DECEPTIVE SPIRIT MEDIUMS IN THAILAND'S FAITH ECONOMY: MOTIVES, METHODS, AND ETHICAL RESTORATION

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: In Thailand, spirit mediumship represents a complex interplay of cultural tradition, local religiosity, and the contemporary faith economy. Rooted in community practices rather than canonical Theravāda Buddhism, which prohibits monks from engaging in such activities, mediumship occupies a culturally significant yet doctrinally peripheral space. While many mediums serve meaningful roles within their communities, others exploit their spiritual authority for personal gain, engaging in deceptive practices that harm individuals and erode social trust. This study aimed to investigate the motives, methods, and impacts of deceptive spirit mediums in Thailand's faith economy, and to explore how Buddhadhamma could support ethical accountability and reform. By situating deceptive practices within both cultural and doctrinal contexts, the research sought to provide insights that contribute to peacebuilding, ethical reform, and community resilience.

Methodology: A qualitative design was employed to capture the complexity of lived experiences. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected informants from Krabi, Thailand, including victims, former followers, and reformed mediums. Data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis with thematic coding, chosen for its suitability in identifying recurring patterns, psychological drivers, and ethical dimensions within narratives. This interpretive approach provided an in-depth understanding of deception and its broader social consequences.

Main Results: Results revealed that financial profit, social status, and power were the primary motivations for deception. Mediums used staged paranormal phenomena, fabricated messages, and ritual performances to exploit emotional vulnerabilities and consolidate authority. The consequences unfolded on three levels: 1) Economic harm, as victims faced financial exploitation; 2) Emotional harm, including trauma, disillusionment, and betrayal; and 3) Social Harm, marked by the erosion of trust and weakening of community cohesion. This hierarchy underscores the urgent and far-reaching nature of the problem.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This study reflected the principles of applied Buddhism within the context of globalization, integrating Buddhist ethics with contemporary concerns and demonstrating how Buddhadhamma could support ethical accountability and reform. The Brahmajāla

Sutta explicitly prohibits bhikkhus from engaging in wrong livelihoods such as fortune-telling, divination, charms, spirit mediumship, and exorcism, highlighting the incompatibility of these practices with Buddhist discipline. While spirit mediumship lies outside canonical Buddhism, the ethical teachings of Buddhadhamma particularly Sīla (Ethical Conduct), Sati (Mindfulness), Karuṇā (Compassion), and karmic accountability, emerge as culturally resonant resources for reform. The study identifies both the strengths (Cultural Relevance, Moral Grounding, Community Accountability Through the Sangha) and limitations (Selective or Superficial Application of Buddhist Ethics) of relying on religious principles for reform. Integrating Buddhist ethics could enhance spiritual integrity and mitigate manipulative practices in local contexts.

Conclusions: The findings demonstrated that spiritual deception poses significant risks not only to individuals but also to community trust, cultural integrity, and policy credibility. This research illuminated the psychological, cultural, and structural factors that sustain such practices, highlighting the urgent need for ethical reform. A multi-pronged approach is recommended, combining regulatory oversight, public education, and the establishment of clear ethical standards for spiritual practitioners. Importantly, integrating culturally embedded ethical frameworks, particularly those rooted in Buddhadhamma, can facilitate moral transformation, strengthen community resilience, and promote sustainable, trustworthy spiritual practices. Such integration can foster moral transformation, advance peacebuilding efforts, strengthen community resilience, and promote sustainable spiritual practices. Failure to act risks entrenching exploitation and eroding the social fabric, whereas proactive reform offers the potential for transformative change guided by Buddhist ethics.

Keywords: Deceptive Practices, Spirit Mediums, Krabi in Thailand, Faith Economy, Buddhadhamma

Introduction

In recent years, "Faith" has transcended the boundaries of religion and rituals in Thailand. The "Faith Economy" refers to the economic activity generated by religious institutions, organizations, and individuals, encompassing a wide range of goods, services, and financial transactions. It includes activities like donations to religious organizations, consumption of religious goods and services, and the operation of faith-based businesses (DiMaggio, 2018). Over recent decades, there has been a notable increase in both public and academic interest in the practices of spirit mediums, driven by their profound cultural, psychological, and spiritual implications. This surge in attention reflects a broader fascination with how these practitioners serve as intermediaries between the physical and the spiritual realms, offering guidance and comfort to their followers. Spirit mediumship, deeply entrenched in diverse cultures across the globe, plays a pivotal role in many religious and spiritual traditions, revered for its ability to connect the living with the spiritual world. However, this veneration also presents vulnerabilities. Within the community of legitimate spirit mediums, there is a clandestine subset engaged in deceptive practices, exploiting these revered spiritual channels for personal gain. The operations of these fraudulent mediums not only betray the trust of their followers but also have far-reaching consequences, undermining individual financial security,

psychological health, and spiritual well-being. The impact of their deception stretches beyond individual victims, affecting families and communities and eroding trust in legitimate spiritual practices (Kalvig, 2016); (Johnston & Johnston, 2024).

