When the cards don't add up: Vocabularies of motive, boundary-work, and rationalization in spiritual online discourse

Cătălina Enoiu[1]

Abstract

Contemporary spiritual practices like Tarot reading exist in contested epistemic spaces, requiring users to negotiate legitimacy and meaning in skeptical cultural contexts. This study examines how Tarot users construct and maintain the credibility of their practice through online discourse. Based on our thematic content analysis of three Reddit threads totaling 250 user comments, this article identifies how users deploy vocabularies of motive, boundary-work, and collective rationalization to justify and protect Tarot engagement. These findings emerge from empirical data, rather than being solely derived from existing literature. Users frame Tarot as emotional reflection and symbolic self-work rather than supernatural prediction, distinguishing it from religion, science, and superstition through hybrid stances emphasizing therapeutic dimensions. When readings appear inaccurate, users collectively rationalize these moments through symbolic reinterpretation and peer reinforcement, preserving the practice's value. Three theoretical contributions emerge: distributed vocabularies of motive function as shared explanatory resources that persist across digital interactions as collective interpretive repertoires; boundary-work operates as flexible epistemic positioning, creating permeable spaces through strategic code-switching between knowledge frameworks; collective rationalization prioritizes affective regulation over logical consistency. These findings demonstrate how contemporary spiritual practices sustain legitimacy through flexible, collectively maintained discursive strategies rather than dogmatic belief systems, contributing to sociological understanding of meaning-making in digital contexts.

[1] Doctoral School of Sociology, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania, enoiucatalina@yahoo.com.

Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, practices like Tarot reading occupy an ambiguous cultural position. Neither fully accepted as legitimate knowledge nor entirely dismissed as superstition, they exist in contested epistemic spaces where practitioners must continuously negotiate meaning and credibility. The rise of digital platforms has created new opportunities for these negotiations, as users engage in public discussions about belief, accuracy, and the value of esoteric practices. Understanding how individuals justify and maintain engagement with contested knowledge systems offers broader insights into meaning-making processes in pluralistic societies.

Sociological research on contemporary spirituality has documented a shift toward personalized, flexible spiritual practices outside institutional frameworks. Studies of Tarot specifically have identified its therapeutic and reflective functions, with practitioners framing it as emotional guidance rather than supernatural prediction (Lavin 2021; Williams 2021; Semetsky 2005). However, these studies have primarily relied on interviews and ethnographic observation, leaving gaps in understanding how legitimacy is constructed and maintained through everyday discourse, particularly in digital contexts where users face diverse audiences and potential skepticism.

To address these gaps, we present original empirical findings based on Reddit discourse analysis, focusing on how Tarot users actively justify, negotiate, and rationalize their practice in real-time discussions. While previous research has relied primarily on interviews and ethnographic observation, our approach highlights how these processes unfold in everyday online interaction. We analyze three threads totaling 250 comments, applying classical sociological concepts—vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940), boundary-work (Gieryn 1983), and collective rationalization (DeSantis 2003)—to understand how meaning is constructed and protected in public discussions. Our analysis reveals that users sustain Tarot's legitimacy not through dogmatic belief but through flexible discursive strategies that emphasize emotional utility, create permeable epistemic boundaries, and collectively manage interpretive challenges. These findings contribute to sociological understanding of how contested practices persist in skeptical cultural contexts and how digital platforms enable new forms of collective meaning-making.

This article examines how individuals justify, defend, and recalibrate the meaning of Tarot reading in online discussions, focusing on how Reddit users make sense of its perceived accuracy, failure, and epistemic status. Rather than approaching belief as a binary position, the study traces how Tarot is rendered intelligible through discursive practices that respond to different interpretive demands. Drawing on classical and interpretive sociology for theoretical farming, our analysis applies three conceptual tools: vocabularies of motive, boundary-work, and collective rationalization; to empirical data

gathered from online discussions. This allows us to distinguish clearly between established sociological concepts and the original discursive patterns identified through our own analysis.

To investigate the explanatory frameworks people use when discussing their engagement with Tarot, the study asks: What kinds of justifications do users provide for engaging with Tarot, and how do they define its usefulness? How do users retrospectively describe the meaning of a Tarot reading, especially in terms of what it accomplished for them? These questions are used to construct a typology of vocabularies of motive, culturally available forms of explanation through which users describe Tarot as therapeutic, intuitive, symbolic, exploratory, or simply entertaining.

To understand how the epistemic status of Tarot is negotiated, the study asks: How do users draw boundaries between Tarot and other domains such as science, religion, psychology, or superstition? How do users position themselves in relation to belief or disbelief, and what discursive strategies do they use to qualify, suspend, or reframe belief? The aim is to capture how users make Tarot compatible with other knowledge systems, or protect it from discrediting associations.

Finally, to examine how the meaning of Tarot is preserved when its predictive function fails or is called into question, the study asks: What forms of rationalization do users offer when readings appear inaccurate, confusing, or fail to deliver expected outcomes? What explanations for success or failure become shared, repeated, or affirmed by others in the thread, forming patterns of collective rationalization? These questions support a typology of collective rationalizations, distinguishing individual reinterpretations from socially reinforced justifications. The goal is to understand how users sustain the practice by reframing error as misinterpretation, symbolic truth, emotional relevance, or narrative insight.

Conceptual framework

Vocabularies of motive

The concept of vocabularies of motive was introduced by C. Wright Mills in a short article published in 1940. Rather than seeing motives as inner causes of action, Mills treated them as words people use to explain what they do. Motives, in this perspective, are not hidden intentions or psychological states, but public accounts. They are part of ordinary talk, used to make actions understandable and acceptable in a given social situation.

People do not invent motives from scratch. They draw on available ways of speaking that are shaped by culture and history. These ways of speaking, vocabularies, help them justify or explain their actions to themselves and to others. What Mills showed is that these vocabularies vary depending on the context. An act that is justified as a search for truth in one setting might be explained as a personal experiment or as self-care in another. People choose their vocabularies of motive depending on what they think is expected, appropriate, or defensible. These choices are not random: they depend on social norms, the audience, and the perceived legitimacy of certain types of explanations.

This idea is useful for the sociological study of everyday practices, especially when the practice in question is not fully stabilized or socially uncontested. Tarot reading is such a case. In many societies, Tarot is not recognized as science, nor is it always accepted as religion. As a result, people who use Tarot cards often feel the need to explain why they do it and what it means to them. On public forums such as Reddit, users give many different accounts: some say Tarot is a form of therapy, others call it a tool for reflection, while some describe it as a way to listen to their intuition or to make sense of emotions. These explanations are not just expressions of belief. They are ways of placing oneself in relation to broader systems of meaning, science, spirituality, psychology, entertainment, and of defending one's actions in a potentially skeptical or mixed audience. To illustrate how these explanations are constructed in practice, we conducted an empirical analysis of public discussions on Reddit. In these online forums, users provide a variety of accounts: some describe Tarot as a form of therapy, others present it as a tool for reflection, while some see it as a way to listen to their intuition or to make sense of emotions. These examples are drawn from my own data analysis, not solely from existing literature. Such explanations are not merely expressions of belied; rather, they serve as ways of positioning oneself in relation to broader systems of meaning (such as science, spirituality, psychology, or entertainment) and of defending one's actions in front of a potentially skeptical or mixed audience.

