

# Shifting Authority and the Rise of Spirituality and Wellness Influencers

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Within the fields of both religious studies and digital media studies, scholars are observing similar trends of decreased trust in institutional sources of authority. Charismatic authority figures step in to fill this gap and claim positions of social influence. This article will first trace the literature in the field of digital media on the rise of influencers as figures who claim their leadership roles based on their own personal, authentic stories. The next section will explore the shifts in authority in religious and spiritual spaces, as Americans move away from institutional religious spaces and seek authority in individual experiences. This will lead into the last section that discusses the emerging research on spirituality and wellness influencers and how these individuals

appeal to followers who are seeking personal connection, emotional stories, and individualized experiences of the transcendent. Overall, this article will explain how spirituality and wellness influencers relate to a wider social shift in authority away from traditional religious expertise to a more personal, emotional, authentic, and charismatic form of authority. The rise of these spirituality and wellness influencers is part of a larger digital media culture in which people look to online influencers as sources of information on politics, religion, healthcare, gender roles, finances, and more. As Emily Hund (2023) argues in her book, the influencer industry is shifting, “becoming less about what to buy and more about what to think” (p. 7).

## 1. Influencers and Charismatic Authority

The development of social media influencers dates back to the early 2010s with the popularity of YouTube vloggers (video-bloggers) who were sharing details of their daily lives and beginning to promote products. As Hund (2023) and Duffy (2017) both assert, the emergence of the influencer industry is closely connected to economic realities around the 2008 financial crisis and the loss of many jobs in the creative fields of journalism, public relations, and marketing. Primarily young women began to write about their lives and visually document everything through photos and videos. Blogging and early social media platforms gave women especially a space to share their personal stories and develop followings. As Lövheim

and Lundmark (2019) discuss in their study of female bloggers who write about religion, the women use these new digital spaces to “share personal, everyday experiences through words and images in order to establish dialogue and intimacy with their audiences” (p. 26). The bloggers develop trust and authority with their audience based on their ability to be authentic and vulnerable in sharing personal stories (p. 33).

These early influencers illustrate a shift to a form of authority, as Lövheim and Lundmark (2019) explain, that is “based on bloggers’ and vloggers’ competence in communicating with, connecting to, and addressing their audiences, rather than formal training or a position sanctioned by a religious institu-

tion” (p. 24). Max Weber formulated this distinction between traditional authority that is based on either formal training, such as a doctor, priest, or professor, or one’s birth into a royal family and the new form of charismatic authority, “which is based on the perceived exceptional personal qualities of an individual” (Lövheim & Lundmark, 2019, p. 25). While Weber was writing about the rise of celebrities and political leaders without formal training and authority, his concept of charismatic authority is key to understanding the current popularity of influencers who often build trust with audiences based on sharing authentic aspects of their personal lives while posting engaging content and positive emotions.

The rise of influencers as new sources of charismatic authority also relates to a decline in trust in traditional sources of expertise. As Andrejevic (2013) correctly predicted well before the rise of influencers and online extremism, the exposure to more and more information in online spaces did not solidify trust in institutional authority but rather drove people down rabbit holes of endless information or “infoglut,” as he terms it. Rational critique is lost when there is no agreed upon set of facts or trusted authorities. People often believe in conspiracy theories because they provide certainty when there is endless information available. Baker and Rojek (2020) elaborate on what they term the “low-trust society” and how people often look to influencers to provide certainty as traditional authority figures lose trust. Furthermore, they elaborate that “lifestyle gurus” as new experts “is the direct result of the fluidity of the authoritative structures that traditionally characterized social life and the search for meaning and purpose that science and technology seem unable to deliver” (p. 17). People are losing trust in traditional spaces of information, such as education, religion, science, and medicine, and at the same time, we live in a society with “high levels of ambivalence and uncertainty about nearly everything” (p. 155).

