CROSSPOINT
REVISTA DE ESTUDOS INTERDISCIPLINARES EM COMUNICAÇÃO
ISSN: 3086-2442 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.19141/Crosspoint.v2.2026.2177
Programa de Mestrado Profissional em Comunicação do UNASP

EXPOSURE AND ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL RELIGION: AN DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY ON SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT ABOUT THICH MINH TUE

EXPOSIÇÃO E ENGAJAMENTO NA RELIGIÃO DIGITAL: UM SURVEY DESCRITIVO SOBRE CONTEÚDO EM MÍDIAS SOCIAIS A RESPEITO DE THICH MINH TUE

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become important channels through which religious figures and narratives gain public visibility. This quantitative descriptive study maps patterns of exposure, forms of interaction, perceived influence and self-reported behavioral responses in relation to social media content about Thich Minh Tue, a Vietnamese walking Buddhist practitioner who attracted wide attention in 2024. Data come from an online questionnaire answered by 320 respondents recruited December 2024 and March 2025. Facebook was the most frequently reported channel of first encounter (80%) and of viewing (78%). Among respondents, liking was the most common form of interaction (88%), whereas following pages, sharing and commenting were each reported by about 10% or fewer. 56% of respondents reported no significant influence on their understanding of religion, 99% had never taken part in or witnessed the walking journey, 46% reported feeling no connection to the content. Extensive social media exposure and engagement observed in this case did not convert into actual religious practices.

Keywords: social media; buddhism; mediatization of religion; digital spiritual spectatorship; Thich Minh Tue.

Resumo

As mídias sociais se tornaram canais importantes pelos quais figuras religiosas ganham visibilidade. Este estudo descritivo mapeia padrões de exposição, formas de interação, influência percebida e respostas comportamentais autorrelatadas em relação a conteúdos sobre Thich Minh Tue, um praticante budista vietnamita que realiza jornadas a pé. Com base no questionário *online* respondido por 320 participantes, entre dezembro de 2024 e março de 2025, o Facebook foi o canal mais citado como meio de primeiro contato (80%) e de visualização (78%). Curtir publicações foi a forma de interação mais comum (88%), enquanto seguir páginas, compartilhar e comentar foram ações relatadas por cerca de apenas 10% dos respondentes. Por sua vez, 56% dos participantes afirmaram que o conteúdo não exerceu influência significativa em sua compreensão da religião; 99% nunca participaram da jornada a pé nem a presenciaram; e 46% relataram não sentir qualquer conexão com o conteúdo. Resultado: a intensa exposição e o engajamento nas mídias sociais neste caso não se converteram em práticas religiosas efetivas.

Palavras-chave: mídias sociais; budismo; mediatização da religião; espectatorialidade espiritual digital; Thich Minh Tue.

COMO CITAR: LAI, Yen Chi; MATCH, Le Thu; DINH, Thi Thuy Hang . Exposure and engagement in digital religion: an descriptive survey on social media content about Thich Minh Tue. **Crosspoint - Revista de Estudos Interdisciplinares em Comunicação**, v. 2, p. 75-99, 2026. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.19141/Crosspoint.v2.2026.2177>.

1 INTRODUCTION

Religion has been a central pillar of human civilization, profoundly shaping social structures, cultural norms, and individual identities (Kamraju, 2025). It has provided a framework for addressing existential questions, constructing moral and ethical systems, and guiding governance, legal institutions, and broader societal organization. Correspondingly, international human rights frameworks recognize freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental right, encompassing the liberty to practice, observe, and teach beliefs in both private and public spheres, individually or collectively (Shamim, 2024). This right also includes the freedom to adopt, change, or maintain one's beliefs, extends to theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic perspectives, and safeguards the broader domain of thought and personal conviction.

Traditionally, religious practice has emphasized internal belief, ethical reflection, and communal participation. However, in the twenty-first century, these practices are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. This shift is conceptualized through the notion of digital religion, which highlights how offline religious life intersects with and is reshaped by online environments (Campbell, 2025). The rapid proliferation of social media has transformed how individuals engage with spirituality, turning digital platforms into spaces for exploring, expressing, and negotiating religious meaning (Liu *et al.*, 2025). In this context, religious presence extends beyond physical boundaries, as digital representations coexist with embodied practices, enabling new forms of visibility and interaction (Lim, 2020). Consequently, younger generations increasingly rely on social media to encounter and interpret religious ideas. In Vietnam, where high levels of digital connectivity intersect with diverse religious traditions, these dynamics play a particularly significant role in shaping public awareness of religion.

