reshape society by transforming communication, enhancing access to information, and automating labor. It influences cultural norms, redefines human relationships, and shifts power structures, often accelerating both progress and inequality across economic, political, and social dimensions of life (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2022). The technological nature of media also significantly influences the mediatization of rituals. Media possess a material bias, and their technological constraints shape new forms of rituals that are no longer bound to specific times and places. Instead, mediatized rituals must adapt to the prevailing criteria of media practice—visibility, entertainment value, and engagement—so that surrogate participants may benefit from them. Thus, mediatized rituals bring about changes in traditional rituals across societies. From this perspective, the transmission of rituals as mediated messages within mass societies introduces risks such as media saturation and the transformation of participatory engagement into mere spectatorship (Chaney, 1983).

4. Methodology

Based on the objectives and research questions, this study employs qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is one of the classic methods for analyzing textual data. A key feature of this method is the use of categories, which are often connected with theory or derived from theoretical models (Flick, 2020; Bauer, 2000).

The technique of this method is based on the categorization and coding of various elements in the text to extract its characteristics and understand their exact meaning (Lickiewicz, 1987, as cited in Bonville et al., 2022: 238).

One of the approaches used in qualitative content analysis is the conventional approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is also employed in this study. This approach is used in the case that literature on the issue is limited. Another feature of this approach is obtaining direct and explicit data through the study and evaluation of the text, without imposing prior theory. After repeatedly studying the data and obtaining an initial analysis of the texts, the foundation for creating codes is established. Based on similarities and differences, categorization is then conducted (Iman & Noushadi, 2011).

Open coding is used in this study. Open coding refers to the classification and naming of concepts in qualitative data analysis, where the researcher proposes codes by evaluating and questioning the data (Bebi, 2020: 860).

The population of this study consists of Shiite-revolutionary gatherings held in Iran. From this, three gatherings—"Salam/Hi Commander", "Daughters of Haj Qasem", and "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān"/ Daughters of Iran Homeland —were selected as the study sample using the "purposive sampling" method. Purposive sampling is a widely used technique in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2013). In this non-probability method, the study of the research sample is based on selection criteria derived from the research objectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2018: 194). The general characteristics of the research sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. General characteristics of the research sample

Row	Event name	Date of holding	Venue
1	Salam Farmandeh/ Hi Commander	June 5, 2022	Azadi Stadium (100,000-capacity) - Tehran
2	Daughters of Haj Qasem Gathering	January 5, 2023	Azadi Stadium (12,000-capacity) - Tehran
3	Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān Gathering	December 17, 2022	Martyr Heydarian Stadium - Qom

Given the relatively long gap between the holding of these gatherings and the initiation of this study, all accessible and relevant data related to these events, such as photos, videos, and news broadcasts spread on mass media and social media, were collected to gain a

comprehensive understanding. The data were analyzed in the light of the research questions, focusing on aspects such as the method of organizing the ceremonies and the media construction of rituals within the theoretical and critical framework of the "Society of the Spectacle" and "Mediatization".

5. Findings
Based on the objectives and research questions, the results of this study are categorized into two main axes, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Main categories and subcategories of the study

Row	Axis	Main categories	Subcategories
1	Construction components of Shia-revolutionary spectacular rituals	Construction of rituals in public settings	•Irrelevant venue •Lack of environmental symbolism •Inappropriate ritual context
		Construction of presence and participation of the subject	•Construction of gendered heterogeneity •Construction of emotional participation •Construction of the subject's theatrical position
2	Media construction of Shia-revolutionary spectacular rituals	Transitionalization of the communication mode	•Broadcasting music videos •Musical performance
		Ideological representation	•Mass representation •Specific representation

5.1. Components of the construction of Shia-revolutionary spectacular rituals
In this section, the components involved in constructing Shia-Revolutionary spectacular rituals are examined and analyzed under two main categories: (1) The environmental construction of rituals, and (2) The construction of the subject's presence and participation. To understand these components, this analysis considers how the gatherings were organized—focusing on the form of the ceremonies, the presence of participants, and the relationship between the ritual form and the elements of ritual communication.