As people move away from trusting institutional authority figures, they increasingly find charismatic influencers, who share personal stories, to be more compelling and trustworthy (Baker, 2022b, p. 112). Often these influencers take advantage of this shift in trust and social anxieties to sell more products and promote harmful ideas, as Baker (2022a) documents in her work on how influencers spread misinformation and far-right ideas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Volcic and Andrejevic (2023) similarly discuss how distrust of experts and the polarization of social media platforms

create an environment that is ripe with extreme misinformation. Far-right influencers lean into these polarized spaces to cultivate a loyal following and promote extremist ideas, but Volcic and Andrejevic (2023) assert that these influencers also promote “commercial populism” or an economy of products and services that bring money to the influencers and fuel these platforms. These far-right influencers promote their own version of “health and wealth” to their followers (p. 150). While the ideas promoted by influencers may vary greatly, the overall goal of cultivating a loyal following that will trust you to purchase products is the same across the political spectrum. As noted in a *New York Times* profile of progressive wellness influencer, Amanda Chantel Bacon, this crunchy granola guru sometimes promotes the exact same supplements as far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Young, 2017, para. 42). The specifics of the ideas promoted by Bacon and Jones might vary widely but the overall message to distrust experts, follow their advice, and buy these products is identical.

In order for influencers to develop this trust in their audience, they need to engage with authentic emotions, to be vulnerable and share personal stories, and to encourage parasocial relationships with their followers. Authenticity and vulnerability have long been key to establish connections with followers in digital media spaces, going back to the early days of blogging. Lövheim and Lundmark (2019) discuss how authority is often developed by bloggers by sharing their authentic personal lives and opening up about vulnerability. They explain, “Vulnerability is a significant theme in this process, both in the sense of exposing weaknesses, brokenness, shortcomings and in the sense of being exposed to criticism from those from whom confidence and trust is given” (p. 33). Similarly, Morrison (2011) discusses how the early “mommy blogs” were a space where women leaned into the intimacy of the blogging platform to share personal stories and therefore develop an “emotionally close community” (p. 44).

Along with displaying authentic emotions and sharing vulnerabilities, influencers also need to facilitate parasocial relationships with their followers, or a sense that the influencer and follower have a real friendship with each other. Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the term parasocial relationships in the early days of television when they observed people developing imaginary relationships with characters and actors that were entering into their home via the tele-

vision set. As Einstein (2025) defines the term, “parasocial relationships exist when someone forms an emotional attachment to a media personality” (p. 125). The concept of parasocial relationship has expanded with social media influencers because these individuals are much more relatable than mass mediated celebrities. In addition, influencers can be a part of people’s lives in the intimate spaces from the moment they wake up until they go to sleep. Furthermore, Baker and Rojek (2020) assert that influencers develop relationships with followers because they are perceived to be outside of the hierarchy of institutions, which may have ulterior motives. As Baker and Rojek explain, “[Influencers’] *raison d’être* as accessible, non-hierarchical, plain-speaking sources of advice and guidance about life issues represents a genuine challenge to the knowledge, hegemony and status of professionals” (p. 15).

Parasocial relationships between influencers and followers are also distinct from media celebrities because there are opportunities for interactions through comments or even in-person meet-ups. Sometimes these interactions go both ways, as influencers also feel connected to their audiences. As Hund (2023) found in her interviews with influencers, these relationships are not always one-directional. “Influencers both cultivate and care for their audiences, cherishing the personal connections while also leveraging them in the marketplace” (p. 49) Hund also traces some of the ambivalences that influencers feel when they develop friendships with their followers but, at the end of the day, need to be marketing lifestyle content to them.

One specific way that influencers cultivate trust in the audience is by opening up and sharing a personal story of a time of struggle and how they overcame that struggle. Baker and Rojek (2020) argue that this “narrative of self-transformation” is a key aspect of the work of “lifestyle gurus” (p. 12). As opposed to a traditional authority figure like a physician who can only talk abstractly about a disease, influencers can show their relatability by talking about their own personal experience living with this disease and overcoming it through a particular treatment. Through social media accounts, influencers share “a compelling narrative revealing their transformation from a state of pain and misery to one of success and well-being” (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 59). The period of struggle does not need to be overcoming a dramatic medical ailment but can be overcoming negative body image, mental health struggles, or stubborn acne. The

most important thing is that the influencer has gone on a journey of change or is in the process of transforming. Building trust around one’s personal experiences and anecdotal evidence is what distinguishes influencers from institutional sources of authority. As Einstein (2025) writes, “newly minted gurus proclaim no expertise other than life experience. It is a badge of honor, a way to say that they are working outside the system to a group that eschews authority” (p. 180). It is common for influencers to say things like “I’m not an expert, but this is my own experience” and then share anecdotal evidence.