This transformation is evident in the viral circulation of religious content on Vietnamese social media. A prominent case is that of Thich Minh Tue (birth name Le Anh Tu), a once little-known walking practitioner who has been unexpectedly transformed into an reluctant internet phenomenon. Thich Minh Tue decided to ordain in 2015 and, according to Vietnamese state media, had practiced ascetic (dhutanga) walking in several earlier journeys before 2024, when his fourth alms-walking journey across Vietnam drew widespread attention on social media (Nhân Dân, 2024). In May 2024, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha stated that he is not a member of its clergy (Trung Kiên, 2024).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 RELIGION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Digital technology is fundamentally reshaping human existence, particularly the experience of being religious or spiritual, as this transformation unfolds as an "irreversible" process (Bingaman, 2023). Traditionally, religious life has been anchored in institutional structures, sacred spaces, and embodied practices that emphasize continuity, discipline, and communal participation. However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly altered the conditions under which religion is communicated, accessed, and experienced. The digital transformation of faith extends beyond the mere facilitation of worship or the creation of virtual prayer spaces; rather, it signals the emergence of religion as a form of global engagement capable of transcending geographical boundaries, fostering transnational connections, and influencing political discourse in unforeseen ways (Ahmed, 2025). Practices once confined to physical places of worship are now embedded within digital environments, enabling individuals worldwide to access spiritual guidance and participate in discussions on issues such as peace and conflict. Religious leaders increasingly employ social media and artificial intelligence to engage with followers and broader faith communities, thereby amplifying their influence from local congregations to global audiences.

Scholars of digital religion emphasize that online environments are not merely neutral channels for transmitting religious messages but active forces that reshape both the forms and meanings of religious practice. As Zhang (2025) argues, social media has transformed religious identity formation by enabling believers to construct and express their faith in more individualized and diverse ways. The concept of digital religion thus highlights the dynamic interplay between technological affordances and religious expression (Campbell, 2025), suggesting that digital media simultaneously extend and transform religious life. While these platforms enhance accessibility by allowing individuals to encounter religious content beyond geographic and institutional constraints, they also reconfigure religious communication by fragmenting complex doctrines and practices into discrete, easily consumable units (Zhang, 2025).

Social media represents a critical site of this transformation. Unlike traditional mass media characterized by one-to-many communication, social media platforms facilitate interactive, user-generated, and algorithmically curated flows of content. Within these environments, religious narratives are produced not only by institutional authorities but also by ordinary users, influencers, and online communities. This de-

centralization enables believers to shape and articulate their religious identities in increasingly individualized ways (Zhang, 2025), while simultaneously challenging established hierarchies of authority and opening new spaces for interpretation, negotiation, and contestation of religious meaning.

At the same time, the integration of religion into everyday media consumption introduces new patterns of engagement. Rather than encountering religion through structured and intentional practices, individuals increasingly engage with religious content incidentally, as it appears within broader streams of entertainment, news, and social interaction. This process, often described as the "banalization" or "everydayization" of religion (Hjarvard, 2008), suggests that religion becomes embedded in routine media exposure, potentially diminishing its perceived distinctiveness and depth. As religious content competes within an attention-driven media environment, it is subject to the same logics of brevity, immediacy, and emotional appeal that shape other forms of digital content.

Furthermore, the affordances of digital platforms encourage modes of interaction that are rapid, selective, and low-effort. Practices such as scrolling, liking, or briefly viewing content enable engagement with religious material without sustained reflection or long-term commitment. While these forms of interaction increase visibility and accessibility, they may also contribute to a shift from embodied and communal religious practice toward more individualized and mediated experiences. In this sense, digital media do not merely expand the reach of religion but actively reshape its experiential and interpretive dimensions.

2.2 MEDIATIZATION OF RELIGION: FROM SACRED MEANING TO MEDIA LOGIC

The concept of mediatization provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how religion is not merely communicated through media but fundamentally reshaped by it. Broadly defined, mediatization refers to the pervasive transformations that media introduce into all domains of social life (Kho *et al.*, 2014). Within this process, social institutions, including religion, become increasingly influenced by the norms, formats, and operational logics of media systems. Consequently, media should not be understood as neutral channels of transmission; rather, they actively structure how religion is represented, interpreted, and experienced in contemporary society. This shift implies that religious authority, meaning, and practice are no longer confined within institutional or doctrinal boundaries but are progressively shaped by media dynamics.