In Thailand, spirit mediums, known as "Rang Song" or "Mar Song," occupy a significant position within the nation's spiritual and cultural fabric. Believed to channel spirits, deities, or ancestral souls through trance states induced by music, chanting, and dance, they function as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical realms. Their practices reflect a syncretic blend of Buddhism and animist traditions, emblematic of Thai religiosity; However, spirit mediumship is associated with local practices rather than scholarly Theravāda Buddhism, which prohibits monks from engaging in such practices. Beyond ritual performances, spirit mediums serve as community healers, counsellors, and guardians, particularly in rural contexts where they play important roles in conflict resolution, life-cycle events, and social cohesion. However, perceptions of their legitimacy vary: While many revere their functions, urban and younger demographics often view them as superstitious or outdated. The commercialization of their practices, especially fee-based services, has also invited scepticism and criticism. Despite these tensions, spirit mediums remain a compelling element of Thai cultural heritage, illustrating how tradition adapts within modernity and offering insight into the dynamic interplay of religion, culture, and societal change (Baird, 2014); (White, 2017); (Pinnukul et al., 2020); (Limwongse & Makoto, 2023).

The phenomenon of spirit mediums, who claim the ability to communicate with the non-physical realm, is widespread across cultures and historically embedded in religious traditions where such figures often occupy positions of reverence and authority (Kitiarsa, 2005); (Patamajorn, 2008); (Yee & Chai, 2021). Yet, this influential status inevitably raises concerns about the authenticity of their claims and the potential for deception. In Thailand, this dynamic can be understood as a conflict between trust and exploitation: While many followers seek guidance, healing, and communal support, others encounter manipulation that undermines confidence in spiritual practices. The principle of compassion (Karuṇā), central to Buddhadhamma, provides a culturally grounded approach to conflict resolution by fostering empathy, accountability, and the restoration of social trust. Crucially, spirit mediumship is a folk religious practice, shaped by animist and Brahmanic traditions and later intertwined with popular Buddhism, rather than a feature of canonical Theravāda doctrine, which emphasizes ethical conduct (Sīla), mindfulness (Sati), and wisdom (Paññā). The case of Rang Song thus offers rich insights into the intersections of religion, culture, psychology, and social change in contemporary Thai society. While global scholarship has examined spiritual and religious practices extensively, research specifically addressing deceptive practices in spirit mediumship remains limited. Existing studies highlight cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions but often overlook the integration of psychological drivers and tactical mechanisms of fraud. This study addresses that gap by examining how cultural, psychological, and socio-economic factors interact to enable deception among spirit mediums, and by considering the wider implications for belief systems, community structures, and resource distribution.

Buddhadhamma and Spirit Mediumship

The relationship between Buddhadhamma and spirit mediumship is complex, shaped by diverse interpretations across doctrinal traditions and cultural settings. Classical Buddhism emphasizes liberation through ethical conduct (Sīla), mental discipline (Samādhi), And wisdom (Paññā), focusing on impermanence, suffering, and non-self. This framework discourages reliance on rituals or supernatural intermediaries for salvation or material gain. Although Buddhist texts recognize spiritual beings and psychic powers, such elements are peripheral rather than central to enlightenment. Nonetheless, spirit mediumship remains widespread in many Buddhist societies, particularly in Southeast and East Asia, where Buddhism has merged with pre-Buddhist animistic traditions. In these contexts, mediums serve roles in healing, guidance, communication with the dead, and communal rituals, often legitimized through syncretic blends of Brahmanic and Buddhist practices. Certain traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, integrate ritual engagement with spirits, usually for protection rather than personal benefit. Scholars have distinguished between "Dharmic Buddhism," aligned with canonical teachings, and "Karmic Buddhism," which incorporates popular practices involving merit-making and supernatural forces. Consequently, while spirit mediumship lies outside the doctrinal core of Buddhadhamma, its persistence reflects the dynamic interplay between Buddhist orthodoxy and local spiritual needs (Kitiarsa, 2005); (Patamajorn, 2008); (Sirisawad, 2016); (Cohen, 2020).

Psychological Motivations

Psychological research has long examined the drivers of deceptive behaviour, identifying factors such as personal gain, societal pressures, and personality traits like Machiavellianism. The latter, defined by manipulativeness, exploitation, and deceit in pursuit of self-interest, is especially salient in contexts where strategic manipulation produces tangible benefits. Within the sphere of spirit mediumship, these psychological predispositions manifest in distinctive ways. Mediums may exploit follower's spiritual beliefs and the trust vested in them to secure financial or social rewards, often through calculated fabrications of supernatural experiences or messages to bolster credibility and authority. This deception extends beyond opportunism, reflecting a deliberate manipulation of religious and cultural sentiments. Moreover, socio-cultural conditions, such as economic instability or collective uncertainty, intensify these dynamics, providing fertile ground for mediums to offer illusory solutions and comfort while reinforcing their influence. Thus, the motivations underpinning deceptive practices in spirit mediumship emerge from a convergence of individual psychological traits and broader social pressures, forming a complex interplay that sustains such behaviours. Understanding these intertwined drivers is essential to grasping the full spectrum of deceptive practices within this spiritual domain (Deci & Richard, 2012); (Samacari, 2017); (Mulyadi et al., 2023); (Seda, 2023).