In an analysis of health influencers, Hendry et al. (2022) propose the concept of “influencer pedagogy” to examine how influencers “cultivate authenticity and expertise” in order to educate their followers (p. 1). Similar to the previous studies, the authors found that influencers successfully attract an audience by “cultivating a perception of authenticity and establishing parasocial relationships” (p. 4). The trust that they gain from their audience is then activated to educate the audience on various health topics. Because influencers have been honest and vulnerable in sharing various life struggles, then viewers are more likely to trust their advice. The influencers take on an important role as a health educator while clearly explaining that they are speaking from their own personal experiences (p. 9).

In another study of wellness influencers, Wellman (2023) applies source credibility theory to examine how these influencers use “expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness” to maintain their authority with audiences (p. 7021). While wellness influencers often do not hold degrees or training in health-related fields, they claim expertise by sharing personal stories and creating beautiful content (p. 7030). As Wellman explains, “Within the wellness industry on Instagram, influencer attractiveness manifests through aesthetic presentations of bodies and aesthetic content creation” (p. 7029). In addition, Wellman asserts that the positionality of influencers, such as race, sexuality, class, body type, or abilities, can also impact whether they are viewed as credible. This helps to explain why an influencer like Belle Gibson, who lied about using alternative treatments to cure herself from a non-existent cancer, was believed and had a successful online career, and why Black influencers often struggle to overcome algorithmic bias and the perception that they are less credible.

Another topic in which influencers have gained more trust and authority in recent years is in talking

about current political and social topics. Hund (2023) uses the term “genuinfluencers” to describe a sub-genre of influencers who turn complex social topics into easily digestible slideshows or quick videos on Instagram or TikTok. Generally, these influencers have some educational background in the topic but they develop connections with their audience more through their engaging style and authentic emotions. For example, Hund discusses the work of Sharon McMahon or “SharonSaysSo” online who has over 1.3 million Instagram followers and posts about current political topics. She identifies as “America’s Government Teacher” on her platforms and shares videos and slideshows that break down issues like immigration, elections, civil rights, and international affairs. Hund argues that these education influencers represent this shift from what to buy to what to think and believe about social topics. At the same time, there remains a risk that since these content creators have developed a great deal of credibility, they can

easily use this to promote harmful content or misinformation (Hund, 2023, p. 142).

Relatedly, I found (Peterson, 2024) in a study of the work of another influencer/educator, Blair Imani, that this progressive political content rarely reaches an uninformed audience and instead reinforces polarized divides in society. I argue that Imani engages with an attractive aesthetic style and authentic emotions to attract an audience that is united by feelings of satisfaction that they are informed about progressive topics. As the article states, “Imani’s work as a social justice influencer is to curate a community based on shared pleasure in being distinct from the implied unenlightened others” (p. 2). These cases of influencers promoting ways to think about progressive social topics reflects this shift in authority, as followers look to these people as knowledgeable leaders not because of the degrees that they hold but rather because they create engaging content that is perceived to be genuine and relatable.

## 2. Shift from Religious Institutions to Individual Authority

While there are frequent discussions about the future of religion in the U.S., with some arguments for the weakening of religion and other cases being made for the recent revival of more traditional forms of religiosity, one overall theme that comes up in survey data is that Americans are moving away from identifying solely with institutional religions. Americans remain committed to religious beliefs and still participate in various faith practices but are hesitant to belong to an institutional religion. Surveys also show the popularity of syncretism or blending practices and beliefs of various religious and spiritual traditions. In this section, I will cover some of the studies of contemporary religious and spiritual identity of Americans and how they illustrate a move away from traditional sources of authority and a focus on more personal experiences and charismatic authority. This section will also include a discussion of New Age spirituality and its foundation in the idea of the individual as the source of divinity. The shift in seeing influencers as authority figures relates to this shift in religious identity, as people move away from seeing institutional religions and traditional leaders as the source of authority and instead relying on individual experiences. The last sec-

tion of this article will explore how spirituality and wellness influencers step in to take on this role of charismatic authority figures.