By examining how people talk about Tarot, we can study the vocabularies of motive they use. These vocabularies are not neutral. They help create the space in which Tarot becomes meaningful, credible, or useful. Through them, users position Tarot not as superstition or fraud, but as a personal resource. In doing so, they also position themselves, as rational, open-minded, playful, intuitive, or emotionally aware. This use of motives is shaped by the cultural tensions surrounding Tarot, and by the need to make sense of a practice that exists at the margins of established knowledge systems. For sociologists, studying these vocabularies allows us to see how people manage uncertainty, claim legitimacy, and construct moral coherence in everyday life.

While vocabularies of motive can be seen as a form of collective rationalization, we distinguish the two analytically. Vocabularies of motive are proactive accounts used to justify action and position oneself within boarder meaning systems. In contrast, collective rationalization refers to retrospective discursive strategies used to preserve coherence when practices are challenged or fail. This distinction allows us to trace different temporal and functional dimensions of meaning-making in Tarot discourse.

Boundary work

The concept of boundary-work was introduced by Thomas Gieryn to describe how people create and defend symbolic distinctions between different domains of knowledge. His original work focused on science, showing how scientists draw boundaries between what counts as science and what does not, in order to maintain authority and credibility. But the idea can be applied more broadly. Boundary-work refers to the ways in which people define what something is not, as much as what it is. These distinctions are not fixed. They are

produced in discourse, often in situations where the legitimacy or value of a practice is uncertain or contested.

In public discussions about Tarot, such as those on Reddit, boundary-work can be seen in how users position Tarot in relation to other domains, such as science, religion, psychology, or superstition. Some draw a clear line: Tarot is not about predicting the future, not magic, not irrational. Others claim that Tarot can coexist with scientific thinking, or that it belongs to a different way of knowing, based on intuition or personal experience. These discursive strategies help users defend the practice against ridicule, or make it fit with their own self-image as rational, open, or emotionally aware. In our analysis of Reddit discussions about Tarot, boundary-work emerged clearly in how users positioned Tarot in relation to other domains, including science, religion, psychology, and superstition. Some users explicitly drew sharp boundaries, insisting that Tarot is not about predicting the future, not magical, and not irrational. Others adopted more integrative positions, suggesting that Tarot can coexist with scientific thinking or belongs to an alternative epistemology based on intuition or personal experience. These discursive strategies allow users to defend their practice potential ridicule and to align it with a self-image of being rational, reflective, or emotional attuned.

Boundary-work is often implicit. Users may say that they do not "believe" in Tarot, but that it "works" in some way, by helping them reflect or organize their thoughts. In doing so, they reject one frame (e.g., supernatural belief) while endorsing another (e.g., psychological tool). Others may reject the idea that Tarot needs to be explained at all, positioning themselves against both believers and skeptics. Often, boundary-work occurred implicitly. Users started they did not "believe" in Tarot in a traditional or supernatural sense, but asserted that it "works" as a tool for organizing thoughts or promoting self-reflection. By doing so, they rejected one interpretive frame (e.g., mystical belief) and embraced another (e.g., psychological or therapeutic utility). Some users even questioned the need to explain Tarot at all, distancing themselves from both believers and skeptics. These acts of boundary-making show how people negotiate meaning and legitimacy in a fragmented cultural space. For sociologists, studying these boundaries reveals how people manage uncertainty, protect valued identities, and make sense of practices that lack stable institutional support.

Collective rationalization

The concept of rationalization has a long tradition in sociology and social theory, where it refers not simply to reasoned action, but to the retrospective construction of justifications that make action appear reasonable, even when its origins are affective, habitual, or interest-driven. This understanding is most explicitly formulated in the work of Vilfredo Pareto and Karl Mannheim, and later expanded with a psychological focus by Leon Festinger.

In *The Mind and Society* (1916), Pareto distinguished between two types of human action: logical and non-logical. While logical actions follow clear reasoning from means to ends, most everyday actions, according to Pareto, are non-logical, they are guided by

sentiments, habits, or social position. However, people rarely acknowledge these sources directly. Instead, they produce what Pareto called derivations: post hoc explanations that frame their behavior as rational, moral, or necessary. These derivations function socially. They allow actors to appear coherent, to defend their conduct, and to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of others. Rationalization, in this sense, is not necessarily falsehood, but a socially adaptive discourse that conceals the non-logical roots of action.

Karl Mannheim built on this idea in his sociology of knowledge, particularly in *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). For Mannheim, rationalization is the process through which individuals or groups justify their beliefs and practices in ways that mask their historical and social rootedness. A rationalization, in his usage, is not a neutral explanation, but a discourse that stabilizes existing positions and mitigates conflict between professed ideals and actual interests. It is especially visible when people face challenges to their worldview. Rationalizations do not merely reflect belief, they maintain the appearance of consistency, particularly in settings of ideological contestation.

Adding a complementary psychological dimension, Leon Festinger introduced the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957. While not using the term "rationalization" in the sociological sense, Festinger described the emotional tension that arises when individuals become aware of internal contradiction, between beliefs and actions, or between competing beliefs. This dissonance produces discomfort, which individuals seek to reduce. One common strategy is to change the meaning of the action retroactively, to reinterpret it in a way that makes it appear consistent with their prior beliefs. This process, too, is a form of rationalization: an adjustment not of the action itself, but of the explanation for it.

These classical contributions outline rationalization as a discursive response to tension. Whether prompted by social contradiction, affective discomfort, or threats to identity, rationalizations serve to repair coherence in retrospect. They are not deliberate falsehoods, but socially patterned strategies through which actors preserve a sense of legitimacy and continuity, both for themselves and for their audiences.

Building on the classical understanding of rationalization as a retrospective justification for action, Alan DeSantis (2003) introduces the concept of collective rationalization to describe how groups, not just individuals, construct shared explanations that defend contested practices. In his ethnographic study of cigar smokers, DeSantis shows how regulars at a cigar shop repeatedly craft and circulate a set of discursive arguments that protect the group from anxiety caused by health warnings and public stigma. These rationalizations are not created in isolation. Rather, they emerge through a social process of storytelling, repetition, and affirmation, where members reinforce each other's accounts until they become a stable repertoire of shared justifications. DeSantis identifies how these group narratives help reduce cognitive dissonance, not only at the individual level (as Festinger described), but also within the group as a whole. The rationalizations gain strength through repetition and mutual reinforcement. Over time, they become part of the group's symbolic vocabulary, allowing members to frame their behavior, smoking in this case, as reasonable, benign, or even beneficial. In this sense, collective rationalization functions both as a form of discursive maintenance and as emotional regulation, offering a buffer against external criticism and internal doubt.

Applied to practices like Tarot reading, this concept helps explain how online communities respond to failed predictions or inconsistent outcomes. Instead of abandoning the practice, users co-produce narratives that preserve its value, reframing error as misinterpretation, emphasizing symbolic insight over literal accuracy, or attributing inconsistency to personal growth. These collective rationalizations allow the practice to remain meaningful, even when its predictive function is questioned.

Applied to practices like Tarot reading, the concept of collective rationalization helps explain how online communities respond to failed predictions or inconsistent outcomes. Unlike vocabularies of motive, which refer to proactive justifications for engaging in a practice, collective rationalizations are retrospective strategies used to preserve the practice's legitimacy when it is challenged or does not produce expected results. In our data, users did not abandon Trot in the face of inaccuracy; instead, they co-produced narratives that reframed error as misinterpretation, emphasized symbolic or emotional insight over literal accuracy, or attributed inconsistency to personal growth and timing. This distinction adds analytical depth by highlighting how meaning is sustained not only through initial justifications for practice (vocabularies of motive), but also through shared, affective responses to moments of doubt or contradiction (collective rationalizations). Together, these concepts capture different phases and functions in the maintenance of meaning within contested spiritual practices.