5.1.1. Construction of rituals in public settings
The first component is *construction* of the rituals in the publics settings. The manner in which these gatherings are held is considerable, because it reflects a transformation in the traditional form of ritual performance. Elements such as the physical setting (including the venue, seating arrangements, and mise-en-scène) and temporal factors (such as the calendar occasion) may initially appear technical or superficial, yet each carries symbolic meanings that contribute to the ritual's construction.

A defining characteristic of any ritual is its *venue*, as the essence of a ritual is semantically intertwined with its location. Historically, religious places—such as mosques and churches—were purposefully designed for the performance of religious rites, and it would seem inappropriate to hold non-religious events in such settings. Thus, the ritual and its venue are mutually reinforcing, and separating the two can alter the ritual's identity and meaning. The ritual's dependence on the location becomes part of both its performative process and its symbolic interpretation.

In the case studies examined, the venues included indoor sports arenas and football stadiums—spaces that bear no intrinsic semantic connection to religious-political rituals. These venues, designed for sporting events like football matches and fan gatherings, do not traditionally embody a spiritual or religious function, nor are they customarily used for religious or quasi-religious ceremonies. This spatial shift in the staging of religious rituals may have practical motivations, such as accommodating larger crowds, but a primary reason appears to be the facilitation of enhanced shooting and visual spectacle. The architectural design of such venues naturally supports the visual documentation and broadcasting of mass gatherings.

For instance, the *"Salam Farmandeh"* gathering was held in Tehran's Azadi Stadium, which contains 100,000 seats. Holding a religious-political event in this setting, without any sporting context, highlights the organizers' focus on the venue's large capacity and its suitability for multi-angle visual representation. Likewise, the *"Daughters of Haj Qasem"* gathering was held at the 12,000-seat Azadi Indoor Stadium, and the *"Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān"* event was held at Shahid Heydarian Stadium in Qom.

Figure 1. A wide shot of the ceremony held at the Azadi Stadium– "Salam Farmandeh" gathering

The irrelevant venue for the studied gatherings is reflected in the form and mise-en-scène of the research sample, resulting in a type of "lack of setting symbolism". One of the characteristics of rituals is the presence of influential and dense symbols. Ritual symbols are powerful

and influential, and they go beyond the ordinary use of language, leading to events (Rothenbuhler, 2008). Part of the ritual symbols are used in the venue and mise-en-scène of the ritual, creating their meanings individually and collectively as part of the ritual's symbols, which have been constructed and reproduced throughout history. Therefore, a significant part of the meaning-making process in any ritual is created through environmental symbols.

By environmental symbols, we mean objects used by the subject in performing the ritual. For example, in Shia congregations, symbols such as black cloth, banners, images of sacred places, and others are used to decorate the ritual venue. These symbols not only link a meaningful connection to the ritual, but also a specific and direct connection to the Shia calendar. In the studied gatherings, a few symbols were used to decorate the venue. Banners were among the most frequently used items to decorate the gathering, sending a direct message to participants and audiences, as no historical-artistic or metaphorical meaning could be assigned to them. These included images of martyr Soleimani, supreme leader statements, images of veiled women with flowers on their faces, the prayer "faraj" (God May Haisen the reappearance of Imam Mahdi), the title of the gathering, and the poem "Eshgh janam, Imam Zamanam" (My Love, Mahdi) through the banners. Additionally, in the decoration of the gatherings, large flowers, large screens, and small white lights were used in the background to create a symbolic representation. It is important to note that the symbolism of these elements lacks a historical context, as these symbols were merely created to organize these gatherings and have no ritual significance.

