

# Ritual behavior affects perceived objectivity of moral norms

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## INTRODUCTION

Increasing the perception of moral norms as objective **promotes norm adherence** (Rai & Holyoak, 2013), thus stabilizing within-group cooperation.

How do groups fabricate their norms to appear more objective?

**Religious elements** such as declared religiosity (Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2015), religious grounding of morality (Goodwin & Darley, 2008), and belief in supernatural punishment (Sarkissian & Phelan, 2019), has been shown to increase **moral objectivity**.

Whereas groups vary substantially on these elements, we argue that a crucial, less variable element has been neglected – **ritual form**.

Every group uses ritual performance to communicate, negotiate, and sustain beliefs associated with their norms.

Rituals (as **formal public displays**) communicate acceptance of group norms through **visible and tangible anchoring** (e.g., piercings), **making physical what is not** (e.g., prestige, commitment, loyalty, fairness).

We propose that through rituals, groups charge associated norms with objectivity.

## MORAL OBJECTIVITY

- in opposition to the realm of subjectivity and relativity (e.g., food preferences), people tend to perceive the realm of morality **closer to the realm of factual propositions** (e.g., Moon is closer to Earth than Sun)
- perception of moral norms as:
  - **absolute and everlasting**
  - **existing independently of:**
    - time and space (universality)
    - circumstances (absoluteness)
    - and humankind (realism)

## RITUAL FORM

Cross-culturally recurrent patterns performed in

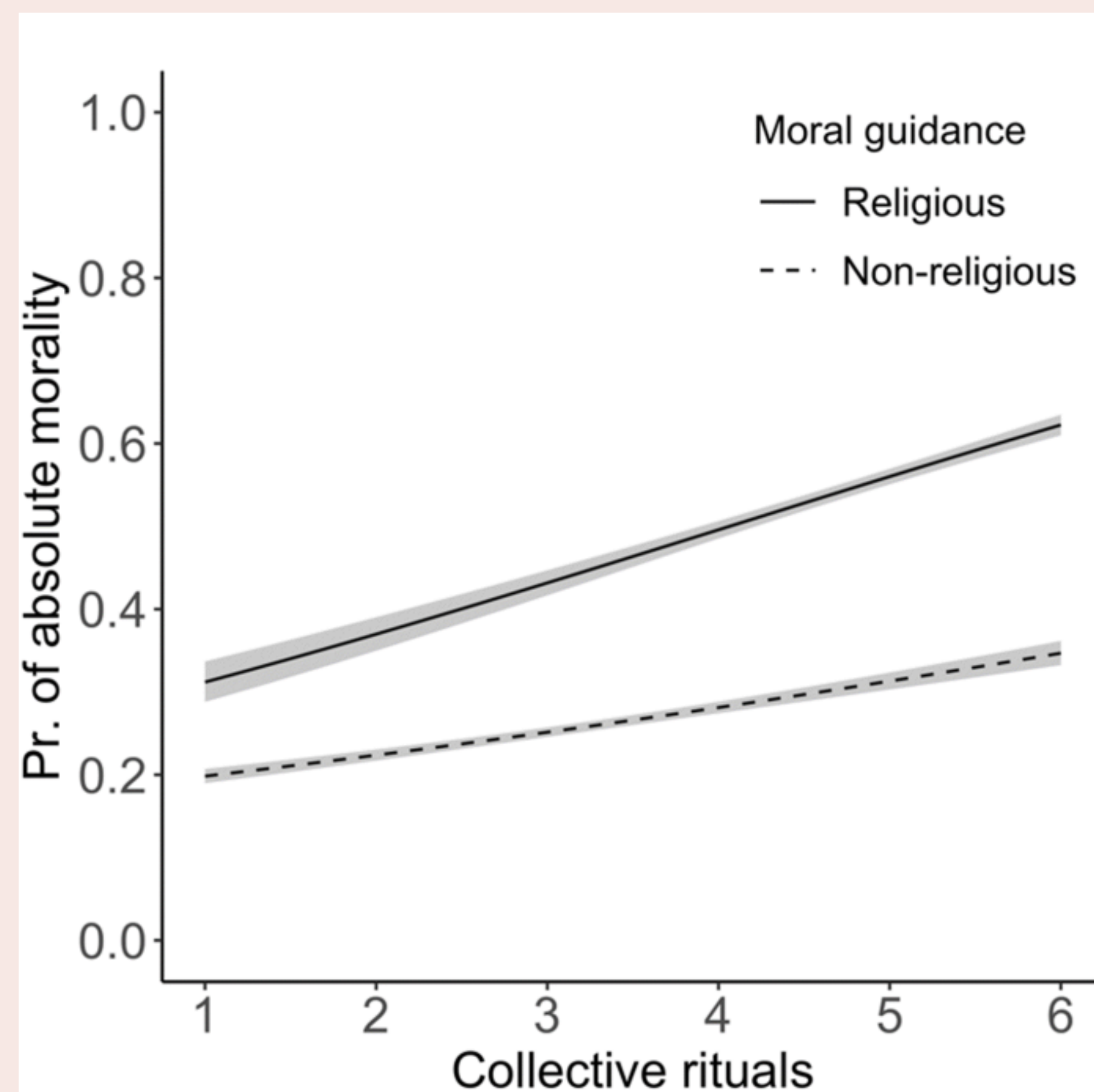
- rigid
- repetitive
- highly exaggerated sequences (Rappaport, 1979)

## METHODS

- 6 correlational studies
- primary and secondary datasets
- various populations (representative of US population – **Pew 2014**, representative of various countries between 1981 and 2004 – **World/European value survey**, **Czech Republic**, **pilgrims of Santiago**)

## HYPOTHESIS 1

**The more frequently one attends religious rituals** (i.e., rituals that are symbolically linked to morality), **the more one would perceive morality as objective.**



Building on Rappaport (1979), we identified three facilitating **aspects of ritual form** - **materialization**, **digitalization**, and **invariance** - that should increase the perceived objectivity of norms by physically anchoring them, clearly delineating them, and making them seem eternal.