Methodologies of Deception

The methodologies employed by deceptive spirit mediums are diverse and strategically designed to manipulate the beliefs of their followers. Research identifies several recurrent tactics, including the fabrication of supernatural phenomena through staged events or physical effects. Such performances may involve the use of technology, sleight of hand, or audiovisual manipulations

to create convincing illusions of paranormal activity. Equally prevalent is the delivery of fraudulent messages, wherein mediums claim to transmit communications from deceased relatives or spiritual beings. This practice not only enhances their perceived authority but also exploits the emotional vulnerabilities of individuals seeking solace or closure. These methods reflect a sophisticated grasp of psychological mechanisms, as deceptive mediums skillfully read audience reactions, adapt their performances accordingly, and capitalize on cognitive biases that predispose belief in the supernatural. The integration of technological devices with psychological manipulation strengthens the credibility of these deceptions while simultaneously complicating their exposure or refutation. Consequently, understanding mediumistic deception requires attention to both its technical execution and its psychological underpinnings (Hodges, 2005); (Patamajorn, 2008); (Willard & Norenzayan, 2013); (Earnest, 2024).

Impacts on Followers

The consequences of deception in spirit mediumship are profound and multifaceted, affecting individuals, communities, and broader cultural-religious systems. At the individual level, followers who trust in the purported abilities of mediums may experience financial exploitation, often investing significant resources in services promising spiritual or worldly benefits. Psychological harm is also prevalent, including emotional distress, disillusionment, and a sense of betrayal when spiritual interventions fail or deceptions are revealed. On a communal scale, such practices erode social trust by violating shared spiritual norms, fostering skepticism, and undermining confidence in legitimate practitioners, which can contribute to social discord and diminished cohesion. At a broader cultural and religious level, exposure of fraudulent mediumship can devalue authentic spiritual experiences, challenge traditional institutions, and alter the cultural landscape by prompting the abandonment or heavy scrutiny of historically significant practices. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate that deception in spirit mediumship undermines both interpersonal trust and the integrity of spiritual traditions, emphasizing the need for vigilant oversight and the enforcement of ethical standards to protect followers and preserve the authenticity of communal and cultural spiritual life (Walach et al., 2009); (Boynton et al., 2013); (Yee & Chai, 2021); (Kassem, 2024).

Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the motives, methods, and impacts of deceptive spirit mediums in Thailand's faith economy, and to explore how Buddhadhamma could support ethical accountability and reform.

Methodology

This research utilised a qualitative design to delve deeply into the motivations and methods employed by spirit mediums in their deceptive practices. Such a design facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the intricate psychological motivations and interpersonal dynamics at play. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews were structured around a series of open-ended questions crafted to probe into the participant's personal experiences,

perceptions, and responses to the deceptive practices encountered. This approach was intended to elicit rich, detailed narratives that provide insight into the complex phenomena under study. To ensure clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions for the main study, a pilot test was conducted with a select group of participants. This preliminary phase involved presenting the devised questions to the group and soliciting their feedback regarding the clarity, relevance, and overall suitability of the questions. The participants were encouraged to openly share their perspectives, providing insights into any potential ambiguities or aspects of the questions that might lead to misunderstandings. The feedback obtained from this pilot test proved invaluable, highlighting areas where modifications were necessary to enhance the clarity and effectiveness of the interview questions. Adjustments were subsequently made to refine the wording and structure of the questions based on this input. Moreover, the pilot test served as a crucial opportunity to assess the comfort level of the participants with the interview process. Ensuring that participants felt at ease during the interviews was paramount, as this would likely influence the authenticity and depth of their responses during the actual study.

This study involved 15 purposively selected key informants, chosen for their direct and meaningful experiences with spirit mediums. The sample included former followers, victims of deceptive practices, and reformed spirit mediums willing to candidly discuss their past engagements. Participants met strict inclusion criteria: 1) Aged 18 or older to ensure informed consent; 2) Thai nationals residing in Krabi province, maintaining cultural and geographical consistency; and 3) Direct experience with spirit mediums as victims or witnesses. These carefully defined criteria ensured that participant's accounts accurately reflected the phenomena under investigation, enhancing the validity of the findings. To further strengthen trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in reflexivity, critically examining their positionality and potential biases throughout data collection and analysis. This involved maintaining reflective notes, questioning assumptions, and continuously considering how personal perspectives might shape interpretation, ensuring a rigorous and balanced analysis of participant's experiences. Data were collected in April 2024, with procedures designed to capture in-depth insights.

The interviews conducted as part of this study were meticulously audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed to enable comprehensive content analysis. This study employed qualitative content analysis, a systematic technique for reducing data into distinct categories or themes. This method relies heavily on the researcher's capacity for inductive reasoning, allowing for the extraction of valid inferences directly from the data. Throughout the analysis, the data were rigorously examined and continuously compared, enabling the derivation of themes and categories directly from the content. In alignment with the qualitative research methodology, the responses from the participants were processed and analysed using Taguette, a specialised software application designed for qualitative data analysis. Taguette supports a diverse array of data types, including interview transcripts, survey responses, and responses to open-ended questions. The software aids in the encoding of text segments, simplifying the process of identifying patterns or themes within the data. This process involves highlighting relevant text segments and assigning

them tags or codes, with the flexibility to introduce new tags as the analysis evolves. Taguette further allows for multiple tags per text segment to accommodate the encapsulation of multiple ideas. Following the initial tagging, the data were exported to a Microsoft Word document for more detailed analysis. This subsequent phase involved a cognitive process of associating similar codes and grouping them into overarching themes. A word frequency analysis was conducted to augment the efficiency of data management and analysis. This analysis highlighted the most frequently occurring words within the data, aiding in the identification of key themes and concepts. The utilisation of a word cloud provided a visual representation of these frequencies, facilitating a more structured and in-depth exploration of the collected data and enabling a more precise navigation through its complexities.