In contrast, symbols used in various rituals have historical-cultural roots and form a part of the identity of that ritual. In the "Salam Farmandeh" gathering, some spectator stands had banners reading "Eshgh janam, Imam Zamanam", "Salam Farmandeh", "Allahumma ajil li waliyyika al-faraj", and a large flag of Islamic Republic of Iran. In the "Daughter of Haj Qassem" gathering, purple banners with phrases like "All Iranian girls are my daughters", "The way of Haj Qassem", "Hijab guarantees the piety of society", "The way of Haj Qassem, the way of teaching", "The great gathering of Haj Qassem's daughters", "Image of a veiled woman with flowers on her face", "Image of a less veiled woman with the English name Martyr Soleimani", and "Images of Martyr Soleimani" were observed. In the "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān" gathering, only a large screen behind the performers displayed the Iranian flag image.

Figure 2. The coverage of the event with a banner featuring the image of Martyr Soleimani– 'Daughters of Haj Qassem' gathering

Another feature of the environmental construction of these gatherings is their 'ritual inappropriateness.' These gatherings, which do not root in Iranian Shia history, have been constructed recently. Rituals, on the other hand, are a form of traditional behavior, and there are always elements in rituals that become standardized beliefs, shaped in a specific style, and are relatively fixed and official. This indicates that a ritual is something repeatable, meaning that others have performed it in the same way in the past. The credibility of a ritual is not enforced by its agent, meaning that the ritual is somewhat a pre-designed scenario (Rothenbuhler, 2008). However, these gatherings do not have a Shia calendar-related occasion and are based on current events in Iran, such as the martyrdom of General Soleimani, the protests of fall 2021, etc. For example, the 'Salam Farmandeh' gathering was held on the afternoon of June 5, 2022, with no corresponding calendar event, and coincided with the day of support for the families of prisoners. The 'Daughters of Haj Qasem' gathering was held in 2021 and 2022, coinciding with the martyrdom of General Soleimani, but in support of women's hijab. The Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān gathering was held for the first time on December 8, 2022; although it was considered a celebration during the birthday of Hazrat Zaynab (pbuh), due to its simultaneous occurrence with the protests of fall 2021 in Iran, it can be seen as a response to those protests.

The contextual factors have provided an important arena for constructing rituals, which, in addition to lacking many of the components of Shia religious rituals, were solely aimed at the formation of a specific gathering and its display. Therefore, the objectives of organizing these new rituals were not focused on the future, but rather on addressing the needs or achieving the goals of the organizers through factors such as the venue, symbols, arrangement, and the timing of the gathering being prioritized secondarily.

Figure 3. Announcement of the date of 'Salam Farmandeh' gathering by *Fars News Agency*

5.1.2. Construction of presence and participation of the subject

The second category of the components of constructing Shia-Revolutionary spectacular rituals is the "Construction of Presence and Participation of the Subject". Generally, the subject is the most important and central element in the formation of rituals and ceremonies; without the subject, no social action can occur. Therefore, the subject is an inseparable element of rituals; however, the way the subject participates in rituals varies depending on the cultural and historical context. Additionally, each subject participating in a ritual has specific roles and duties that consciously and voluntarily are accepted. There is always an element of awareness and voluntary participation in rituals. People consciously participate in rituals related to specific events, where they are either the performers of the ritual or participants (Rothenbuhler, 2008). The way of subject participation, the gender of subjects, and the relation of subjects to each other are some of the components that define the subject's relationship to a ritual. The findings of this part of the research show that subjects are either in the position of the performer or the participant in these gatherings, and the gender ratio between performers and participants, emotional participation, and the theatrical positioning have been constructed. One of the subjective components of these gatherings is the "Construction of Heterogeneous Gender Relations". In Shia rituals, such as the commemoration of the Ashura rituals, a distinction is made between the participation of men and women. Typically, men are closer to the center of the ceremony, such as the podium, and thus play a central role in the performance of the ritual. The male speaker or reciter is positioned