Central to mediatization theory is the notion of media logic, a concept that originates with Altheide and Snow (1979) and that Hjarvard (2008) applied to religion, which

describes the institutional and technological norms that govern media production and dissemination. Media logic privileges immediacy, dramatization, personalization, and audience appeal, thereby influencing how religious content is formatted and circulated. In contrast to traditional religious communication, which emphasizes continuity, ritual depth, and doctrinal coherence, media-driven environments tend to favor content that is simplified, emotionally engaging, and easily consumable (Zhang, 2025). As a result, complex theological ideas and spiritual practices are often reframed into short, visually compelling, and narrative-driven formats, frequently detached from their broader doctrinal and institutional contexts.

This transformation has profound effects on the structure of religious authority. Traditionally, religious authority is anchored in institutional frameworks that regulate doctrine and practice. However, in a mediatized world, authority is spread out among many different people, such as content creators, influencers, and platform users. As Couldry and Hepp (2013) argue, mediatization entails a "de-centering" of authority, whereby the production and interpretation of meaning are no longer monopolized by institutional actors. While this process enables greater participation and pluralism in religious expression, it also fragments interpretive control, allowing religious narratives to be selectively framed, reinterpreted, or distorted in accordance with media logics.

Mediatization reshapes the symbolic representation of religion. Religious figures, rituals, and practices are frequently transformed into media-friendly images designed for circulation within attention-driven environments. This process often privileges visibility over depth, reducing complex systems of belief into visually striking or emotionally resonant elements. Acts of devotion, for instance, may be presented as isolated spectacles rather than as components of sustained spiritual discipline, reflecting a broader shift from meaning-oriented representation to visibility-oriented presentation.

Mediatization also reconfigures the temporal dimensions of religious engagement. Whereas traditional religious life emphasizes continuity, repetition, and long-term commitment, digital media environments privilege speed, fragmentation, and constant novelty. Religious content is encountered in brief, episodic moments within continuous streams of information, limiting opportunities for sustained reflection and deeper engagement. This contributes to what can be understood as a "flattening" of religious experience, in which interaction becomes immediate yet potentially superficial.

Mediatization does not signify the decline of religion but rather its reconfiguration within a media-saturated society. Religion remains visible and influential; however, its public expression is increasingly shaped by external media logics. This dynamic generates an inherent tension between the core values of religion—such as depth, ethical

guidance, and spiritual discipline—and the operational priorities of media systems, which emphasize attention, circulation, and engagement. Recognizing this tension is essential for understanding how religious content gains prominence in digital environments and why increased visibility does not necessarily translate into meaningful or transformative forms of engagement.

2.3 RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY, PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION AND THE CONSUPTION OF RELIGIOUS CONTENT

Research on digital religion has long asked who holds authority when religious content circulates online. Campbell (2007) examined how religious authority is negotiated, and sometimes contested, in online settings, while Turner (2011) argued that the internet weakens the interpretive monopoly of established religious hierarchies by giving ordinary believers and commentators access to religious knowledge and a public voice. Hjarvard (2013) similarly holds that, in a mediatized culture, media are not only channels but also agents that shape which religious expressions become visible.

The notion of peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), developed to describe how newcomers take part at the edges of a community of practice, offers a useful vocabulary for the low-commitment forms of engagement examined here. Watching, liking or forwarding religious content can be regarded as ways of standing at the periphery of a practice without entering its disciplines or communities. We use the term descriptively. We do not assume that peripheral engagement is, or is not, a step toward fuller participation, because the cross-sectional data collected here cannot speak to such trajectories. Studies of media, religion and meaning-making further stress that audiences do not merely receive religious messages but select, interpret and appropriate them within everyday life (Hoover, 2006). Religious content on social media is therefore consumed alongside news and entertainment, and Hjarvard (2008) describes the resulting "banal" presence of religion in everyday media use as a distinct form of religious expression. In this article, digital spiritual spectatorship refers to this observation-oriented, low-commitment mode of encountering religious content online.

2.3 YOUTH DIGITAL RELIGION, AND THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

The dynamics of mediatization and algorithmic visibility are particularly pronounced among younger generations, who are deeply embedded in digital environments and rely extensively on social media for information, interaction, and identity

construction (Yao, 2025). For contemporary youth, these platforms function not merely as communication tools but as primary spaces for meaning-making and cultural participation. Consequently, religious engagement is increasingly shaped by the affordances and constraints of digital media, where encounters with spiritual content often occur incidentally rather than through deliberate or institutionalized practice.