Across the board, survey data indicate that more people in the U.S. are unaffiliated with a religion, and these numbers are higher for younger generations. The 2023–2024 Pew Religious Landscape study found that 28% of Americans have no religion, a number that has stayed steady since 2020 (G. Smith, 2025, p. 3). The Public Religion Research Institute Census of American Religion (2025) found the same 28% number among all U.S. adults, whereas 38% of young adults ages 18–29 are unaffiliated with a religion. In his extensive studies of the religious “nones,” Burge (2021) is careful to delineate the diversity within this group that makes up about a quarter to a third of U.S. adults. “That’s why it’s nearly impossible to give a simple description of who the nones are: they exist in large numbers in age, income, and educational spectrums” (p. 70). Burge finds that nones are also racially diverse, gender diverse, and not only on the far-left of the political spectrum (p. 70). Burge (2025a) also breaks down nones into four different categories based on their motivations: those who are “nones in name only” and

participate in religious practices but do not identify with a religion; the spiritual but not religious who are interested in spirituality; the “dones” or people who have no interest in religion; and the zealous atheists.

The theme that I want to pull out in all of these statistics is a transition away from institutional religions and traditional authority figures. At the same time, there is a move towards more individual experiences that range from participating in religious practices to New Age spirituality beliefs to some who are opting out altogether. People may be seeking what Burton (2020) terms “intuition religions,” which focus on “narratives that simultaneously reject clear-cut creedal metaphysical doctrines and institutional hierarchies and place the locus of authority on people’s experiential emotions” (p. 33). Individual emotional experiences of the transcendent are granted authority and institutional religions are often perceived as corrupt and backwards. In his recent book on the decline of religion, C. Smith (2025) argues that religious institutions are experiencing an “unplanned obsolescence,” as they are no longer needed in people’s lives and other practices and spaces have filled the same desires (p. 4). People seeking community can find this in an exercise class, a brunch meet-up, or a book club. Those looking for a prayerful space can practice meditation or participate in a secular retreat. Those seeking advice can go to their therapist rather than a religious leader. C. Smith argues that sometimes people do find themselves in institutional churches in the same way as people will dabble in analogue media technologies like record players and film cameras, but most of their fulfillment is found outside of these old institutions, which have become superfluous (p. 4).

Although people are moving away from traditional religious institutions, there is still a persistent interest in spiritual practices and beliefs. For instance, C. Smith’s (2025) survey of Millennials found that a sizable minority of participants believe in many New Age ideas and practices. As C. Smith argues, “in the Millennial zeitgeist, such beliefs [in New Age ideas] are not fringe silliness but part of bigger, significant cultural movements deserving serious attention” (p. 331). C. Smith’s survey found that spirituality, magic and the occult remain popular even in a society with modern science and technology (p. 368). The Pew Research Center (2023) found that “70% of U.S. adults can be considered ‘spiritual’ in some way, because they think of themselves as spiritual people or say spirituality is very important in their lives” (p. 7). Some of the

beliefs that came up in the Pew survey include finding power in something greater than oneself; believing that there is energy or spirits in animals, nature, objects, and cemeteries; connections with those who have died; a sense of wonder about the greater universe; and connecting beyond this world (pp. 10–16). In addition, spiritual practices that people find gives them meaning include: spending time in nature, taking time to look inward, and meditating (pp. 17–18). A study of the Making Meaning Project asked about specific spiritual practices and found the top activities for religious/non-religious participants respectively were meditation (40%/27%), yoga (18%/15%), and astrology or horoscopes (15%/14%) (Burge, 2025b).

Even though spiritual practices and beliefs remain strong among a significant number of Americans, the survey data do not show that people are leaving religion for spirituality. The Pew Research Center (2023) found that 22% of all respondents identified as “spiritual but not religious” but 48% as “spiritual and religious” (p. 20). People who are unaffiliated with religion are not more likely to be spiritual; 48% of unaffiliated adults do not identify as spiritual or religious (The Pew Research Center, 2023, p. 27). Similarly, Burge’s survey work does not indicate that the “nones” are replacing religion with spirituality, but instead, “the nones just aren’t that spiritual, either” (Burge, 2025b, para. 2). The survey data showed that among people who are religious, spirituality was very important (62%) or somewhat important (27%), but among non-religious, spirituality was very important (24%) and somewhat important (28%) (Burge, 2025b). These data seem to indicate that people who are religious are also interested in spiritual questions and perhaps are mixing a variety of practices and beliefs in their lives.