before male participants, and there is gender homogeneity. However, women are positioned away from the center of the ceremony, and if audio-visual technologies are used, their participation is minimal. Although in processions, such as the Arbaeen march, 22nd of Bahman, and Quds Day, there is mixed participation, what makes the gender heterogeneity in these gatherings significant is their similarity to Shia rituals. In the studied gatherings, the gender homogeneity present in Shia rituals has changed, and a heterogeneous gender relation has been constructed, which is significant in two ways: first, the presence of both women and men together, and second, the heterogeneity between the performer and the participant. For instance, in the "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān" gathering, the male reciter (Mohammad Hossein Hedayat) performed a song or eulogy for the exclusively female participants, who were in various age groups such as children, teenagers, young adults, and middle-aged women. These women were at the core of participation in the event. Similarly, in the "Salam Farmandeh" gathering, performers like Abdolreza Helali, Hossein Taheri, Abu Zar Rouhi, and Hamed Soltani performed in front of a mixed audience of men and women. In the "Daughters of Haj Qassem" gathering, a mix of male and female performers were present alongside female participants. This new gender combination of the gatherings is purely performative, as it creates a public conflict in perception, drawing more attention to these events. The traditional Shia cultural norms in Iran religious rituals stresses on the gender centrality of men in execution of rituals. The sudden disruption of this long-established norm has created a greater level of attention toward these gatherings.

Figure 4. Presence of the male reciter and female participants- "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān" Gathering

Figure 5. Family presence of participants- "Salam Farmandeh" Gathering

Another subjective component of the studied gatherings is the "Construction of Emotional Participation". The participation of members in a ritual depends on their position, but the ritual is performed through the various forms of members participation. Each type of participation is predefined, as a ritual is never constructed at the moment of its execution (Rothenbuhler, 2008); therefore, the subject is aware of the forms of participation before entering the ritual. Additionally, the participation of members serves the purpose of

performing the ritual and its main goal, which is the creation and reproduction of meaning. However, in the studied gatherings, no form of participation was clearly defined, as, unlike in Shia rituals, there were no specific actions corresponding to the calendar event, and the subject had not previously encountered such ceremonies. A significant portion of this participation was limited to the mere presence of the subject; the subject was present but did not engage in any pre-determined or organized action, which contrasts with one of the key features of any ritual: the active participation of the subject (Hoover & Lundby, 2010). Among the few actions of the participants, a large part of it occurred during the execution of the ceremony, and about the performers, falling into bodily, expressive, and objective forms of participation. Bodily participation relates to participants using parts of their bodies, typically through hand gestures (either open or clenched). Expressive participation was manifested in actions such as singing along with the performed/played anthem, screaming, or whistling. Objective participation refers to the use of various objects by the subject in the process of participation, such as lighting up a mobile phone, playing a fanfare, waving flags, or displaying images of the supreme leader or martyr Soleimani on their phones.

Figure 6. Participants using flags and images of martyrs– "Salam Farmandeh" Gathering

In the "Salam Farmandeh" gathering, the actions of participants included singing along with the songs, saluting when reciting the part "Salam Farmandeh", turning on mobile phone lights, waving flags with the names of the Imams, clapping, whistling, and playing cheering horns. In the "Daughters of Haj Qassem" gathering, participants waved various flags, turned on mobile phone lights, screamed, clapped, and displayed images of Martyr Soleimani. Finally, participants in the "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān" gathering joined in by singing along with the chorus of the song, raising their hands, screaming, and turning on their mobile phone lights. Such participation, which had an enthusiastic, emotional, and exciting aspect, was only effective for the

studied gatherings, and there is a possibility that it might not be used in similar gatherings. Therefore, this type of participation can be considered as "momentary participation," where the reasons behind these actions are unclear, and at the same time, in contrast to what might traditionally include elements like joy or mourning, it creates joyous actions with underlying meanings like support, approval, and advocacy.

Fihure 7. Participation using the flag and image of Martyr Arman Ali-Verdi- Gathering "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān"

The final subjective component of the studied events is "the construction of a theatrical situation for the subject". The performers in these events are placed in a specific, separate position from the participants, which is partly due to the location of these events (as mentioned earlier). The structural layout of football stadiums and sports saloons follows the model of ancient Greek and Roman theaters. The ancient Greek theatres (Theatron) were located in a bowl-shaped space between two hills, providing seating for the audience to watch the events occurring below. After Rome conquered Greece, they adapted many of Greece's theatrical traditions, making physical changes to the theatres, including taller stages for better viewing (Perry, 2013). Thus, in both ancient theatres and public performances, the audience or participants were placed higher up and surrounding the stage, with the performer positioned in the center of attention.