Therefore, in this study, content analysis combined with the use of Taguette served as the primary methodological approach for analysing the interview transcripts. This approach facilitated a systematic categorization and interpretation of the data, enabling the extraction of meaningful insights. The themes identified through this rigorous analytical process were instrumental in addressing the study's objectives and deepening the understanding of the deceptive practices of spirit mediums. A word cloud was incorporated into the data analysis phase to augment the analysis of the interview transcripts. This visual tool proved especially beneficial for rapidly identifying and displaying the most frequently occurring words within the dataset. The use of a word cloud allows for an immediate visual representation of prevalent themes and concepts, providing a clear and impactful overview at a glance. Such visual tools are pivotal in enhancing the comprehensibility and accessibility of complex data, thereby aiding in the more effective communication of key findings and insights.

Results and Discussion

Through a systematic analysis of participant's responses, several prominent themes were identified. The study's results provided significant insights into the motivations and methods utilised by deceptive spirit mediums, substantiating the research objectives with detailed findings. The data collected and analysed revealed a complex interplay of psychological, social, and tactical dynamics that facilitated fraudulent activities in the realm of spirit mediumship. Furthermore, to enhance comprehension of the findings, a word frequency query was generated, yielding a visually represented word cloud (Figure 1). This word cloud prominently displayed the most frequently used words during the interviews, providing immediate insight into the main themes.

The word cloud, as shown in Figure 1, effectively synthesised key themes from a text that scrutinised unethical behaviours in spirit mediumship. This visualisation tool highlighted the frequency and relevance of terms within the document, with larger and more prominent words indicating major topics of discussion. Central themes such as "Deception" and "Practices" dominated the visual field, emphasising the core focus on the manipulative tactics employed by spirit mediums. The word cloud also brought attention to the primary motivators behind these unethical behaviours, with terms like "Financial," "Personal Gain," and "Power" suggesting significant drivers. Additionally, it outlined

the methods used by mediums, including "Fabrication" and "Audiovisual Effects," to create convincing illusions of supernatural phenomena. In addition, the psychological and social impacts of these deceptions were represented by terms such as "Trust," "Community," "Emotional," and "Betrayal," highlighting the profound effects on individuals and their communities. Ethical considerations were also a focal point, with references to "Machiavellianism," "Unethical," and "Morality" underscoring the moral dilemmas faced by practitioners. Lastly, words like "Reflecting" and "Ethical Grounds" suggested a narrative of introspection and potential ethical reform within the practice. This word cloud served not only as a visual summary of the study's content but also as an analytical tool that offered insights into the dominant discussions about deceptive practices in spirit mediumship, encapsulating the complex interplay between personal motives, employed methods, and their broader impacts.
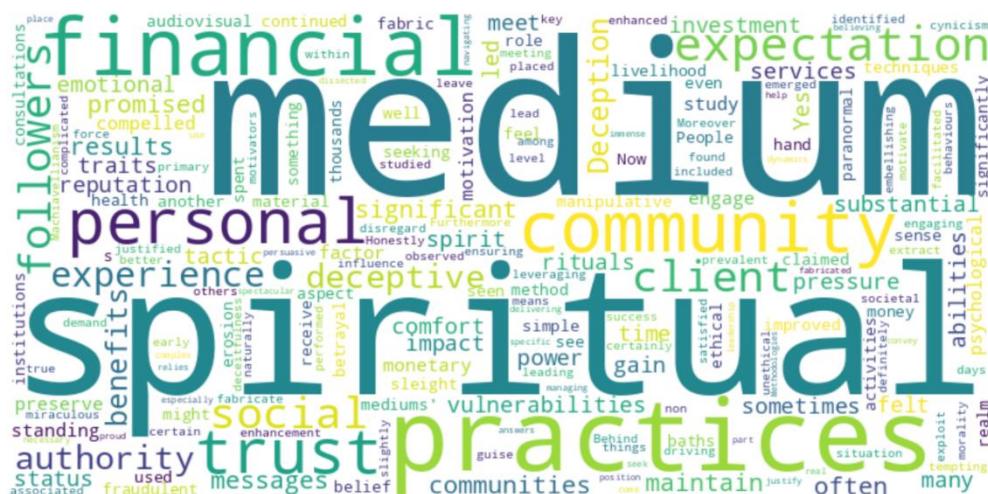
Figure 1 Word Cloud: Deceptive Practices in Spirit Mediumship

Motivations Behind Deception

The study identified key psychological factors that motivate spirit mediums to engage in deceptive practices. It was found that the primary motivation for engaging in deceptive practices was personal gain. This included financial benefits, social status enhancement, and power over others. Spirit mediums were observed to exploit the vulnerabilities of their clients, leveraging their authority and the trust placed in them to extract monetary and non-monetary benefits. Furthermore, the influence of societal expectations and pressures also emerged as a significant factor. Some mediums felt compelled to maintain their status within their communities by meeting the expectations for miraculous results, leading them to fabricate experiences to preserve their reputation and community standing. Moreover, traits associated with Machiavellianism, such as deceitfulness, cynicism, and a disregard for morality, were prevalent among the media studied. These traits facilitated manipulative behaviours and justified unethical practices under the guise of spiritual authority.