This shift unfolds within a broader context of rapid social change, in which religious ideologies are subject to ongoing reflection and reassessment, especially among Generation Z and Millennials (Tahom & Srisophon, 2025). Processes of globalization, digital expansion, and rising individualism have contributed to the erosion of traditional, collectively inherited belief systems, replacing them with more individualized and flexible forms of spirituality. Rather than passively adopting established doctrines, individuals increasingly reinterpret and renegotiate religious meanings in ways that align with personal values and experiences. Global trends reinforce this transformation, as the number of individuals identifying as non-religious rose from approximately 35 million in 2008 to around 1.1 billion in 2019, with continued growth projected (Tahom & Srisophon, 2025). This pattern is especially evident among those under 40 and is particularly pronounced in Asia, including countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. In digital contexts, this individualized orientation is further intensified, as algorithm-driven platforms continuously deliver fragmented and decontextualized religious content that can be consumed and shared without requiring sustained commitment or institutional affiliation.

The notion of digital spiritual spectatorship provides a useful conceptual lens. Rather than engaging in structured religious practices, young users increasingly encounter religion as observers, interacting with spiritual narratives through short-form videos, viral posts, and curated feeds. Such engagement is characterized by immediacy, visual appeal, and emotional resonance, yet often lacks depth, continuity, and embodied experience. As Lim (2020) suggests, digital environments can transform religious expression into performative acts oriented toward visibility and circulation, thereby blurring the boundary between spiritual practice and mediated performance.

These dynamics are particularly salient in Vietnam, where a diverse and fluid religious landscape intersects with rapid digital transformation. Religion in Vietnam encompasses a wide range of forms, from indigenous belief systems such as animism and ancestor worship to institutionalized traditions including Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism (Open Development, 2023). While some religions are organized under unified structures, others consist of multiple sects and organizations. As of 2022, the state officially recognized 16 religions and 43 religious organizations, with over 26.5 million adherents, alongside thousands of religious communities and nearly 30,000 places

of worship. At the same time, a significant proportion of the population engages in folk spiritual practices often categorized as "no religion," reflecting a flexible, practice-oriented approach to belief that is embedded in everyday cultural life. This orientation resonates with broader youth patterns, in which formal affiliation may be weak, but spiritual and moral engagement persists in informal and personalized forms.

The expansion of digital infrastructures in Vietnam has further reshaped these patterns of engagement. With high levels of social media penetration among young people, platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have become key sites for the circulation of religious content. However, these platforms operate according to logics that prioritize virality, emotional intensity, and visual immediacy, often reducing complex religious practices and figures to simplified and highly shareable representations. The case of Thich Minh Tue offers an empirical entry point into these debates. Whether digital visibility is accompanied mainly by observation and low-effort interaction, or also by deeper engagement, is an empirical question that this study addresses descriptively.

The literature does not indicate a decline in religious interest among Vietnamese youth, but rather a reconfiguration of how religion is experienced. Digital media make spiritual content easier to find, and they change how people interact with it through speed, visibility and emotional appeal. The Vietnamese case thus offers a setting in which cultural traditions, digital infrastructures and generational change intersect, and in which the notion of digital spiritual spectatorship can be explored descriptively.

The existing literature highlights a fundamental tension in the digital transformation of religion. While social media platforms significantly expand the visibility and accessibility of religious content, they simultaneously reshape the conditions of engagement through algorithmic curation and media logic. This dynamic is particularly evident among younger generations, whose religious experiences are increasingly mediated by digital environments characterized by speed, fragmentation, and visuality. Within the Vietnamese context, these transformations intersect with culturally embedded, flexible forms of religiosity, further complicating how belief and practice are expressed and experienced.

This study aims to describe social media exposure to, and engagement with, content about Thich Minh Tue. It is a quantitative, cross-sectional, exploratory and descriptive investigation. Using a convenience sample of social media users, it maps patterns of exposure, forms of interaction, perceived influence and self-reported behavioral responses. It does not test associations, correlations or causal effects, and it does not seek to generalize to the Vietnamese population.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: Through which channels do respondents report first encountering and viewing content about Thich Minh Tue, and how often do they name him when asked to list Buddhist monks?

RQ2: What forms of interaction with this content, and what motivations for interacting, do respondents report?

RQ3: What influence on their understanding of religion, and what emotional responses, do respondents report after viewing this content?

RQ4: What offline behavioral responses do respondents report?

4 METHODOLOGY

This study is a quantitative, cross-sectional, exploratory and descriptive survey. Its purpose is to map patterns of exposure, forms of interaction, perceived influence and self-reported behavioral responses in relation to social media content about Thich Minh Tue, a case chosen because of its prominence on Vietnamese social media in 2024. The design does not allow conclusions about associations, correlations or causal effects, and no inferential tests were conducted.