Related work

Vocabularies of motive: Justifying Tarot use as self-work and spiritual practice

Sociological and anthropological studies over the past two decades consistently show that Tarot readers and users rarely frame their practice in terms of prediction or supernatural insight. Instead, they justify their engagement with Tarot through vocabularies of emotional self-regulation, therapeutic meaning-making, intuitive reflection, and personal spirituality.

Lavin (2021), based on ethnographic fieldwork with American spiritualist workers, found that readers often describe themselves in counseling terms, seeing Tarot as a healing practice rather than a divinatory one. Her respondents emphasized roles such as "intuitive coach" or "emotional guide", and frequently framed their readings as a form of self-help in the absence of formal mental health care. This therapeutic framing is echoed in Semetsky's (2005) work on Tarot in psychotherapy, where the cards are described as symbolic prompts that help clients articulate unconscious thoughts, functioning similarly to projective tools in counseling. Reese (2010) likewise documents Tarot's role in intuitive problem-solving, where users seek "creative insight" in moments of personal difficulty.

Beyond therapeutic use, researchers find that Tarot is widely treated as a medium for self-understanding and identity work. Williams (2021), in interviews with Canadian practitioners, found that readers described Tarot as a way to "give words to thoughts or experiences", often turning to it in moments of uncertainty or loss. The cards become a tool for naming inner experiences that lack language. Cervantes (2022) builds on this,

noting that users adopted Tarot during the COVID-19 pandemic as a symbolic technique for coping with instability and re-centering the self. Murney (2023) further expands this vocabulary by examining Tarot as a creative method in activist and ecological art, where its open-ended symbolism helps practitioners navigate emotional and political uncertainty. These accounts show how Tarot is mobilized not as prophecy, but as an instrument of affective processing and narrative repair.

Other motives emphasize spiritual meaning outside of institutional religion. Williams (2021) identifies this form of Tarot practice as "personalized religiosity", where the cards are used as tools for connecting with a higher self, spirit, or the universe. Her respondents explicitly rejected church-based religion, but described Tarot as a kind of spiritual dialogue, "like prayer", but self-directed. This aligns with the findings of Sosteric (2014), who sees contemporary Tarot as part of a broader "spiritual self-help" culture that blends mystical and psychological logics.

Additional studies support this reading. Miller (2022), analyzing #WitchTok content, documents how users present Tarot as a materially grounded, embodied ritual, tied to identity formation, intuitive listening, and emotional storytelling. Even when posted publicly, these uses are not framed as prediction but as modes of self-inquiry. In a different context, Höllinger and Smith (2002) show that young adults engaged in esoteric practices, including Tarot, often do so to explore personal values and identity. While they do not use the term "vocabularies of motive", their data support the idea that Tarot practice is justified through appeals to authenticity, introspection, and emotional depth.

Recent research on diverse contemporary spiritualities also highlights the broader vocabularies of ecological and therapeutic motives utilized in spiritual practices, offering a valuable context for understanding Tarot's contemporary use. Pinto and Vilaça (2023) show how New Age spiritualities articulate self-realization through ecological consciousness and communal lifestyles, demonstrating that spiritual practices often serve as means for emotional self-regulation, introspection, and identity formation (Pinto and Vilaça, 2023). Hussain and Wang (2024) discuss how digital technology, particularly social media, enriches spiritual experiences by enabling community-building, facilitating the sharing of personal insights, and fostering collective reflection throughout spiritual journeys (Hussain and Wang, 2024).

Practitioners and users frame Tarot not as a system for knowing the future, but as a culturally flexible toolkit for meaning-making in the present. These vocabularies of motive center around therapeutic insight, emotional guidance, self-expression, and spiritual autonomy. As such, Tarot is repeatedly described not as a belief system, but as a reflective practice, something users do, not necessarily something they believe in. This orientation underlines the analytical importance of studying how users talk about Tarot, rather than whether they believe it "works".

Boundary-work: Distinguishing Tarot from religion, science, and superstition

Across the sociological and anthropological literature, boundary-work emerges as a central process through which Tarot practitioners negotiate the legitimacy of their practice. Rather than accepting external definitions, such as "fortunetelling", "occultism", or "irrationality", users and readers actively draw distinctions between Tarot and adjacent domains like religion, science, superstition, or therapy. These symbolic boundaries help position Tarot as a credible and meaningful practice in a cultural space that is otherwise skeptical of esoteric or non-institutional knowledge.

One recurring boundary is drawn between Tarot and popular images of fortunetelling. Williams (2021) reports that readers she interviewed explicitly rejected the label of "fortune-teller", viewing it as trivializing and inaccurate. One respondent explained that despite her family's respect for her practice, "then I get referred to as a 'fortune-teller.' I really don't like the term". Practitioners instead preferred to describe themselves as intuitive readers, spiritual counselors, or guides, labels that emphasize care, insight, and professionalism rather than exoticism. This rejection of the fortune-teller stereotype is similarly documented by Baumholser (2016), whose interviewees actively deconstructed what they saw as a stigmatizing identity linked to fraud and superstition.

Another key axis of boundary-work lies between Tarot and institutional religion. Williams (2021) shows that practitioners often frame their work as "spiritual but not religious". They construct Tarot as a form of personalized religiosity, intuitive, self-directed, and experiential, distinct from the doctrines and hierarchies of organized faiths. In this framing, Tarot is not a system of belief, but a method of connection with Spirit, the Universe, or the Higher Self. Similarly, Palaga (2022), studying neo-pagan movements, emphasizes that practices like Tarot are integrated into broader efforts to recover ancestral spiritualities and reject the authority of institutional Christianity. Though Tarot is not the core focus of her study, Palaga's findings on symbolic disidentification resonate with the broader trend of Tarot being positioned as a post-institutional, reflexive spiritual practice.

Tarot is also distinguished from science, though not always in oppositional terms. Rather than rejecting science outright, many practitioners blend scientific and spiritual registers to bolster credibility. Lavin (2021) describes how American Tarot professionals adopt what she calls a "soft approach", framing card reading as akin to narrative therapy or Jungian psychology. This allows readers to present their practice as emotionally grounded and symbolically rich, without claiming supernatural powers. Semetsky (2005) similarly situates Tarot in a postmodern epistemological space, arguing that it works through "a-causal" principles, drawing on Jung's concept of synchronicity, and likening its logic to non-linear phenomena in quantum theory. These hybrid explanations enable readers to construct Tarot as both intuitive and intellectually respectable.

At the same time, researchers document how these hybrid strategies help practitioners manage reputational risk. Lavin (2021) notes that Tarot workers are often marginal in both scientific and religious contexts, lacking formal credentials and facing suspicion from mainstream institutions. To counter this, they develop fluid professional

identities, blending elements of healer, therapist, and spiritual guide. This "role flexibility", Lavin argues, is itself a form of boundary negotiation: by not being locked into any one role, practitioners avoid the epistemic constraints of medicine, religion, or academia, while drawing selectively from all three to meet client expectations.

These distinctions are not only rhetorical; they are protective. By emphasizing intuition, healing, creativity, and narrative insight, Tarot readers defend against accusations of irrationality or manipulation. They align themselves with therapeutic and artistic domains, and distance themselves from both exploitative "psychics" and religious dogma. In Miller's (2022) study of WitchTok, users do similar work, drawing lines between authentic spiritual practice and superficial trends. While Tarot is integrated into digital content, participants often justify their practice by invoking ritual knowledge, personal connection, and emotional sincerity, traits that affirm authenticity even in consumer contexts.