"It is true that personal gain, financial benefits, enhanced social status, and power are significant motivators that can be tempting. In my early days, the financial aspect was certainly a driving force. This is not just a spiritual role; It is also a livelihood. The better I performed, the more my services were in demand, which naturally improved my financial situation" (Personal Interview 1, 2024).

"Honestly, it is complicated. Yes, the financial aspect is significant because this is my livelihood. There is a pressure to maintain a certain level of success, and sometimes that means ensuring the clients leave satisfied, which can lead to embellishing things slightly" (Personal Interview 2, 2024).

"Yes, definitely. There is an expectation for spectacular results, sometimes the community's standing relies on this. To preserve my reputation and meet these expectations, I have, at times, fabricated experiences. It is not something I am proud of, but it felt necessary to maintain my position and authority in the community" (Personal Interview 6, 2024).

"My clients come to me seeking comfort or answers, and the trust they place in me is immense. When I use their vulnerabilities to meet community or personal expectations, I justify it by believing that the comfort they receive is real, even if some of the experiences I convey are not" (Personal Interview 7, 2024).

"Being persuasive and sometimes manipulative is part of the role, especially when managing expectations and delivering what the clients seek. These traits help in navigating the complex dynamics of spiritual and community leadership" (Personal Interview 11, 2024).

Methodologies of Deception

The study further dissected the specific tactics employed by deceptive spirit mediums. A common method involved the fabrication of spiritual manifestations, where mediums used a variety of techniques, from simple sleight of hand to high-tech audiovisual effects, to create illusions of paranormal activity. The dissemination of fraudulent messages purportedly from the spiritual realm was another tactic used to cement the media claimed abilities and authority. These messages often promised followers personal benefits such as improved health, wealth, or resolutions to personal dilemmas, which significantly influenced the followers' continued belief and investment in the mediums' services.

"Some of the techniques I am familiar with, well, I have seen a range from simple tricks like sleight of hand, where objects are subtly moved to suggest a spiritual presence, to more sophisticated methods involving audiovisual technology that simulate ghostly apparitions or voices" (Personal Interview 3, 2024).

"As a medium, one might claim to receive messages directly from the spiritual realm. These messages often promise the client relief from personal problems or assurances of prosperity and health, playing on their desires and vulnerabilities" (Personal Interview 8, 2024).

"Well, these tactics are designed to reinforce the medium's perceived abilities and authority. When followers see or hear something they believe to be supernatural, it significantly strengthens their belief in the medium's powers. This often results in continued reliance on the medium's

services, and substantial financial and emotional investments from the followers" (Personal Interview 9, 2024).

"In many cases, it is a mix of financial incentive and the pressure to meet client expectations. If a medium has once claimed to produce paranormal evidence, they might feel compelled to continue to deliver these experiences to maintain their reputation and income" (Personal Interview 12, 2024).

"Reflecting on these practices, it is challenging. Personally, I reached a point where I had to reconsider the ethical implications of my actions. It led me to move away from such practices. Now, I focus on providing comfort and advice based on realistic and ethical grounds" (Personal Interview 13, 2024).

Impacts on Followers and Communities

The consequences of these deceptive practices on followers were profound. Financial exploitation was widespread, with many followers spending substantial sums of money on regular consultations and rituals that promised spiritual or material rewards. Psychologically, the deception led to significant harm, including emotional distress and a pervasive sense of betrayal once the fraudulent activities were exposed. The erosion of social trust was another critical impact, with communities experiencing diminished trust not only in other spiritual practices but also in broader social institutions. This erosion of trust often led to increased scepticism and a general wariness of spiritual or religious engagements, altering the social and cultural fabric of the affected communities.

"I was introduced to the medium through a friend during a particularly tough period in my life. I was seeking some guidance, and it seemed like a good fit at the time. It started small, just a few baths for a reading here and there. But as my involvement grew, so did the costs. I was soon paying substantial amounts for special rituals that promised to bring more direct results, like healing or financial fortune. Over time, I must have spent thousands" (Personal Interview 4, 2024).

"Over a couple of years, I spent thousands of baths on various rituals and consultations. Each session promised some form of spiritual or material gain, which, in hindsight, never materialised in any meaningful way. I know that sounds quite burdensome financially" (Personal Interview 5, 2024).

"Yes, it is not just me. Many in my community who had similar experiences share this deep-seated mistrust now. We have seen a noticeable decline in participation in not only spiritual activities but also community events that were once vibrant and full of trust. It feels like the social fabric of our community has been altered" (Personal Interview 10, 2024).

"In light of these challenges, I would like to see some changes implemented to prevent such deceptive practices in the future. There needs to be more stringent oversight and regulation. People who engage in these practices should be held accountable. Beyond that, there should be more public awareness campaigns to educate people about potential signs of fraud and how to report them" (Personal Interview 14, 2024).

"The psychological impact was severe. Initially, there was a lot of emotional investment because I genuinely believed in the medium's abilities. When I finally realised it was all a deception,

the sense of betrayal was overwhelming. It wasn't just about the money; It felt like a personal violation. I have become very sceptical of any spiritual practices. This experience has made it hard for me to trust not just other mediums but even institutions and systems that are supposed to oversee and regulate these practices" (Personal Interview 15, 2024).