## 3 RITUAL ASPECTS

### MATERIALIZATION

- anchors moral orders in the corporeal performance
- lends the solidity of objects to something previously immaterial and makes it directly accessible to the senses

### DIGITALIZATION

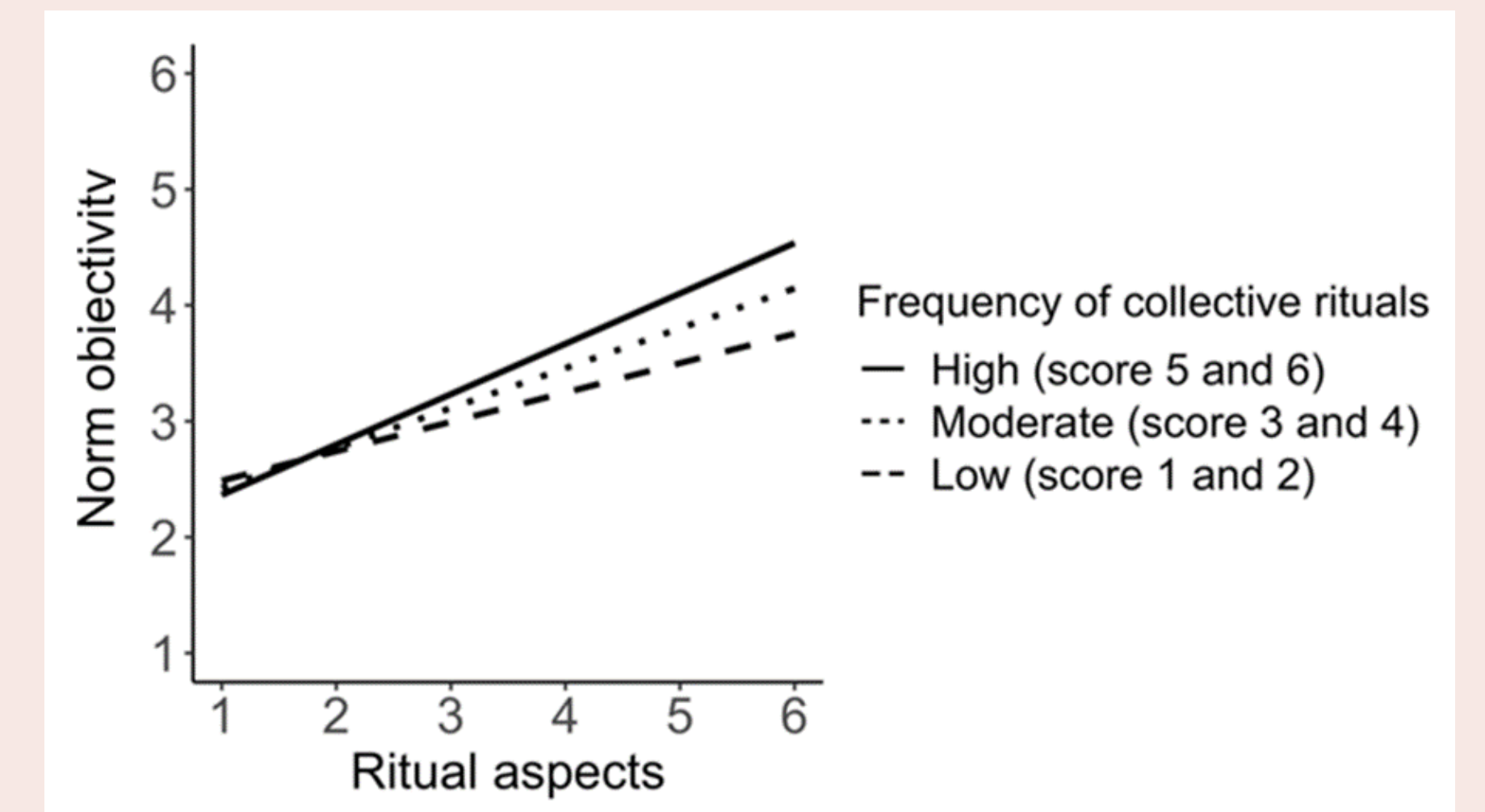
- out of continuous, hard to quantify, complex, ambiguous, analog states fashions clearly distinct, digital, publicly observable states facilitating comparison

### INVARIANCE

- impression of eternally existing orders by repeating invariant structure
- seeming endurance and changelessness

## HYPOTHESIS 2

**An increase in perceived objectivity of norms would be associated with the stronger perception of ritual aspects** (i.e., materialization, digitalization, and invariance).



## CONCLUSION

**The more people attend religious rituals, the more they perceive moral norms as objectively existing**

- stable in **multiple populations**,
- with **varying degrees of religiosity**.

Rituals achieve this **not only by their symbolic content**, which is cross-culturally highly variable, but also through a cross-culturally recurrent **ritual form**.

**The more** people felt that religious rituals are **invariant** and have **materializing** and **digitalizing** potential, the more they perceived moral **norms as objective**.

## FOR MORE DETAILS SEE

Chvaja, R., Horský, J., Lang, M., & Kundt, R. (2023). Positive Association Between Ritual Performance and Perceived Objectivity of Moral Norms. *The International Journal of the Psychology of Religion*, 33(2), 115–135.

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