Recent literature also shows how diverse online spiritual practices utilize boundary-work to establish their credibility within contested epistemic spaces. Dos Santos (2023) analyzes neopagan practices in digital contexts, discussing how neopaganism's animistic perspective transforms online environments into authentic sites for religious rituals and personal spiritual engagement. Practitioners intentionally blur the boundary between online and offline realities to legitimize digital spaces as meaningful spiritual territories, distinct from purely artificial or leisure-based contexts (Dos Santos, 2023). Recent scholarship also examines how digital religious technologies may perpetuate bias through their algorithmic design, particularly regarding gender representation and traditional religious interpretations (Biana, 2024). Siuda (2021) proposes a typology of digital religious engagement that differentiates between informational "religion online" and interactive "online religion". This conceptual distinction helps explain how Tarot discussions online blend both informational and interactive dimensions, actively negotiating their legitimacy amidst skeptical audiences (Siuda, 2021).

Boundary-work is essential to how Tarot practitioners sustain their practice in a skeptical cultural landscape. They construct Tarot as a hybrid domain: not quite religion, not science, not superstition, but a unique mode of insight. This legitimacy is achieved not by abandoning contested terrain, but by continuously redrawing its boundaries, placing Tarot in a space that is personal, flexible, and credible.

Collective rationalization: Making sense of failure without abandoning the practice

In sociological and anthropological studies of Tarot, researchers have noted that the practice's resilience depends not just on how it is justified or distinguished from other domains, but also on how users make sense of its failure. Collective rationalization refers to the shared discursive strategies by which readers and clients explain, reframe, or reinterpret Tarot readings that do not come true or seem incorrect. Although most studies do not explicitly use the term "rationalization" in the classical sociological sense, many document practices that serve this function, allowing the interpretive system of Tarot to survive moments of contradiction. These rationalizations are often shared, circulated, and

reinforced within Tarot-reading communities, and they are crucial to maintaining the coherence and credibility of the practice.

One common rationalization strategy is reframing an incorrect or negative reading through metaphorical interpretation. Schwalm (2004), analyzing an ethnographic case from a Tarot reading in Texas, observes how a reader immediately reinterpreted the Death card to avoid literal panic: "It doesn't actually mean death". Instead, it was presented as symbolizing transformation or personal change. This ability to symbolically recode meanings on the spot, especially for potentially falsifying cards, is one of the ways Tarot maintains interpretive flexibility. Williams (2021) similarly reports that readers describe Tarot as "a snapshot of life", meant to reflect possibilities and prompt action, not to deliver fixed outcomes. A reading that doesn't "fit" becomes a message about what needs to change, rather than a predictive failure.

Another strategy is to attribute error to limited perspective or interpretation rather than to the cards themselves. In her interviews, Williams (2021) documents examples of clients who initially dismissed a reading, only to reinterpret it later as meaningful when life events unfolded. In one case, a client reported being told she was "meant to bring Tarot to the world", a message that seemed implausible at the time, but later aligned with her decision to become a professional reader. These retrospective validations help resolve the dissonance of initial confusion or doubt, and reinforce the view that meaning may emerge over time. The cards, in this logic, are never wrong, only misunderstood.

Other rationalizations emphasize the conditional nature of Tarot messages and the role of personal agency. Semetsky (2005) and Reese (2010) both note that readers often describe the future as fluid, contingent on free will and current energies. If a prediction does not come true, it is explained as the result of a change in intention, attitude, or behavior. This aligns with what Lavin (2021) describes as "navigating interactional trials", the work readers do when a client is skeptical or disappointed. In such cases, practitioners shift the frame from prediction to guidance: the cards didn't fail, they simply offered a path the client didn't follow.

Rationalization is also a collective process. Williams (2021) highlights how Tarot communities, both offline and online, serve as spaces where readers share success stories, interpret ambiguous outcomes, and circulate common sayings such as "the cards tell you what you need to hear". These narrative conventions support a communal interpretive culture in which hits are emphasized, and misses are downplayed or reframed. This mirrors earlier anthropological observations (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937; Luhrmann 1989) about how divination systems protect themselves from disconfirmation through interpretive elasticity.

In digital contexts, Miller (2022) shows that TikTok users who engage with Tarot as part of WitchTok also participate in collective rationalization. When readings appear vague or inaccurate, comment sections become sites of emotional processing and shared meaning-making. Rather than discrediting the reading, users often reinterpret it to match new emotional insights or future developments. These responses reinforce a communal norm: that Tarot's value lies in the resonance it creates, not in the precision of its predictions.

Researchers also note that professional readers strategically manage belief to avoid the burden of empirical accuracy. Lavin (2021) documents how Tarot professionals adopt disclaimers ("for entertainment only") and frame their role as intuitive facilitators rather than prophets. By inviting clients to co-construct meaning and stressing that "the future is not set in stone", readers protect themselves from being held to predictive standards. This role flexibility, as Lavin calls it, enables Tarot to function as both a spiritual and psychological tool, rather than a testable claim.

When Tarot fails to deliver accurate predictions, the interpretive community does not reject it. Instead, users engage in collective rationalization through symbolic reinterpretation, delayed validation, emphasis on agency, and narrative repair. These strategies are not ad hoc; they are patterned, shared, and taught. They constitute a socially embedded repertoire that enables Tarot to remain credible and meaningful in the face of contradiction.

Materials and methods

This study examines how Tarot users articulate the meaning, legitimacy, and interpretive boundaries of their practice in online discourse. We analyze discussions from three Reddit threads that explicitly address belief, accuracy, and perceived failure in Tarot readings. The data consists of user-generated posts and comments from the following public threads: (1) "As a skeptic, Tarot is surreal with how accurate it is" (r/Tarot), (2) "Do you believe in Tarot?" (r/spirituality), and (3) "How do you deal with Tarot being wrong?" (r/Tarot). These threads were selected for their relevance to our three research questions: how users justify Tarot use (vocabularies of motive), how they negotiate its legitimacy (boundary-work), and how they explain failed or inaccurate readings (collective rationalization). Each thread contains between 45 and 170 user comments, yielding a total dataset of approximately 250 discrete textual contributions.

We approach this material using thematic content analysis, a method well suited to identifying patterns of meaning in open, user-generated discourse (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic content analysis allows us to examine how users formulate recurring types of explanations, distinctions, and justifications in language, without presuming coherence or intentionality on the part of individual speakers. Following established procedures, we began by reading all comments closely and coding them inductively, focusing on recurring formulations related to belief, legitimacy, error, and reflection. Initial codes included expressions of doubt, appeals to intuition, therapeutic framing, disclaimers about prediction, and reinterpretations of failed readings. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories corresponding to the three analytical concepts guiding the study. Quotes were coded by the first two authors and disagreements were solved through joint examination. To ensure analytical consistency, we treated each user comment as a unit of analysis and retained pseudonyms and thread contexts. Only publicly visible comments were included.

Results

Making sense of Tarot: Justifications, belief, and everyday use

Making meaning with the cards: Vocabularies of motive in everyday Tarot use

The results are organized around the three conceptual lenses guiding this study. For each, we present empirical findings derived from Reddit discussions, identifying recurring discursive strategies used by Tarot practitioners. These findings are not theoretical generalizations, but are grounded in observed patterns within the data. For each section, we also propose a typology of user orientations or rationalizations to highlight the specify of each theme and avoid redundancy across sections.