Through a detailed examination of the motivations, methodologies, and impacts of deceptive practices among spirit mediums, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of deception utilised by these individuals. The findings underscore the complex interplay of personal, psychological, and societal factors that drive such practices and highlight the significant consequences for individuals and communities ensnared by such deceptions. These insights are vital for developing strategies to mitigate these harmful practices and for informing policy and community guidance on the management and oversight of spiritual and religious practices.

Furthermore, the study's findings revealed a nuanced role for Buddhadhamma in guiding ethical reform within the realm of spirit mediumship in Thailand. Despite not being central to scholarly Buddhist teachings, spirit mediumship was embedded in local Buddhist-influenced cultures, often blending animistic and Brahmanic elements with popular Buddhist practices. Participants acknowledged that Buddhist principles, particularly mindfulness (Sati), ethical conduct (Sīla), compassion (Karuṇā), and the law of karma, served as crucial moral reference points. These principles were cited as potential safeguards against the proliferation of deceit, encouraging reflection and moral accountability among the media. Several reformed spirit mediums interviewed expressed that their transformation toward ethical practice was significantly influenced by Buddhist teachings, especially the awareness of karmic consequences and the aspiration to cultivate wholesome action. Furthermore, the concept of Sangha (Spiritual Community) was identified as a valuable communal structure that could be leveraged to promote ethical regulation and peer accountability. Thus, the integration of Buddhadhamma not only offered a spiritual counterbalance to deceptive practices but also provided a culturally resonant ethical framework for both individual and collective transformation.

Discussion

The research elucidated several crucial aspects of deceptive practices among spirit mediums, revealing a complex interplay of psychological motivations, sophisticated deception methodologies, and profound community impacts. Furthermore, the study also revealed that while spirit mediumship is not central to canonical Buddhism, its deep integration into Thai spiritual culture invites ethical concerns, particularly regarding deception. Buddhadhamma offers a meaningful framework to address these issues through principles such as Sīla (Ethical Conduct), Sati (Mindfulness), and Karuṇā (Compassion). Reformed mediums in the study cited Buddhist teachings, especially the concept of karma, as influential in their moral re-evaluation and decision to abandon deceptive practices. Additionally, the Sangha (Spiritual Community) was recognized as a potential mechanism for fostering ethical accountability and community-based oversight. Thus, integrating Buddhadhamma into spiritual practices may serve as both a deterrent to misconduct and a path to ethical reform.

A key implication of these findings lay in the role of compassionate, ethics-driven community engagement as a counterforce to deception. When communities actively embraced values of empathy, accountability, and inclusivity, they created spaces where individuals felt supported without needing to resort to manipulative practices. This aligned closely with the principle of karuṇā in Buddhadhamma, which emphasized the alleviation of suffering through genuine care for others. By cultivating trust through compassion, communities could dismantle the conditions that allowed deceptive practices to thrive. In line with Adabanya et al. (2023) and Berardi et al. (2020), communities characterized by trust were more likely to identify and challenge harmful or deceitful behaviors, as their members were invested in the collective good.

Furthermore, the application of Buddhadhamma principles, Sīla, Sati, and awareness of karma, extended beyond individual moral reform to collective peacebuilding. When community structures were guided by these principles, they fostered a culture of transparency, forgiveness, and restorative justice rather than cycles of mistrust or retribution. The Sangha, understood as a spiritual and social community, became a vehicle for peer accountability and ethical reinforcement, anchoring spiritual practices in shared responsibility. Framing the issue within a holistic peace-oriented paradigm highlighted that addressing deception was not only about curbing individual misconduct but also about nurturing social harmony. By grounding responses in Buddhadhamma ethics, communities transformed deception into opportunities for reconciliation, thereby contributing to a more resilient moral fabric.

The study prominently highlighted personal gain, financial benefits, enhanced social status, and increased power, as the primary motivator for spirit mediums to engage in deceptive practices. The medium's exploitation of their client's vulnerabilities was particularly concerning, as it leveraged the trust and authority bestowed upon them, turning it into a tool for personal enrichment. This manipulation was often justified through Machiavellian traits such as deceitfulness and cynicism, revealing a deep-seated moral disengagement that enabled such unethical behaviour. These findings suggested a need for a rigorous ethical framework within which spirit mediums operated, potentially guided by both community standards and legal regulations to curb exploitation (Bereczkei, 2017).

The adoption of diverse techniques, from sleight of hand to advanced audiovisual technologies, illustrated the lengths to which deceptive mediums went to fabricate spiritual manifestations. The dissemination of fraudulent messages promising personal benefits like health, wealth, or fortune further entrenched client's dependency on their services. This manipulation not only underscored the calculated precision of the deception but also highlighted the vulnerability of clients who, often in desperate circumstances, sought solace in spiritual guidance. Educating the public about these tactics could have empowered potential victims to recognize and prevent fraudulent practices, in accordance with Lev et al. (2022) and Junger et al. (2023).