The architectural similarity between stadiums, sports halls, and ancient theatres creates a comparable situation for the positioning of subjects. In this setup, the performers are at the center of the stage while the spectators sit in surrounding stands, viewing the performers from above. However, in Shiite rituals, the performer is typically situated higher than the participants, with minimal distance between them. For example, in Shiite congregations, the speaker or eulogist sits on a pulpit higher than the participants.

In the studied events, the positioning of the performers differs based on the structure and architecture of the venues. The performers are either at the center of the sports field or in the initial part of the stadium,

while the participants are placed in the stands as spectators. The distance between the subjects is greater. In the "Salam Farmandeh" event, the performers stood at the center of the grass field on a stage, while the participants were in the spectator stands. In the "Daughter of Haj Qassem" event, the performers were on a stage set up in the arena, and the participants were in the stands. In contrast, in the "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān" event, the performers were placed at the initial section of the event, while the participants were scattered throughout the stadium, including on the plastic chairs set up on the ground.

This positioning of the subjects has two implicit meanings. First, the performers, often reciters or singers, are placed at the center of attention, creating dependency and passivity among the participants, as there is no predefined, active role for them. Second, the positioning of the subjects in this way is a theatrical display meant to maximize visibility and attract more attention to the event. The centrality of the performer and the distance between them and the participants emphasize the importance of the performer and create a sense of separation in the audience's minds. On the other hand, the collective presence of the participants in the outer section of the venue, alongside the few performers, creates a sense of exclusivity for the performers and a sense of mass participation for the audience.

Figure 8. Presence of participants in the spectator stands and the presence of performers on stage– "Salam Farmandeh" Gathering

The overall environmental and subjective components of the studied gatherings show that the structure of holding Shiite-revolutionary rituals has changed compared to traditional Shiite rituals. These changes are aimed at using these gatherings for the media and performative goals of the organizers; in other words, these gatherings have turned into performative objects, with the ultimate goal being visibility and gaining more attention. In addition to the construction of environmental and subjective components for the events, the media

mechanisms of these gatherings are also important, which will be discussed in the second part of the findings.

5.2. Media construction of Shiite-revolutionary performative rituals
In the second part of this research, the media construction of Shiite-revolutionary performative rituals was analyzed in two main categories: the transformation of the form of communication and the ideological representation. In this section, how the communicative space of the studied gatherings has changed and how the visual representation of these gatherings occurs is crucial.

5.2.1. Transitionalization of the mode of communication
The first category of media construction of Shiite-revolutionary performative rituals is the transformation of the form of communication. In rituals and ceremonies, the form of communication is ritualistic, process-oriented rather than product-oriented (Donzbach, 2019), and this process, through the participation of members, leads to the creation and reproduction of meanings. Therefore, it is clear that in Shiite rituals, the nature of communication has been ritualistic and aimed at creating meaning. By utilization of imaging and sound recording tools in Shiite rituals, the process of creating meaning has turned into transferable media messages. As a result, a new communicative space has been formed, where ritual communication has transformed into transmissive communication. In the transmissive model, the sender's orientation, the transmission of the message, and the receiver's orientation, the cognitive processing of the message, are central (McQuail, 2003). Based on this, audiences have emerged around media messages (audio and visual) for Shiite rituals, who are not physically present at the ceremonies but can easily access and utilize these products, contributing to the growth of "non-ritualistic religiosity", a form of religiosity in which believers may have strong religious beliefs but do not participate much in certain religious rituals (Kowsari, 2008: 176). On the other hand, the emergence and ease of access to media technologies in Shiite rituals have led to the formation of condition to their performative transformation (Ibid: 177). The transmissive communication and its performative transformation have not only ended in the visual and auditory representation of these rituals but have also altered the way they are conducted. In other words, the increasing importance of media representation in the minds of organizers has led to the objectification of rituals to make them more visible and better represented. As a result, multiple transmissive components have been introduced into rituals, creating the possibility of changing ritual components.