4.1 ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

The study involved human participants. The research proposal, including its ethical considerations, was approved in August 2024 by the group of evaluators for the course MDA30012 at Swinburne Vietnam, chaired by Dr. Ngo Bich Ngoc, Dean of the Faculty of Media and Communication, which served as the institutional authority responsible for approving student research at the authors' host institution. Participation was voluntary and anonymous: respondents followed an anonymous survey link, no names were collected, items were not forced, and respondents could leave the questionnaire at any point. Completing and submitting the questionnaire was taken as consent to the use of the anonymized answers for research purposes. Respondents who wished to receive the results could optionally provide an email address at the end of the questionnaire. These addresses, and the IP addresses recorded automatically by the survey platform, were not used in the analysis and were removed from the analytic dataset, which can be accessed via this link: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZBu-pnOZm3-Ym9rjfMmnjt8o4OQQkmvC .

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

An online survey was used to collect standardized self-reported data on respondents' exposure to, interaction with and perceptions of social media content about Thich Minh Tue. Because the sample was drawn by convenience and the data are self-reported at a single point in time, the results describe the responses of this sample. They are not representative of the Vietnamese population and do not identify generalizable patterns or relationships between variables.

4.3 DATA COLLECTION, RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected with an online questionnaire in Vietnamese, hosted on the Qualtrics platform. The survey link was circulated through the authors' professional networks and social media platforms (convenience sampling) and was open from 26 December 2024 to 11 March 2025. The sampling effort targeted young, digitally active people, reflecting the interest in audiences embedded in algorithm-driven media environments. Participation was open to adults who received the link and chose to respond, and no other eligibility restrictions were applied; all respondents who reported their age were 18 or older. The platform recorded 320 responses within this period. One further response, submitted in April 2026 long after data collection had ended, was excluded.

Not every respondent answered every item. Of the 320 responses, 91 contained no answer to any substantive item (respondents who opened the questionnaire and left, or submitted it blank), 229 contained an answer to at least one substantive item, and 200 reached the end of the questionnaire. Items could be skipped and were not forced. All results are therefore reported as frequencies and percentages of the respondents who answered the item concerned (the denominator n is given in every table), and no missing values were imputed. Sample characteristics are reported in Table 1. Among the 198 respondents who reported their age, 66% were aged 18–35 (49% aged 18–25), and the sample is predominantly highly educated and without religious affiliation. The sample should not be read as representative of any wider population. (table on page 87).

4.4 QUESTIONNAIRE

Response formats were single-choice items, multiple-response ("select all that apply") items and open-ended items. The eight emotional responses (inspired, peaceful, empathy, sense of connection to a community, curiosity, skepticism, con-

TABLE 1: Sample characteristics
(% calculated on respondents who answered each item)

CHARACTERISTIC	FREQUENCY	%
Age in grouped bands (n = 198)		
18–25	97	49.0
26–35	33	16.7
36–55	59	29.8
56–75	7	3.5
76 or older	2	1.0
Gender (n = 195)		
Male	40	20.5
Female	150	76.9
Other	5	2.6
Highest education (n = 193)		
Below university	4	2.1
University	143	74.1
Postgraduate	46	23.8
Religious belief (n = 196)		
Buddhism	76	38.8
Other religion	4	2.0
No religious affiliation	116	59.2
Frequency of social media use (n = 198)		
Daily	185	93.4

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

cern, dissatisfaction or disagreement) were rated on a 7-point intensity scale (1 = no feeling at all; 2–3 = very little influence; 4 = moderate; 5–6 = relatively strong; 7 = very strong). Items were not Likert agreement scales. Open-ended items covered the reasons for interacting or not interacting, the perceived role of social media, and the expected effect of taking part in related activities. The items were constructed by the authors to operationalize the four dimensions, informed by the digital religion and mediatization literature reviewed above, and no existing validated scale was adapted. The questionnaire was not formally pretested.

4.5 DATA TREATMENT AND ANALYSIS

Data were exported from the survey platform and analyzed descriptively: absolute frequencies and percentages for categorical items, and means and standard deviations for the 7-point items. For multiple-response items, percentages are calculated on the number of respondents who answered the item, so that they sum to more than 100%. Mentions of monks in the open recall item were coded by name after normalizing spelling and diacritics. Open-ended answers about the reasons for interaction, the role of social media and the effect of participation were read by the authors and are summarized illustratively, without systematic coding or frequencies. No tests of association, correlation or significance were conducted, and no weighting was applied.