The consequences of deceptive practices extended beyond individual victims, affecting entire communities. Financial exploitation led to significant economic burdens, while the psychological impacts, ranging from emotional distress to a pervasive sense of betrayal, undermined mental health and well-being. Furthermore, the erosion of social trust had broader societal implications,

diminishing community cohesion and participation in spiritual and communal activities. This degradation of social fabric called for community-led initiatives to foster transparency and accountability in spiritual practices (Haṭegan, 2021); (Ozcan et al., 2021); (Siridharo et al., 2021). Community engagement guided by compassion and shared ethical values offered a powerful response to these challenges. By prioritizing empathy, honesty, and mutual care, communities created inclusive spaces where individuals felt supported and protected from exploitation. Compassionate engagement encouraged active listening, collective responsibility, and the prioritization of well-being over personal gain, thereby reducing the appeal and effectiveness of manipulative practices. Shared ethical values, rooted in principles such as fairness, accountability, and respect, strengthened communal bonds and rebuilt trust among members. When these values were embedded in local initiatives, such as peer oversight, participatory decision-making, and transparent spiritual practices, they fostered resilience against deception. Such efforts not only mitigated the harms caused by fraudulent mediums but also re-established trust as the foundation of social life, ensuring that spiritual and communal activities contributed positively to both individual flourishing and collective harmony.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study reflected the principles of applied Buddhism within the context of globalization, integrating Buddhist principles with contemporary concerns and highlighting how Buddhadhamma could support ethical accountability and reform. It situated Buddhism within a globalized framework by demonstrating how traditional ethical principles could address contemporary challenges that extended beyond local or national boundaries. Globalization had intensified exposure to diverse cultural practices, economic pressures, and technological innovations, which shaped spiritual practices such as spirit mediumship. These modern dynamics often amplify ethical dilemmas, including fraudulent or manipulative practices, which were less common or manifested differently in traditional contexts.

The Brahmajāla Sutta explicitly prohibited bhikkhus from engaging in wrongful livelihoods such as fortune-telling, divination, charms, spirit mediumship, and exorcism, highlighting the incompatibility of these practices with Buddhist discipline. By integrating Buddhadhamma, particularly principles such as sīla (Moral Discipline), sati (Mindfulness), karuṇā (Compassion), and karma, the study demonstrated how these enduring ethical frameworks could provide culturally resonant solutions to maintain moral integrity in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world. Furthermore, the study highlighted how the Sangha, as a community of practice, acted as a regulatory and ethical anchor, reinforcing accountability not only locally but also in a globalized context where traditional spiritual authority was challenged by external influences. In doing so, the study bridged local Thai practices with global ethical concerns, showing that Buddhist principles remained relevant and adaptable for addressing moral challenges arising from

cross-cultural interactions, technological mediation, and broader social transformations associated with globalization.
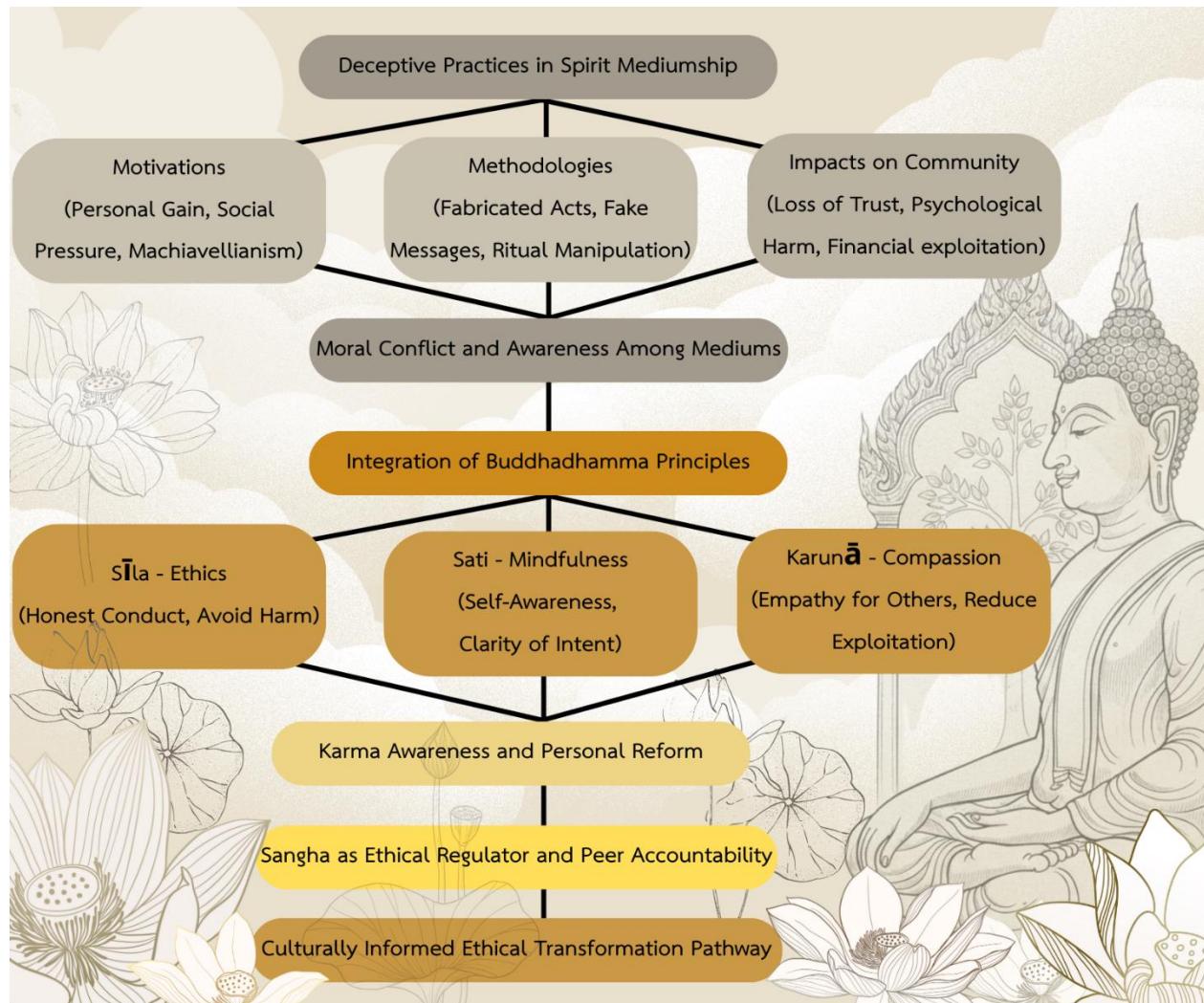