Across the three Reddit threads, users justify their engagement with Tarot primarily through vocabularies that emphasize self-reflection, emotional processing, intuitive insight, and symbolic thinking. Rather than positioning Tarot as a predictive or supernatural tool, most participants describe it as a method for organizing thoughts, accessing inner states, and making sense of lived experience.

A widely shared justification frames Tarot as a psychological mirror, something that allows individuals to reflect on their inner world. One user explains that the cards don't have "any power other than being interesting pictures", but they serve as "an incredible tool for self-reflection" because "our minds are so fixated on patterns and connections" (T1, TwinMoonTerror). This comment captures a broader theme: the cards themselves do not hold meaning, but they provide prompts that resonate with the reader's internal landscape. Another user reinforces this view, stating that Tarot "turned out to be a great tool for self-reflection and it helped me be more mindful about my decisions" (T1, bezzinthetrap). These perspectives shift attention from external divination to internal coherence.

Several users also point to Tarot's role in facilitating emotional clarity. One describes how Tarot helps them "structure self-reflection and give myself the breathing room I need to mentally get my head on straight" (T1, MoonChaser22). In the same thread, a user shares a ritual of drawing cards from different parts of the deck to distinguish between "surface-level thoughts" and "the deep emotions underneath", emphasizing that Tarot has helped them create a system to read their own emotional states (T1, [deleted] OP). These practices show how users incorporate Tarot into personal routines that support emotional regulation and self-awareness.

In a related formulation, Tarot is seen as a flexible and intuitive guide. One user compares it to a word-of-the-day calendar, saying they use Tarot "as a means of self-worth and self-reflection", adapting its meaning to their daily goals (T1, StarryAqua). These comments reflect a broader orientation toward Tarot as a symbolic resource that supports meaning-making rather than prediction.

The theme continues in the thread T3, where users express tolerance for inaccuracy, focusing instead on the interpretive value of the practice. One long-term practitioner writes, "I just don't use Tarot as a science and accept that it's just guidance. I use it to gain

wisdom. But it's not a perfect solution" (T3, The-Gorge). This framing situates Tarot not as a testable method but as a flexible symbolic system whose value lies in what it prompts the reader to consider about themselves or their circumstances.

Across these discussions, the justification for using Tarot consistently centers on its usefulness for psychological and emotional insight, narrative framing, and intuitive exploration. Users rarely invoke magical or deterministic claims. Instead, they draw on vocabularies of personal meaning, therapeutic self-inquiry, and symbolic navigation to explain why Tarot matters and how it "works".

Questioning belief: How users frame Tarot's function and meaning

In all three threads, users engage not only in justifying their use of Tarot, but also in defining its epistemic status. Their vocabularies of motive reveal how Tarot is framed in relation to belief, skepticism, and various domains of knowledge such as science, intuition, and spirituality. Rather than offering fixed positions, many users construct Tarot as a practice that operates in the space between belief and doubt, something useful and meaningful even without metaphysical commitments.

Some users clearly distance themselves from spiritual or supernatural interpretations. In thread T1, TwinMoonTerror explicitly states, "I don't even believe in a universal energy of any kind. I don't believe that the cards have any power other than being interesting pictures... the symbols have resonated with a deeper part of your mind you may struggle to access for whatever reason" (T1, TwinMoonTerror). In this vocabulary, Tarot is not about accessing external truths or forces, but rather about activating personal insight. Similarly, NekoRabbit writes, "I also don't believe in anything spiritual, but Tarot is so extremely accurate. You can interpret most things in a way that it just makes you think about aspects of your life in a way you didn't think about yet" (T1, NekoRabbit). These accounts reflect a secular, psychological frame that rejects mystical explanations while affirming the practical value of the practice.

Other users describe a more ambiguous or suspended stance toward belief. The original poster in T1 admits, "I usually default back to this view. That Tarot isn't particularly magical or 'other' but merely plays into psychology... and yet, there's always a shred of doubt. A hint of speculation. There's a tiny voice in the back of my mind that whispers, 'There are too many coincidences for there to be absolutely nothing magical/other behind it'" (T1, [deleted] OP). Here, the user oscillates between a rational explanation and a residual sense of mystery.

In T3, users address the question of what Tarot "gets wrong" by reinforcing its symbolic or reflective function. TheValleyTarot comments, "That's not how the Tarot works... It shows you future possibility's [sic] and the future is not set in stone... I think you need a refresher on what the Tarot is and how it is used" (T3, TheValleyTarot). This intervention illustrates how users enforce a collective boundary around what kind of belief is considered reasonable within the community: Tarot may guide, but it should not be expected to guarantee outcomes.

Finally, some users explicitly differentiate Tarot from religion or dogma. In T1, Pat_Hand concludes, "What it does do is provide meaning… the Tarot's 78 cards capture the human condition very well… a fabric that you lay over the realm of possibility and your unconsciousness" (T1, Pat_Hand). This statement anchors Tarot within an existential vocabulary: not truth-seeking, but meaning-making.

Across all three threads, belief in Tarot is not a binary matter. Users repeatedly construct Tarot as a legitimate practice without requiring faith in external forces. Some ground its value in psychology, others in intuition or emotional resonance, and still others in loosely defined spiritual or symbolic domains. What unites these varied perspectives is a common effort to describe Tarot as meaningful and effective on its own terms, without needing to resolve the question of whether it "really works".

Ways of using Tarot: A typology of justifications and belief frames

Across the three Reddit threads, users describe Tarot through distinct and recurring vocabularies that reflect how they justify its use and how they relate to its perceived accuracy or truth claims. Based on these discussions, we can group users into four broad orientations. While individuals may move between these positions, each type highlights a stable mode of engaging with Tarot.

The first group can be called *Reflective Rationalists*. These users do not treat Tarot as supernatural or predictive, but as a practical tool for introspection. They emphasize its usefulness in structuring thought and accessing feelings. One user, mlvalentine, explains that "Tarot is about what you perceive. Everything you read comes from you, and your beliefs. So, its accuracy helps you trust yourself and your intuition" (T1, mlvalentine).

The second type might be called *Ambivalent Explorers*. These users hold a mostly skeptical view of Tarot, often explaining it in terms of psychology or symbolism, yet they also acknowledge a lingering sense of mystery or doubt. The original poster of thread T1 writes, "I usually default back to this view. That Tarot isn't particularly magical or 'other' but merely plays into psychology… and yet, there's always a shred of doubt. A hint of speculation. There's a tiny voice in the back of my mind that whispers, 'There are too many coincidences for there to be absolutely nothing magical/other behind it'" (T1, [deleted] OP). Atelier1001 captures this tension when they write, "Yeah, I'm agnostic and even when there's a looooooooooooooooooooooooot of suggestion and Forer effect in place there's also that tiny bit of inexplicable magic, quite a miracle" (T1, Atelier1001). These users use Tarot regularly, but they hold belief at arm's length.

The third type, which might be called *Symbolic Technicians*, treats Tarot as a system of meaning that requires skill and interpretation. These users tend to stress that Tarot is not about fixed outcomes but about reading patterns, symbols, and context. In T3, littlemetalpixie writes, "Tarot isn't ever 'wrong.' It's just a stack of paper showing you pictures. Paper inherently cannot be wrong, but people often are… when we're reading for ourselves, bias is impossible to eradicate. To put it simply, we see what we want to see, even if that isn't what it really says" (T3, littlemetalpixie). dirtynerdyinkedcurvy echoes this practice-oriented stance: "I do a weekly spread… then on Sunday I go back and reflect on

the same cards. How was my interpretation accurate? Where did I misread the cards?" (T3, dirtynerdyinkedcurvy). For these users, Tarot is like a language that rewards study and reflection rather than passive consumption.