5 RESULTS

This section reports descriptive findings from the 320 responses recorded. Because items could be skipped, the number of respondents differs by item (n = 143 to 218 for the substantive items), and every percentage is calculated on the respondents who answered that item. Items that allowed several answers are marked as multiple response, and their percentages sum to more than 100%. The results are organized along three dimensions: awareness and exposure (knowledge), engagement and perception (attitude), and behavioral responses (action).

5.1 AWARENESS AND EXPOSURE (KNOWLEDGE)

In the open item asking respondents to name three Buddhist monks (answered by 208 respondents; Table 2), 128 named Thich Nhat Hanh (61.5% of those who answered, 40.0% of all 320 responses), making him the most frequently named monk, and 66 named Thich Minh Tue (31.7% and 20.6%, respectively). These figures are mention rates in an unprompted recall task. Respondents who knew of him but did not list him among three names are not counted, so they understate awareness. Table 2 also reports the other most frequently named monks. (table on page 89).

Respondents most often reported first encountering content about Thich Minh Tue on Facebook (79.7% of 217 respondents), followed by online news sources (26.7%), word of mouth (20.3%) and YouTube (14.7%). When asked where they view related content, Facebook (77.5%) and TikTok (33.9%) were the platforms reported most often (n = 218).

TABLE 2: Awareness and exposure: monks named and channels of encounter[1]

MONK NAMED (OPEN ITEM)	FREQUENCY	% of n = 208	% of all 320
Thich Nhat Hanh	128	61.5	40.0
Thich Minh Tue	66	31.7	20.6
Thich Chan Quang	27	13.0	8.4
Thich Tri Quang	26	12.5	8.1
ITEM AND RESPONSE OPTION		**FREQUENCY**	**%**
First encounter with the content about Thich Minh Tue (multiple response; n = 217)			
Facebook		173	79.7
Online news sources		58	26.7
Word of mouth		44	20.3
YouTube		32	14.7
MONK NAMED (OPEN ITEM)	**FREQUENCY**	**% of n = 208**	**% of all 320**
Other listed channels		3	1.4
Other (write-in)		23	10.6
First encounter with the content about Thich Minh Tue (multiple response; n = 217)			
Facebook		169	77.5
TikTok		74	33.9
Other listed platforms or channels		94	43.1
Other (write-in)		20	9.2

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

5.2 ENGAGEMENT AND PERCEPTION (ATTITUDE)

Of the 216 respondents who answered the content item, 41.7% reported being most interested in videos of the walking journey and 23.6% in inspirational imagery or storytelling (Table 3). A further 19.4% chose "other" and wrote an answer, many of which stated that they were not interested in any content. The interaction item was answered by 143 respondents (Table 3). Of these, 126 (88.1%) reported liking posts, while following related pages (10.5%), sharing content (5.6%) and commenting (4.2%) were

[1] Multiple-response items: respondents could choose several options, so percentages sum to more than 100%. "Other listed" rows pool several response options, counting each respondent once.

reported far less often. Liking is a low-effort form of interaction, so the pattern is one of widespread but light interaction within this subsample.

The figures for recall and interaction should not be compared directly, because they rest on different denominators. The 21% of all responses (66 of 320) who named Thich Minh Tue unprompted refers to an open recall task answered by 208 respondents, whereas the 88% who liked related content refers to the 143 respondents who answered the interaction item (126 of 143, or 39.4% of all 320 responses). The two figures therefore describe different subsamples and different behaviors, and they are compatible. The interaction item was answered by 143 of the 213 respondents who answered the direct participation item. The data do not show why the others did not answer it, so the results are reported as those of a subsample.

Among the 203 respondents who answered the motivation item (multiple response), curiosity was cited most often (51.7%), followed by influence of peers or family (28.6%), alignment with religious beliefs (21.7%) and skepticism or criticism (10.3%). (table on page 91).

Regarding perceived influence (n = 210; Table 4), 55.7% reported no significant influence on their understanding of religion, 34.3% reported expanded knowledge, 24.8% reported inspiration and 1.4% reported changed beliefs. On the eight emotional responses (Table 5), the most common answer for every response was 1 (no feeling at all), chosen by between 27% and 66% of those who answered. Strong emotional responses (5–7) were reported most often for curiosity (26.2%) and peacefulness (24.7%), and least often for dissatisfaction or disagreement (4.4%) and concern (11.7%). Mean ratings ranged from 1.81 to 3.29 on the 7-point scale. (*table on page 91 and 92*)

5.3 BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES (ACTION)

Of the 213 respondents who answered the item on direct participation, 211 (99.1%) had never taken part in or witnessed the walking journey in person (Table 6). Regarding behavioral responses after viewing the content (multiple response; n = 198), 46.0% reported feeling no connection to the content and avoiding further engagement, 27.8% sought additional information and 17.7% discussed the topic with others. More substantive responses were reported less often: applying related ideas to their lives (13.6%), changing personal beliefs or views (10.6%) and taking part in community or charitable activities (9.1%). Only 5.1% expressed interest in joining related communities, and 1.0% reported active opposition.