In the studied gatherings, the transformation of the communication form has occurred through the broadcast of music videos and the musical performance of the hosts. The central focus of the performances

in the studied gatherings has been religious-revolutionary music videos, such as *Salam Farmandeh*, *Daftar Naghashi (Paint Notebook)*, *Ey Lashkar-e-Sahibe-Zaman*, and *Rafiq-e-Shahidam (My Martyr Friend)*, sung by Abu Zar Rouhi, Abdolreza Helali, and Hossein Taheri. A music video is a short film created by combining images and musical sound, and its difference from a song lies in the communicative space, because songs throughout history have been part of rituals like prayers or significant events within the context of ritualistic communication. However, a music video results from transmissive communication with a visual and performative dimension. In the studied gatherings, the audio of these music videos was used to encourage participants to sing along or lip-sync to them. The communicative process that took place in these gatherings can be observed in Figure 9.

Figure 9. The communication process of Shia-revolutionary music videos in the studied gatherings

Based on Figure 9, the music videos *Salam Farmandeh*, *Daftar-e Naghashi*, *Ey Lashkar-e Saheb-oz-Zaman*, and *Rafiq-e Shahidam* were played in the mass media and social media, and later broadcast in the *Salam Farmandeh* and *Daughters of Haj Qassem* gatherings. These videos were sung along with or lip-synced by the participants (and at times by the performers themselves), eventually leading to their visual media representation. Moreover, these music videos were not performed live during the gatherings; in other words, the vocalists of the videos were not present, and if present, they merely sang along or lip-synced like the other participants. Accordingly, the audio playback of a pre-recorded music video provided the grounds for and reinforced the transmissive-representational mode of communication in these gatherings. In Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān*, Iran* gathering, however, a eulogist was physically present, and the music video did not constitute the main way of performance. The eulogist sang his anthem accompanied by *sanj* and *damam* (traditional percussion instruments), and this performance was later transformed into a specific music video representation. Additionally, in one part of his anthem, he performed the opening lines of *Salam Farmandeh* and invited the audience to join in collective singing.

Figure 10. Group singing (with sign language) of the video music *"Rafiq-e Shahidam"* in the *daughters of Haj Qassem* Gathering

Another component of the transition-oriented transformation of the communicative form is the musical performance, meaning that the subject has utilized the potential of music in their performance. Typically, in Shia rituals, the performer relies solely on their subjective presence and uses audio technologies merely to amplify and extend their voice. As such, the performance is alive and created in the moment. Furthermore, the use of musical instruments in some religious *hay'ats* (congregational ceremonies) has been limited to instruments like the sanj (cymbals) and damām (a type of drum). However, in the gatherings under study, where music videos constituted a significant part of the ceremonial performance, the use of modern pop music instruments is evident. In the *daughters of Haj Qassem* gathering, for instance, the music video *"Rafiq-e Shahidam"* was played without the presence of its original singer, and the song *"Mishe Zāmenam Beshi"* by Gholamreza Sanatgar was lip-synced. Musical instruments such as piano, santur, dohol (bass drum), guitar, beatbox, and others were employed. Similarly, in the *Salām Farmānde* gathering, the music videos *"Salām Farmānde"*, *"Daftar-e Naqqāshi"*, and *"Ey Lashkar-e Sāheb-oz-Zamān"* were played, all of which featured the presence of their respective performers, who either lip-synced or simply stood on stage without singing. Instruments used included guitar, cymbals, wind instruments, electronic beats, and more. The use of these music instruments indicates a transition-oriented restructuring of the communicative dimension of these gatherings and has simultaneously given them a pop character, as most of these instruments are commonly used in the production of pop music. Only in the Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān*,* gathering was a live performance delivered by a *maddāh* (eulogist), who used sanj and damām as the musical background for the chant. Nevertheless, in general, the inclusion of musical performances in these gatherings indicates that organizers believed gaining public attention could not be achieved solely through

vocal and verbal expression. Instead, musical sounds were required to stimulate participants and facilitate greater visibility for these events.