These three orientations, *Reflective Rationalists*, *Ambivalent Explorers*, and *Symbolic Technicians*, map out the range of ways users justify Tarot as meaningful. Rather than fixating on whether Tarot is true or false, users invest in how it functions: as a prompt for thought, a tool for orientation, or a symbolic practice woven into everyday life.

Boundary work

Drawing the line: How users distinguish Tarot from other domains

In the Reddit threads, users perform boundary-work by defining what Tarot is, and crucially, what it is not. These boundaries help them differentiate Tarot from adjacent domains such as religion, science, superstition, and therapy. Through these distinctions, users construct Tarot as a legitimate personal practice that avoids the stigma often attached to fortune-telling or pseudoscience. They do this by emphasizing Tarot's connection to the self, positioning it as a tool for reflection or symbolic exploration rather than supernatural prediction.

In thread T1, a strong boundary is drawn by NekoRabbit, who states: "I also don't believe in anything spiritual, but Tarot is so extremely accurate… it just makes you think about aspects of your life in a way you didn't think about yet" (T1, NekoRabbit). The user explicitly rejects spiritualism, yet affirms Tarot's power through its capacity to reorganize one's thinking. The emphasis is not on belief in magic, but on the mental activity provoked by the cards.

In thread T3, TheValleyTarot challenges the idea that Tarot readings can be simply "right" or "wrong". They write: "That's not how the Tarot works… It shows you future possibilities and the future is not set in stone" (T3, TheValleyTarot). Here, the boundary is drawn against fixed or literal interpretations. By redefining Tarot as a way to explore possibilities rather than predict certainties, the user aligns Tarot with flexible, open-ended meaning-making rather than dogmatic truth claims.

Users also draw distinctions between Tarot and empirical science. In T3, SnapplePuff describes Tarot as an interpretive experience: "Cards are just cards, the 'magic' is supplied by your consciousness detecting patterns and projecting its hopes and fears onto these patterns" (T3, SnapplePuff). This perspective reframes Tarot as a tool for eliciting inner truths, distancing it from both scientific prediction and mystical claims, while affirming its value through subjective engagement.

These examples show how users work discursively to legitimize Tarot. They do so not by insisting that it fits into dominant systems of knowledge, but by establishing boundaries around what Tarot is and what it is not. It is not prophecy, not religion, not empirical science, yet it is meaningful. Through this boundary-work, users make room for Tarot to function as a personal, flexible, and respectable practice.

Legitimating the reader: How users position themselves in relation to belief

In the three Reddit threads, users rarely present themselves as firm believers or outright skeptics. Instead, they adopt flexible, often ambivalent positions that allow them to use Tarot meaningfully without fully committing to supernatural claims. This boundary-work around personal belief serves both to protect their credibility as rational actors and to defend Tarot as a legitimate tool for personal insight. Rather than treating belief as fixed, users describe it as selective, strategic, or contingent, something that can shift depending on context, emotion, or purpose.

Users describe belief as an internal dialogue or shifting practice. In thread T1, the original poster writes: "I like letting myself believe in the magic of the cards. The only time I push that away is when I pull something negative, because I'm not really in the mood to ruminate on something bad… It's for fun" (T1, [deleted] OP). This quote illustrates how belief can be modulated based on emotional needs. The speaker uses Tarot as a source of enjoyment and reflection, but chooses when to suspend or accept its perceived meaning. Belief becomes something done rather than something held.

In thread T3, September8Moon elaborates this position in a more reflective key: "If Tarot functions as an inner voice, a way to be more in touch with yourself or have an unbiased guide to think problems through with… you're going to have a vastly different understanding than someone who uses it for actual predictive readings" (T3, September8Moon). Rather than debating whether Tarot is real or accurate, the user reframes the issue: what matters is how one understands the practice. Belief, in this view, is less about metaphysical claims and more about personal framing.

This mode of belief, flexible, reflexive, and personalized, enables users to navigate tensions between skepticism and meaning. It also creates a space where Tarot can be taken seriously without being treated dogmatically. By drawing boundaries around how belief is defined and when it applies, users defend both the legitimacy of the practice and their own identities as thoughtful participants. This boundary-work does not resolve belief; it manages it.

Belief on one's own terms: A typology of boundary-work in Tarot discourse

Across the three Reddit threads, users construct Tarot as a meaningful practice through discursive efforts to define what Tarot is, and what it is not. These efforts are not only directed outward, toward distancing Tarot from religion, science, or superstition, but also inward, toward managing their own positioning as credible readers or users.

A first strategy is *strategic belief*, deployed by people who use belief selectively, depending on context or mood. These users do not deny the symbolic or emotional impact of Tarot, but they also do not commit to its truth-claims. In thread T1, the original poster writes: "I like letting myself believe in the magic of the cards. The only time I push that away is when I pull something negative… It's for fun" (T1, [deleted] OP). This approach treats belief as something that can be temporarily adopted or suspended. It is emotionally real, but not ideologically fixed.

Secondly, there is *reflexive framing*, engaging directly with the framing of Tarot as a flexible practice. These users emphasize that the meaning of Tarot depends on how one defines it, not on fixed beliefs or universal rules. In thread T3, September8Moon explains: "If Tarot functions as an inner voice, a way to be more in touch with yourself… you're going to have a vastly different understanding than someone who uses it for actual predictive readings" (T3, September8Moon). This type sees belief not as a truth to defend or a fiction to reject, but as a frame to choose and adjust. Through this boundary-work, users defend their use of Tarot while protecting their self-image as thoughtful, reflective individuals.

Collective rationalization

Making sense together: How users explain when Tarot "goes wrong"

The first research question on collective rationalization asks how users explain a failed or inaccurate Tarot reading in public discussions. In the Reddit thread "How do you deal with Tarot being wrong?" (T3), the original poster expresses distress after a reading they felt was clearly incorrect. The responses that follow do not reject the practice or invalidate the experience. Instead, users offer shared explanations, rationalizations, that help preserve the value of Tarot even when it does not meet expectations. These explanations are not isolated; they are affirmed, elaborated, and repeated by others, forming a repertoire of collective sense-making.

One common rationalization is that the future is not fixed and that Tarot shows possibilities, not certainties. TheValleyTarot responds directly to the original poster: "That's not how the Tarot works… It shows you future possibilities and the future is not set in stone" (T3, TheValleyTarot). This explanation is echoed and supported by others, framing Tarot not as a predictor, but as a guide. Similarly, FU-Committee-6666 reassures, "I just try to keep in mind that things can always change, nothing is set in stone, and not to place bets on what the cards predict" (T3, FU-Committee-6666). These users collectively reinforce a view of Tarot as flexible and open-ended, which protects its legitimacy in the face of error.

Another shared explanation emphasizes reader interpretation and emotional bias. littlemetalpixie writes: "Tarot isn't ever 'wrong.' It's just a stack of paper showing you pictures. Paper inherently cannot be wrong, but people often are… when we're reading for ourselves, bias is impossible to eradicate" (T3, littlemetalpixie). This view is reinforced by dutchessmandy, who argues: "Tarot is never wrong, only your interpretation is" (T3, dutchessmandy). These statements do not deny that readings can feel misleading, but they relocate the source of error in interpretation, not in the cards or the practice.