The share reporting changed beliefs differs between the two items that asked about it (1.4% in the item on understanding of religion, 10.6% in the item

TABLE 3: Content of interest, forms of interaction and motivations[2]

ITEM AND RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	%
Content of most interest (single choice; n = 216)		
Videos of the walking journey	90	41.7
Inspirational imagery or storytelling	51	23.6
Other listed content types	33	15.3
Other (write-in; many state no interest)	42	19.4
Ways of interacting with the content (multiple response; n = 143)		
Liking posts	126	88.1
Following related pages	15	10.5
Sharing content	8	5.6
Commenting	6	4.2
Other form of interaction	3	2.1
Motivations for interacting (multiple response; n = 203)		
Curiosity	105	51.7
Influence of peers or family	58	28.6
Alignment with religious beliefs	44	21.7
Skepticism or criticism	21	10.3
Other motivation	41	20.2

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

TABLE 4: Self-reported influence on understanding of religion[3]

ITEM AND RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	%
Self-reported influence on understanding of religion (multiple response; n = 210)		
No significant influence	117	55.7
Expanded knowledge	72	34.3
Inspiration	52	24.8
Changed beliefs	3	1.4

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

[2] Interaction and motivation are multiple-response items. The interaction item was answered by 143 respondents.

[3] Multiple-response item.

TABLE 5: Amotional responses after viewing the content (7-point intensity scale, 1 = no feeling at all, 7 = very strong)[4]

EMOTIONAL RESPONSE	N	MEAN	SD	RATED 1 (NO FEELING), f (%)	RATED 5–7, f (%)
Inspired	203	2.89	1.88	71 (35.0)	37 (18.2)
Peaceful	190	2.96	1.92	70 (36.8)	47 (24.7)
Empathy	186	2.91	1.79	61 (32.8)	39 (21.0)
Sense of connection to a community	187	2.80	1.83	72 (38.5)	38 (20.3)
Curiosity	183	3.29	1.86	50 (27.3)	48 (26.2)
Skepticism	181	2.60	1.62	69 (38.1)	25 (13.8)
Concern	180	2.39	1.57	80 (44.4)	21 (11.7)
Dissatisfaction or disagreement	180	1.81	1.34	119 (66.1)	8 (4.4)

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

on behavior and views). The items are worded differently and were answered by different numbers of respondents, so they should not be read as measuring the same thing, and we do not interpret the difference. (table on page 93).

5.4 OPEN-ENDED ANSWERS ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Open-ended answers were given by 164 respondents on reasons for interacting or not interacting, 162 on the role of social media and 159 on the expected effect of taking part in related activities. These answers were short and were not systematically coded, so no frequencies are reported. They are used here only for illustration (translated by the authors). Many respondents who explained why they did not interact said that they were not interested or had little time. Several described social media as a channel that spread the monk's story quickly, including to younger people. A few said that social media had no influence on them, and one noted that it carries both accurate and inaccurate images of the monk. Among answers on the effect of participating in related activities, "no influence" and "I would not participate" were common.

[4] n differs by item because respondents could skip items.

TABLE 6: Direct participation and behavioral responses[5]

ITEM AND RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	%
Participated in or witnessed the walking journey in person (single choice; n = 213)		
Yes	2	0.9
No	211	99.1
Behavioral responses after viewing the content (multiple response; n = 198)		
No connection to the content; avoided further engagement	91	46.0
Sought additional information	55	27.8
Discussed the topic with others	35	17.7
Applied related ideas to their own lives	27	13.6
Changed personal beliefs or views	21	10.6
Took part in community or charitable activities	18	9.1
Interest in joining related communities	10	5.1
Active opposition	2	1.0

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

6 DISCUSSION

This exploratory survey describes how a convenience sample of Vietnamese social media users, predominantly young, highly educated and without religious affiliation, reported exposure to and engagement with content about Thich Minh Tue. The findings concern this sample only. The interpretation below is offered as a reading of descriptive patterns in light of the literature, not as a test of it.