Figure 2 Ethical Reform Framework Based on Buddhadhamma in Spirit Mediumship

Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework illustrating how the integration of Buddhadhamma could serve as a pathway toward ethical reform among spirit mediums engaged in deceptive practices. The model began by identifying the key dimensions of deception, motivations such as personal gain and social pressure, methodologies involving fabricated rituals and fraudulent messages, and their negative impacts on individuals and communities. These deceptive elements often led to a stage of moral conflict or awareness among some media, creating an opportunity for reflection and transformation. The framework posited that the application of Buddhadhamma could foster moral introspection and behavioral change. Awareness of karma further reinforced the importance of accountability and integrity. The role of the Sangha (Community) was also emphasized as a collective mechanism for ethical guidance and peer oversight. This culturally resonant model

led to a "Culturally Informed Ethical Transformation Pathway," offering a sustainable and community-supported strategy for mitigating fraudulent practices in spirit mediumship.

Furthermore, a key strength of this framework lies in its complementarity to formal regulatory and legal approaches. While legal measures, such as licensing, penalties, and oversight, were effective in enforcing compliance and deterring fraudulent practices, they often operated in a top-down manner and faced limitations in cultural acceptance or enforcement capacity at the community level. By contrast, a Buddhadhamma-informed model worked from within the cultural and spiritual fabric of Thai society, emphasizing moral self-regulation, compassion-driven accountability, and restorative practices. This bottom-up approach fostered community trust and long-term ethical transformation in ways that purely legal mechanisms could not easily achieve. When combined, these approaches formed a more comprehensive strategy: Legal and regulatory systems provided structural safeguards and external accountability, while the Buddhadhamma-based framework embedded ethical consciousness and peacebuilding values directly into spiritual practice. This dual model enhanced the practical relevance of the study, offering both policymakers and communities a balanced pathway to counter deception while preserving the cultural integrity of spiritual traditions.

As such, the findings contributed to an emerging interdisciplinary discourse that blended religious studies, moral psychology, cultural ethics, and governance. The proposed framework demonstrated that sustainable reform required not only legal enforcement but also culturally resonant ethical engagement, making this study significant for both academic inquiry and policy development aimed at restoring ethical integrity in spiritual practices.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research explored deceptive practices within spirit mediumship in Thailand, examining the motivations, methods, and consequences of such practices while considering how Buddhadhamma could support ethical accountability and reform. Guided by the central question of what drives deceptive practices, how they are enacted, and their impacts on individuals and communities, the study found that personal gain, manifested as financial profit, elevated social status, and the exercise of authority, constituted the primary motivation, often reinforced by Machiavellian traits and social pressures to deliver miraculous results. Mediums employed sophisticated strategies, including staged paranormal phenomena and fabricated spiritual messages, deliberately exploiting follower's emotional vulnerabilities to foster dependency and consolidate authority, ensuring a steady flow of social and financial rewards. The consequences extended beyond individual victims, who experienced economic hardship, psychological distress, and betrayal, to communities, where trust erosion weakened social cohesion, reduced participation in cultural and spiritual activities, and undermined confidence in legitimate practices and institutions. Addressing these challenges, the study proposed applying Buddhadhamma principles, Sīla (Ethical Conduct), Sati (Mindfulness), Karuṇā (Compassion), and karmic awareness, as a culturally embedded ethical framework for reform, supported by the Sangha for peer accountability and complemented by

formal legal oversight, forming a holistic approach to mitigating deception and restoring trust. The findings highlighted the urgency of proactive ethical reform, emphasizing the risks of continued deception, including further harm to individuals, erosion of community trust, and undermining of spiritual and policy legitimacy. Contributions of the study include advancing scholarly discourse in moral psychology, cultural ethics, and religious studies, while providing practical guidance for policy and community interventions through legal oversight, community initiatives, educational campaigns, and victim support systems. Nevertheless, the study faced limitations, including a small qualitative sample of 15 key informants from Krabi province, reliance on self-reported data subject to social desirability and recall bias, and a narrow geographic focus, which may limit generalizability. Future research should expand sample size and diversity, incorporate unaffected community perspectives, employ mixed-method approaches to reduce biases, explore the role of digital technology in perpetuating or mitigating deceptive practices, and adopt interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies to deepen understanding and support the development of effective strategies for fostering ethical and trustworthy spiritual environments.

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