Figure 11. Chant performance by M. H. Haddadian in the "Dokhtaran-e Sarzaminam Iran" Gathering

The second category of the media construction of Shi'a-revolutionary performance rituals is the spectacular ideological representation of these rituals. The material world does not convey meaning; rather, social actors construct meaning through their cultural conceptual systems and linguistic representation systems. The media, as one of these social actors, does not reflect reality but rather transforms it into various codes (Hall, 1997). The media's representation of reality does not align with reality, even though audiences may be seduced into equating representation with reality. Media are based on language and meaning, and therefore, meaning is framed within a discursive structure, with the representation of realities occurring within that discursive framework, which will never fully convey all aspects of reality to the audience (Croteau & Hoynes, 2012). Therefore, the method of representation carries meaning that only signifies part of the reality as intended by the subject of representation.

Overall, the representation method of the studied gatherings has a bias, as it serves the ideological and spectacular goals of the organizers. One such form of representation is mass representation. In this form, the value of the image lies in displaying the people from a very distant angle, so that the frame is filled with the mass of people, conveying the idea of a large, crowded gathering. In this type of representation, the camera is placed above the subject and, due to its considerable distance, the subjects appear as atomized and similar to each other, creating a unified mass. This type of representation has political and ideological objectives to represent a "spectacularly portrayed crowd" that evokes meanings like being populous, popular, and significant for the audiences.

In the gathering "Salam Farmandeh", the dominant representation was the mass representation, captured in distant and very distant shots, where the performers and participants were less represented in close or medium-range shots. They were instead portrayed from a distant angle,

notably using helicopter shots. In the "Dokhtaran Haj Qasem" gathering, the dominant representation was again distant, with only the performer shown in medium-range shots. Similarly, in the "Dokhtaran Sarzamine Man Iran" gathering, the representation method was like the mentioned ones, but the reciter was shown just in medium to distant shots.

This mode of representation, while bringing the organizers closer to their goals and providing visual appeal for greater visibility, also fosters the erasure of the identity and individuality of the participants.

Figure 12. Mass representation of participants in the "Salam Farmandeh" Gathering

The other form of media representation in these gatherings is "specific representation". What is meant by specific representation is the depiction in medium and close shots, specifically of subjects and symbols. In general, this form of gatherings covering has a promotional aspect and is designed to provoke the audience emotions, and gain the attentions. Specific representations include subjects such as infants, children, and adolescents, with a predominance in the female gender. These representations are associated with behaviors like crying, clapping, laughing, or singing along with the music video. Specific representations of symbols include flags, headbands, victory signs shown by hands, fingers painted with the flag's colors, and images of martyrs and supreme leaders displayed on mobile phones.

In the "Salam Farmandeh" gathering, specific representations occurred among infants, children, and adolescents. Their presence as spectators or their singing along with tears was depicted. Additionally, in some rare instances, flags and headbands were shown in medium to wide shots. In the "Daughters of Haj Qasem" gathering, young girls singing along with the music video while holding images of Martyr Soleimani were shown in medium shots. Furthermore, all female performers in this gathering were quickly depicted in medium shots. On the other hand, colored flags including the name of Hazrat Fatimah (puh) were represented in close or medium shots. In the "Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān" gathering, young girls laughing and clapping were

depicted in medium to medium-close shots. Additionally, a young veiled girl who was laughing and had written "My Iran" on her palm was shown in a medium shot. Victory signs made by hands and hands painted with the colors of the Iranian flag, without showing the subject's face, along with images of Martyr Soleimani or the supreme leader on mobile phones, were also shown in close or medium shots.