This relates to Burton’s (2020) discussion of “remixed” religion to account for the new and blended ways that people are engaging with spirituality and practicing religion. Burton finds that there is more “religious fluidity” as people bring together various practices and beliefs from different traditions and tailor the perfect spirituality to meet their needs (p. 23). Again, the picture is quite complicated but indicates that American adults are not just adherents to one religious tradition, which they follow exactly as the institutional leaders say, but are more interested in mixing different traditions and developing their own individual experiences of religion and/or spirituality. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the argument

made by Burge that the data do not show a rise of people leaving religion to become spiritual. Instead, people are more likely to leave religion and be uninterested in spiritual practices or to stay in religion but incorporate some spiritual practices like meditation, yoga and astrology—practices which do not always align with traditional religious beliefs (Burge, 2025b, para. 26).

Finally, before moving into a discussion of contemporary spirituality influencers online, it is significant to explain what New Age spirituality is and how it relates to a shift away from religious institutions. As Ward and Voas (2011) found, as institutions lose authority and society becomes more fragmented, alternative and New Age spiritualities have emerged (p. 103). New Age often has a focus on a movement towards a “new paradigm” that offers different ways of seeing the world (p. 106). Although there are various ways to define New Age and innumerable practices that are associated with this spirituality, a key element that unites the New Age is that the individual is the source of ultimate authority. As Heelas (1996)

states, within New Age, “the self itself is sacred” and there is an emphasis on making “contact with the spirituality which lies within the person” (p. 2). Since authority comes from within the self, truth and understanding comes from “one’s own experience” (p. 21). New Age ideas and practices have come in and out of popular discourse since the 1800s but as Urban (2015) says, clever gurus try to “package” old ideas in new practices and concepts (p. 13). This practice of marketing these New Age ideas spans from Mary Bakker Eddy and Christian Science building on New Thought teachings all the way up to current TikTok trends that repurpose the same ideas with new hashtags. Overall, these trends generally promote the idea that the individual has the power within to control their own future and can trust in their own individual experiences. This idea of individual autonomy is often reinforced by online spirituality and wellness influencers and is appealing to an audience that is seeking out individual, charismatic authority over traditional authority.

### 3. Spirituality and Wellness Influencers as New Authorities

This last section will explore the convergence of these two trends of a shift in authority to more charismatic online influencers and the increased interest in spiritual topics. This convergence is shown in the rise of spirituality, wellness, and self-help influencers, using their personal stories and authentic emotions to appeal to audiences. Baker (2022a) documents how wellness influencers engage with the charismatic elements of being an influencer, such as authenticity, vulnerability, and parasocial relationships to get followers to trust them (p. 7). Often times this trust is used to promote harmful information about health and even conspiracy theories. This trust is built on this close connection that influencers build with their followers so that people view influencers as having more authority than their doctors or government leaders (p. 5).

As Young (2017) writes about in a profile of lifestyle guru Amanda Chantel Bacon, followers trust an influencer like Bacon because she is perceived as successful. Buying the products that Bacon sells and following her advice is seen as a way to aspire to her success. Young explains that lifestyle influencers “insist on a connection between what you buy and who

you are. And then they sell you stuff” (para. 30). Influencers work hard to develop this trust in their audience through showing their authentic emotions and their aspirational lifestyles, and then this trust is leveraged to sell products and services to the audience. At best, the promotion of products can lead to followers wasting money on useless products or at worst, following harmful advice that causes dangerous medical results (Sandlin & Gómez, 2023, p. 42). Montell (2021) documents how New Age influencers engage with a mix of pseudoscience, holistic health advice, spirituality, metaphysics, and conspiracy theories to promote their products and services. These influencers often engage in whatever is trending. Montell explains, “Because their actual beliefs take a back seat to the success of their brand, these gurus are willing to fudge them according to whatever the zeitgeist seems to want” (p. 265). During the Covid pandemic, a lot of what was trending related to misinformation about medicine, vaccines, and politics.

New Age spirituality often fits in well with this shift to charismatic authority because both promote that the individual experience is the ultimate source of

authority. In a study of 15 spirituality influencers, Caicedo Farbman et al. (2025) found that few had formal training in mental health or spirituality. Instead, “many profiles indicated having personal awakening or traumatic experiences that inspired them to teach or support others and having natural healing or psychic ability” (p. 8). Influencers build on individual and intuitional experiences to develop trust with followers. Ward and Voas (2011) developed the term “conspirituality” to address this convergence between conspiracy thinking and alternative spiritualities that both became more prominent with digital media (p. 103). The two “core convictions” of conspirituality are “A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order” and “Humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness, or awareness” (p. 104). People need to become aware of this “new paradigm” both in terms of an individual shift in understanding but also an awareness of the larger forces that are controlling the world (p. 104). In both cases, the individual has the agency and responsibility to address these concerns. Online influencers often step in as the guides to help people manage this paradigm shift.