A third rationalization shifts focus from prediction to learning or emotional processing. SnapplePuff explains: "If the patterns you detect are giving you incorrect feelings, that is just the 'cards' (i.e. your brain) guiding you towards realizing what it is you truly want, which is the opposite of what your cards are telling you… It's an inverse affirmation" (T3, SnapplePuff). This response redefines a mismatch between cards and outcome as a meaningful moment of self-discovery, rather than failure. Similarly,

heating_pad reflects: "The cards can't show you outcomes you aren't ready to see, so sometimes they show you something else. And it can often appear wrong at first. But you may find, over time, the truth in those 'wrong' answers" (T3, heating_pad).

These responses demonstrate how users construct Tarot error not as a threat to the practice, but as an opportunity to reaffirm its deeper purpose. They collectively reinterpret inaccuracy as misreading, emotional resistance, or the unfolding of truth over time. These rationalizations are not individual defenses, they are offered, endorsed, and repeated across the thread. In doing so, they stabilize Tarot as a meaningful practice, even in moments of contradiction.

Shared explanations: How users reinforce and circulate rationalizations

The second research question on rationalization asks what explanations for failed or unclear Tarot readings are taken up and repeated by others, forming shared discursive patterns. In the thread "How do you deal with Tarot being wrong?" (T3), multiple users respond to the original poster not by disputing the experience of inaccuracy, but by offering consistent, collectively reinforced ways to make sense of it. These explanations become part of a circulating vocabulary through which the community maintains the value of Tarot, even in the face of disappointment or contradiction.

One widely shared explanation is that the reading was not truly wrong, it was simply interpreted incorrectly. dutchessmandy states clearly, "Tarot is never wrong, only your interpretation is" (T3, dutchessmandy). This is a common refrain echoed in similar form by other users. For example, Proof-Hedgehog-922 responds, "This is so true, even I have interpreted cards wrong then I looked back and realized 'oh… that's what they meant'" (T3, Proof-Hedgehog-922). These responses reinforce the idea that the practice itself remains reliable, and that error lies in the human act of interpretation.

Another common explanation is that the reading was right in a way that only becomes clear over time. heating_pad writes, "The cards can't show you outcomes you aren't ready to see, so sometimes they show you something else. And it can often appear wrong at first. But you may find, over time, the truth in those 'wrong' answers" (T3, heating_pad). This temporal reframing is not just personal, it's validated by others who describe similar experiences of delayed understanding. FU-Committee-6666, who had a distressing health reading, later revisited it and considered that the cards may have reflected a broader emotional or mental state rather than a literal medical outcome (T3, FU-Committee-6666). This way of speaking invites others to re-read past experiences through a symbolic lens, preserving the meaningfulness of the cards.

Users also circulate the idea that self-reading is especially prone to distortion. littlemetalpixie notes, "when we're reading for ourselves, bias is impossible to eradicate. To put it simply, we see what we want to see, even if that isn't what it really says" (T3, littlemetalpixie). This point is supported by severerecipeart, who writes, "When the cards read too 'obvious,' I will go the other way with it… if the cards seem too overwhelmingly positive or self-evident, I ask questions!" (T3, severerecipeart). These users share not only

explanations but reading strategies, advice on how to avoid misinterpretation by stepping back, recontextualizing, or seeking alternative angles.

Together, these rationalizations form a stable discursive framework: the reading is not wrong; it was misread, misunderstood, or not yet fully revealed. These are not isolated defenses, they are repeated, affirmed, and adapted in interaction. This circulation transforms personal coping into collective maintenance. It allows the community to acknowledge doubt and frustration while safeguarding the value of the practice. Through these shared explanations, Tarot remains credible, not in spite of its ambiguity, but because of the communal effort to interpret and reinterpret what it means to be "right".

Explaining the unclear: A typology of collective rationalizations in Tarot discourse

When Tarot readings appear to be inaccurate, users across the Reddit thread "How do you deal with Tarot being wrong?" (T3) do not abandon the practice. Instead, they offer and reinforce various rationalizations that preserve Tarot's legitimacy. These rationalizations are not merely individual coping mechanisms, they are shared, repeated, and often affirmed by others. Based on how users explain and respond to interpretive failure, we can identify four main types of collective rationalization.

The first type is the *Interpretation Defender*. These users argue that the cards are never wrong, only the reader's interpretation may be. The error lies in how the message was read, not in the cards themselves. dutchessmandy asserts: "Tarot is never wrong, only your interpretation is" (T3, dutchessmandy). This view is echoed by Proof-Hedgehog-922, who adds, "even I have interpreted cards wrong then I looked back and realized 'oh… that's what they meant'" (T3, Proof-Hedgehog-922). These users reinforce a shared understanding that the practice remains valid and that skill, clarity, and experience are needed to interpret correctly.

The second type is the *Timing Re-Framer*. These users claim that what seems inaccurate now may become clear later. heating_pad explains: "It can often appear wrong at first. But you may find, over time, the truth in those 'wrong' answers" (T3, heating_pad). This type of rationalization shifts the meaning of the reading into the future, allowing time to confirm or reinterpret the message. FU-Committee-6666, after receiving a stressful health reading, later softened its meaning and said, "maybe it was just my panic and paranoid state showing up??" (T3, FU-Committee-6666). This reframing acknowledges emotional context while maintaining faith in the cards.

Another figure is the *Bias Diagnostician*. These users emphasize that emotional involvement distorts the reading. littlemetalpixie notes: "we're reading for ourselves, bias is impossible to eradicate… we see what we want to see" (T3, littlemetalpixie). This theme recurs across replies that warn against reading while overly invested. The idea is not that Tarot is wrong, but that users project their hopes or fears onto the cards, blurring their objectivity.

Finally, we see the *Symbolic Re-Interpreter*. These users do not focus on accuracy or prediction, but instead reframe the purpose of Tarot itself. SnapplePuff writes: "That

despair is a tool, by identifying it, you know the correct answer is in fact 'yes'. It's an inverse affirmation" (T3, SnapplePuff). Here, a negative reading is not evidence of error, but a symbolic test to clarify what the querent really wants. The logic is less about forecasting and more about generating emotional or narrative insight.

These four types, *Interpretation Defender*, *Timing Re-Framer*, *Bias Diagnostician*, and *Symbolic Re-interpreter*, show how users explain away apparent failures without undermining Tarot. Each type offers a way to integrate confusion, contradiction, or disappointment into a coherent interpretive framework. Importantly, these explanations are not private. They are offered to others, affirmed in response, and repeated in similar forms across the thread. In this way, rationalization becomes a collective activity: a shared discursive practice that sustains Tarot as credible, meaningful, and usable, even when it is wrong.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing sociological literature on Tarot by analyzing how users justify, legitimize, and protect the practice in everyday discourse. Building on prior work that has identified Tarot's role in emotional self-regulation, personalized spirituality, and therapeutic meaning-making (Lavin 2021; Williams 2021; Cervantes 2022; Semetsky 2005), our analysis confirms and expands these themes through the lens of online interaction. Using thematic content analysis of three Reddit threads, we identified recurring discursive strategies, vocabularies of motive, boundary-work, and collective rationalization, through which users sustain the value of Tarot despite epistemic tension, ambiguity, or failure.

Our findings affirm previous research on vocabularies of motive showing that Tarot is framed less as a system for prediction than as a tool for reflection, insight, and symbolic self-orientation (Reese 2010; Semetsky 2005; Williams 2021). Users describe Tarot as emotionally supportive, creatively useful, and spiritually resonant, echoing prior descriptions of Tarot as a resource for self-work and non-institutional religiosity (Miller 2022; Sosteric 2014). However, our analysis shows that these vocabularies are not only individual but also interactionally maintained. Users collectively articulate and refine justifications for Tarot in public forums, foregrounding the social dimension of meaning-making that prior studies often reported through interviews.