Figure 13. Representation of a veiled girl in the "*Dokhtarān-e Sarzaminam Irān*" gathering in a medium to close-up shot

Overall, the components of the transitional communication form and ideological representation show that the goal of these gatherings was not the performance of rituals, but rather the construction of a display aspect in the visibility of crowds of people who were directly defending their believes and were numerous. As a result, all ritual and media activities have increasingly become objects of spectacle and focus for the organizers, leading to a transformation in many elements of Shia rituals—either through their omission or their modification to serve more theatrical purposes. Concurrently, the modes of representation have been shaped to align with theatrical objectives, carrying ideological significance that mirrors the organizational structure and intent behind the event.

6. Conclusion
This research critically examined the Shiite-revolutionary gatherings held in 2023. The findings of the study, based on the research questions, revealed that the studied gatherings sought to construct a new type of ritual with substantial differences to traditional Shiite Iranian rituals. Consequently, new elements emerged in the formation of these gatherings, such as holding events in sports fields that had no intellectual or ritual connection to Shiite practices, the absence of Shiite symbols at the event locations, the lack of proper mise-en-scène, and organizing events without cultural-religious significance. These elements collectively shaped the environment of these gatherings.
Additionally, the mixed-format presence of subjects— as both

performers and participants— their emotional and momentary engagement, and the spectator-like positioning of participants in relation to the performers all influenced the nature of involvement and participation in these gatherings. Furthermore, the transformation of the communication form, such as the playing video clips and musical performances, and the ideological representation of mass representations of the people and specific representations of subjects and symbolic visuals led to the media construction of these gatherings.

How these gatherings were organized and executed, as well as their connection to visual media, suggests that the organizers sought to create new rituals that only symbolically retained a connection to Shia and revolutionary content while completely deviating from the traditional ways of organizing such events. The most significant change in this process was the theatricalization of the rituals by the organizers; all environmental, subjective, and media components of these gatherings were dedicated to making them more visible and sensationalized.

As mentioned earlier, to gain significance in public-media thought, there is a need for visualization, media exposure, and visibility; the logic of attention and visibility is discernible in these gatherings. The creation of situations that contradict traditional Shia cultural rituals, such as mixed-gender participation, the use of music videos, musical performances, spectator-like involvement, and the extensive use of promotional opportunities to encourage attendance and support for these events with targeted representations, all indicate the importance of being seen and theatricalized. Thus, success was measured by gaining more attention. Such a logic aligns with the logic of media exposure; in other words, the value of the media and its dominant audience logic— observation and greater attention— has surpassed other societal institutions, such as religion. As a result, the values of religious institutions, such as performing religious rituals, have been altered. The community witnessed gatherings that had no structural relation to the ritualistic structures of society and defined their culture of celebrity within the logic of spectacle.

By adopting the logic of celebrity culture and theatricalization in religious rituals, the fluidity of the performance contrasts with the stability of the symbolic environment, such that the performance of rituals is redefined as an act of making itself visible. As a result, the necessity of establishing a link between the calendar occasion and the organization of such events has faded. Organizers, based on their interests or specific goals, have decided to hold events without formal occasion. These events superficially resemble traditional rituals, such as those held in religious gatherings, but they have no structural or, at times, even content-based relationship with traditional practices. Therefore, such gatherings can be considered based on the concept of "pseudo-rituals of spectacle", where the primary goal of holding these events is to gain visibility. They utilize ritualistic aspects to encourage

greater participation and attract more attention, yet there is very little correspondence between the event and the long-standing rituals in Iranian society. Adopting the logic of a spectacle society inevitably transforms populism into a major goal for the organizers of pseudo-rituals of spectacle. Consequently, the large attendance, popularity, and viral spread of these events in mass and social media have gained a significant achievement for cultural policymakers and event organizers. The institutionalization of such rituals could lead to a disconnection between the culture and future generations of society. The dominance of media populism in organizing such pseudo-rituals establishes a platform for ritual instability in society because, over time, populism and religious populism undergo various changes, especially through media consumption.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

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