While there is some important work on wellness influencers taking on this role as new authority figures, there are fewer studies that look at the emergence of New Age spirituality trends among influencers. Asadi (2021) conducted fieldwork on energy healers in 2016–2018, focusing on how they incorporated digital media in their work. Rather than perceiving the digital media in opposition to New Age ideas, Asadi found that the spirituality teachers interpreted digital media and coding language through a New Age lens. Asadi asserts, “the internet has fundamentally informed New Agers’ cosmology and bodily practices by reframing the physical universe—which is now powered by digital code—as ever more enchanting, and as such, metaphysical” (p. 42). These findings relate to previous spirituality leaders who saw the possibility of tapping into other realms through new technologies like the telegraph, photograph, and television. Gregory (2018) also conducted ethnographic work with Tarot card readers to understand how they use digital media in their work. Gregory found that these spirituality leaders had to become “reluctant entrepreneurs” and engage with digital media to build up their brand and to cultivate an audience in order to be successful (pp. 209–210).

Another study on Tarot in digital media was done in the context of Romania, but has wider relevancy.

Enoiu (2025) focuses on how Tarot is popular online and often provides comfort for people struggling with uncertainty. As she states, “the Tarot takes on new functions [in digital media]: it becomes a resource for emotional coping, a narrative device of the self, and a practice of community belonging in the digital environment” (p. 44). Tarot becomes a space for individual self-reflection but also to connect with a larger community of support. This study also focuses on how Tarot provides opportunities for people to claim authority through their own individual, authentic experiences rather than religious institutions. As Enoiu writes, “The practice of Tarot, being decentralized and open to reinterpretation, produces a plurality of forms of symbolic validation, in which personal experience and community recognition play an important role” (p. 49). Tarot readers are often seen as legitimate if they build on charisma and their “relational and narrative performance” (p. 50). Digital media platforms provide new opportunities for Tarot readers to connect with audiences and build trust by using an authentic style and sharing personal narratives.

A few recent studies have explored the development of witchcraft communities online. Miller (2022) examines how witchcraft TikTok videos are often tied to consumerism, such as promoting spell jars, natural remedies, altars, witch kits, and the services of the witch influencers. In another study of online witchcraft, Quilty (2022) focuses on how young women use social media spaces to claim agency by working against established “gendered scripts” (p. 29). Quilty argues that the digital communities provide more opportunities for women to talk about experiences and emotions that are often disregarded in religious institutions and wider society (p. 29).

Along with these studies of New Age spirituality, Tarot, and witchcraft, other scholars have explored more general spirituality and self-help influencers. For instance, Ganga Keiffer (2020) discusses the concept of “spiritual entrepreneurship” in her study of how women lean into “traditionally feminine ideals of teaching and nurturing” in order to develop successful digital careers promoting multi-level marketing (MLM) schemes, self-help content, or business coaching (p. 80). Ganga Keiffer argues, “Spiritual entrepreneurs meld business savvy with ‘soul-nourishing’ practices such as meditation and mindfulness, linking success and empowerment in business to spiritual development and the gratification of feeding one’s soul” (p. 81). These online influencers attribute their

success as entrepreneurs to their spiritual commitment; they manifested this success through their positive visions and mindfulness. Similar to the studies that looked at female influencers, Ganga Keiffer finds that the more successful self-help influencers leaned into feminine emotions, personal stories of transformation and an aspirational lifestyle to claim authority as wise leaders. She writes, “Self-help entrepreneurs promote themselves as people who have both products and wisdom to share. They are teachers and gurus passing along the lessons they have learned from their own gurus and their own experiences” (p. 97). These self-help gurus are often trusted to give good advice because they display their own life successes and how they overcame struggles.

Along similar lines, Jetter (2024) analyzed the work of two specific spirituality influencers, Marianne Williamson and Laura Malina Seiler, and found that they also developed authority by sharing their personal stories of struggles and intimate emotions. By engaging with Weber’s concept of the “exceptional [wo]man,” Jetter discusses how these two women use their successful lives to lead by example (p. 357). Rather than coerce people to follow them, Williamson and Seiler use various digital media platforms to share their stories in the hopes that seekers will find these stories relatable (p. 368). Jetter explains, “Legitimised by experience, these ‘exemplary women’ offer their own path, their personal failures and spiritual crises as valuable lessons to those wandering similar paths and craving the same kind of enlightened life” (p. 369). This study is another example of digital spirituality leaders building their credibility by being vulnerable and sharing their own personal story of transformation.