Reported exposure was concentrated on a small number of platforms, with Facebook the most frequent channel for both first encounter (80%) and viewing (78%), and TikTok next for viewing (34%). Respondents were most interested in videos of the walking journey (42%) and in inspirational imagery or storytelling (24%). This is compatible with the argument that media logic favors visually engaging, easily consumed formats (Hjarvard, 2008; Zhang, 2025), although the

[5] Behavioral responses are a multiple-response item.

survey did not compare these formats with doctrinal content. Verón's (2014) distinction between production and recognition provides a further lens. Content about Thich Minh Tue was produced in one context and is received, commented on and reinterpreted in others, and the survey captures only a thin slice of that recognition. It does not measure how meaning shifts as the content circulates.

Among respondents who answered the interaction item, interaction was dominated by liking (88%), and following pages, sharing and commenting were each reported by about 10% or fewer. Curiosity was the most frequently reported motivation (52%), whereas alignment with religious beliefs was reported by 22% and skepticism by 10%. This descriptive profile resembles what the literature calls low-commitment, observation-oriented engagement, and it is the sense in which the notion of digital spiritual spectatorship is used here. The data do not show why respondents interacted in this way or whether the pattern would differ among respondents with higher or lower exposure, because exposure intensity was not measured and no cross-tabulations were run.

56% of respondents reported no significant influence on their understanding of religion, 99% had not taken part in or witnessed the walking journey in person, and 46% reported no connection to the content. Small minorities reported more substantive responses, such as applying ideas to their lives (14%) or taking part in community or charitable activities (9%). Emotional responses were mostly weak, with the most common rating being "no feeling at all." Because these are one-time self-reports without a baseline, they cannot establish whether the content did or did not change anyone's beliefs. The difference between the two items on changed beliefs (1% and 11%) further suggests that responses are sensitive to item wording.

Within the Vietnamese context, the literature describes religious life as flexible, syncretic and embedded in everyday practice rather than strictly institutional (Open Development, 2023). In this sample, 59% reported no religious affiliation and 39% identified as Buddhist. The reported patterns are consistent with that description, but the survey did not test it, and a sample with a different religious composition might report different patterns.

7 LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is a non-probability convenience sample drawn from the authors' networks and social media, and it is skewed toward young, highly educated respondents, so the results cannot be generalized. Second, all data are self-reported, which makes them susceptible to recall and social

desirability effects. Third, the design is cross-sectional and descriptive, and no associations were tested. Fourth, item non-response was substantial: only 200 of 320 responses reached the end of the questionnaire, and the number of respondents differs across items (n = 143 to 218), which may bias item-level percentages in unknown ways. Fifth, the questionnaire was constructed by the authors, was not pretested and was not validated against an established scale, and open-ended answers were not systematically coded. Sixth, data were collected between December 2024 and March 2025, after the peak of public attention in 2024, and concern a single case. Future research could use probability or quota samples, validated scales, measures of exposure intensity that allow association tests, longitudinal designs, and qualitative methods to examine how audiences interpret religious content online.

8 CONCLUSION

This exploratory descriptive study mapped patterns of exposure, interaction, perceived influence and self-reported behavior in relation to social media content about Thich Minh Tue among 320 convenience-sampled respondents in Vietnam. Respondents reported encountering and viewing the content mainly on Facebook and TikTok, interacting mostly in light ways such as liking, and rarely taking part in offline activities related to the monk. A majority reported no significant influence on their understanding of religion. These patterns describe the sample and do not establish associations or effects.

The patterns are compatible with the notion of digital spiritual spectatorship as a descriptive lens for observation-oriented, low-commitment engagement with religious content, and with the literature on mediatization and digital religion. Testing whether visibility, motivation or interaction type are related to deeper engagement requires data that measure these variables and analyses designed for that purpose. Longitudinal research could further examine whether sustained exposure over time is associated with changes in identity, values or spiritual practice.

Findings of this kind may interest scholars and practitioners of religious communication, who can use descriptive baselines like these to ask what forms of engagement audiences report in the first place. Any inference about how religious content should be designed or framed, however, needs evidence beyond this exploratory survey.

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ISSN: 3086-2442 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.19141/Crosspoint.v2.2026.2177

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ISSN: 3086-2442 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.19141/Crosspoint.v2.2026.2177

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ISSN: 3086-2442 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.19141/Crosspoint.v2.2026.2177

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Submitted: June 3, 2026
Approved: October 20, 2026
Revised: November 6, 2026
Edited: November 13, 2026
Published: November 18, 2026