One final area of research that relates to New Age spirituality influencers is the theorization around the algorithm, specifically the power of the algorithm to

promote spirituality content. Online discussion of being “blessed by the algorithm,” as Singler (2020) analyzes, can range from secular content to religious content. Reinis and Laughlin (2025) specifically analyze how Evangelical Christians perceive the algorithm as a tool from God to spread an Evangelical message. Within the New Age spirituality space, several studies have explored how content creators will frequently appeal to the algorithm to try to get content to spread. Videos circulating on TikTok will talk about spirituality topics and add a line, such as “if you see this video, it’s meant for you” (St. Lawrence, 2024). Although spirituality influencers rely on their own intuition to claim authority, the algorithms are increasingly perceived as having their own authority to spread content or alternatively to “shadow-ban” content.

Cotter et al (2022) discuss how the algorithm is not just viewed as aerie for feeding people the perfect video but also has a divine quality when it presents videos that appear to know the person better than they know themselves (p. 2913). In some cases, the power of the algorithm to spread content relates to the teachings of the influencers around spreading positivity. In a study of manifestation videos on TikTok, Reinis (2025) finds that the TikTok algorithm is not just a tool for the platform to keep people watching but also “a divine force helping people find enlightenment” (p. 1763). In addition, Chalfant (2025) examines how the TikTok algorithm is perceived in a similar way to previous technologies. Just like how early leaders in the New Thought movement of the 19th century would use technologies like the camera and the telegraph to prove the power of the spirit realm, so too do digital influencers appeal to the power of the algorithm to demonstrate how their content can spread. The reasoning is that the best content will spread through the algorithm and reach the people that “it is meant” to find (p. 651).

## 4. Concluding Thoughts

This review article has traced the scholarship on the emergence of social media influencers with a focus on how they claim charismatic authority, the shift among Americans to more personalized experiences of religion and spirituality away from institutions, and finally the trend of spirituality and wellness influencers claiming the position as spiritual guides. I want to

make the claim that there is a connection between the prominence of influencers as charismatic authority figures and the shift away from traditional religious institutions in American public life. Spirituality, wellness, and self-help influencers step in to attract an audience that is seeking meaning and more of a personal experience of spirituality. These influencers have seemingly

figured out how to live successful lives in terms of financial success while also maintaining positive thoughts, a healthy body, satisfying relationships, and spiritual fulfillment.

Scholarship has begun to critically analyze how influencers are going beyond promoting what people should buy to pushing a more holistic approach of what to buy and believe in order to live the most fulfilling life. In particular, scholarship has focused on the far-right space of influencers, such as the manosphere, tradwives, and Q-anon. Other scholarship, as I discussed in this article, has explored wellness influencers and specifically how they have promoted harmful content during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there remains a lack of research on New Age spirituality trends that circulate through algorithmic spaces of TikTok and Instagram. Trends relating to manifesting, reality shifting, astrology, tarot, and witchcraft have mostly been discussed in the popular press but less academic work has explored this digital content. Survey data show that a significant portion of the American public have participated in these practices and/or hold these beliefs. As people move away from institutional religions and traditional authority figures, we need more studies that look at the blended religious and spiritual lives of young Americans. In addition, more research should examine the role of these spirituality influencers in promoting beliefs and practices to their followers.

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## Book Reviews

**Afshar, Sahar, Wei Jin Darryl Lim, and Vaibhav Singh** (Eds.). *Script, Print and Letterforms in Global Contexts: The Visual and the Material*. Oxford, Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, and New York: Peter Lang, 2025. Pp. ix, 212. ISBN 978-1-78997-503-1 (paper) \$63.95; 978-1-80374-847-4 (ePub), \$63.95

*Script, Print, and Letterforms in Global Contexts* appears as the 6th volume in the Media and Communication Series: Printing History and Culture. This collection reminds us that printed material and the printing process form parts of material culture. As such printed materials and their processes provide a sometimes overlooked avenue into understanding human culture in different eras and in different places. The essays in this volume provide both. Some of them examine the history of printing, with a geographical

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