Regarding boundary-work, we confirm Lavin's (2021) observation that readers construct hybrid professional and epistemic identities that blend therapeutic, spiritual, and intuitive registers. Our data also demonstrate how non-professional users participate in similar discursive positioning: distinguishing Tarot from superstition, religion, or pseudoscience while simultaneously asserting its emotional credibility. Users adopt reflexive, often ironic stances that allow them to frame Tarot as "spiritual but not irrational", "psychological but not clinical", or "intuitive but not magical", expanding previous insights into how legitimacy is maintained in contested epistemic spaces (Semetsky 2005; Palaga 2022).

Our most original empirical contribution lies in the detailed reconstruction of collective rationalization processes. While earlier work has noted Tarot's interpretive flexibility (Williams 2021; Schwalm 2004), few studies have examined how communities actively manage failure in discourse. We show that when a reading is inaccurate or confusing, users do not simply reinterpret it privately, they engage in shared rationalization practices. These include reframing readings symbolically, attributing error to bias or timing, and reaffirming the practice's emotional or narrative value. Through these recurring forms of sense-making, users insulate the practice from disconfirmation while sustaining its relevance and usefulness for emotion management. Our typology of rationalization types, *Interpretation Defenders*, *Timing Re-Framers*, *Bias Diagnosticians*, and *Symbolic Re-Interpreters*, offers a novel analytical framework for understanding how interpretive systems remain coherent in loosely structured spiritual cultures.

Conceptual contributions

This study contributes to the growing sociological literature on Tarot by analyzing how users justify, legitimize, and protect the practice in everyday discourse. Building on prior work that has identified Tarot's role in emotional self-regulation, personalized spirituality, and therapeutic meaning-making (Lavin 2021; Williams 2021; Cervantes 2022; Semetsky 2005), our analysis confirms and expands these themes through the lens of online interaction. However, our findings go beyond confirmation to offer three theoretical refinements that advance sociological understanding of meaning-making in digital spiritual communities.

From individual accounts to collective repertoires: Expanding vocabularies of motive

Our analysis extends Mills' concept of vocabularies of motive by demonstrating how these explanatory frameworks operate as collective interpretive repertoires in digital contexts. While Mills focused on situational accounts given by individuals to justify their actions, our data reveals that online discourse enables the development of what we term distributed vocabularies of motive, shared explanatory resources that persist across interactions and become community property.

This finding builds on DeSantis's (2003) insight that rationalization can function as a collective endeavor. In his study of cigar smokers, DeSantis showed how groups develop shared narratives that defend contested practices through social storytelling and mutual reinforcement. Our analysis of Tarot discourse reveals a similar process. Reddit users do not simply share rationalizations; they actively maintain and transmit a stable repertoire of justifications that function as interpretive resources for future interactions.

Unlike face-to-face settings where vocabularies emerge situationally, digital platforms enable vocabulary inheritance, the process by which explanatory frameworks become durable community resources. Users reference, modify, and build upon each other's explanations across threads and time. When a user describes Tarot as "a tool for self-reflection" or "emotional guidance", they draw from and contribute to a collective

vocabulary that transcends individual conversations. These justifications become templates that other users can adopt, adapt, or extend in their own accounts.

This represents a useful extension of Mills' original framework. The asynchronous, persistent nature of online discourse allows vocabularies of motive to become stable and transferable. Rather than emerging anew in each situation, motivational accounts accumulate into shared repertoires that communities actively maintain. This distributed nature of vocabularies helps explain how practices like Tarot sustain legitimacy across diverse contexts and audiences, but through collective discursive work.

Beyond demarcation: Reconceptualizing boundary-work as epistemic positioning

Our findings also refine Gieryn's concept of boundary-work by revealing more flexible and strategic processes of epistemic negotiation. Gieryn's original formulation emphasized clear demarcation between knowledge domains, how scientists distinguish "real" science from pseudoscience to maintain authority and credibility. Our data shows that Tarot users engage in a more flexible process we term epistemic positioning, the active construction of contextual relationships between knowledge systems rather than fixed boundaries.

Rather than simply separating Tarot from science, religion, or superstition, users create permeable epistemic spaces that allow selective borrowing and strategic alignment. They do not reject scientific thinking; instead, they position Tarot as complementary to psychological insight or therapeutic reflection. They do not abandon spirituality; they frame Tarot as "spiritual but not religious", creating space for personalized meaning-making outside institutional frameworks. These are not fixed boundaries but dynamic positioning strategies that serve different argumentative and emotional needs.

We identify a pattern of epistemic code-switching, where users move fluidly between rational, spiritual, and therapeutic frames within single posts or conversations. A user might explain Tarot psychologically ("it helps organize my thoughts"), spiritually ("it connects me to my intuition"), and pragmatically ("it's just a tool that works") without seeing these as contradictory. This positional fluidity enables users to maintain credibility across different audiences while preserving the personal value of their practice.

This challenges Gieryn's emphasis on clear demarcation by showing how boundary-work in digital contexts operates through strategic ambiguity rather than definitional clarity. The goal is not to establish what Tarot definitively is, but to maintain interpretive flexibility that preserves multiple pathways to legitimacy. Users construct Tarot as existing in a hybrid space, not quite science, not quite religion, not quite therapy, but drawing selectively from all three domains as circumstances require.

From cognitive to affective: Rethinking collective rationalization

Our analysis also reveals that collective rationalization in Tarot discourse operates primarily through emotional rather than cognitive logic, extending both classical rationalization theory and DeSantis's collective formulation. While Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory focuses on resolving logical contradictions, and DeSantis showed how groups collectively manage threats to identity and practice, our data demonstrates that

rationalization in meaning-making contexts functions predominantly as emotional regulation.

When Tarot readings fail or appear inaccurate, users' responses focus less on logical consistency and more on emotional comfort, hope maintenance, and identity protection. The rationalizations we identified, reframing readings symbolically, attributing error to timing or interpretation, emphasizing emotional insight over predictive accuracy, serve to preserve what we term the affective utility of the practice rather than its epistemic coherence.

This represents a significant departure from cognitive dissonance models that assume rationalization aims to restore logical consistency. In Tarot discourse, logical consistency is less important than emotional resonance. Users are willing to accept contradiction, ambiguity, and uncertainty as long as the practice continues to provide symbolic resources for meaning-making, emotional processing, and identity work. The collective rationalizations function not to eliminate cognitive dissonance but to maintain the emotional and symbolic benefits that make Tarot personally valuable.

We propose the concept of affective rationalization to capture this dynamic, shared discursive strategies that manage emotional discomfort and preserve symbolic resources rather than resolve logical contradictions. This form of rationalization acknowledges that meaning-making practices like Tarot operate through what we call affective logic, where emotional truth takes precedence over empirical accuracy.

This finding has broader implications for understanding how interpretive communities maintain coherence in the face of epistemic uncertainty. Rather than requiring logical consistency, these communities develop collective strategies for preserving emotional and symbolic utility. The goal is not to defend truth claims but to maintain practices that support identity, coping, and meaning-making in everyday life.

Through these three conceptual refinements, distributed vocabularies of motive, epistemic positioning, and affective rationalization, our study accounts for the dynamics of digital discourse and contemporary spiritual practice. These extensions help explain how informal spiritual practices persist and thrive in skeptical cultural contexts, not through dogmatic belief or logical consistency, but through flexible, collectively maintained discursive strategies that preserve emotional and symbolic value while managing epistemic uncertainty.

Limitations and future directions

This study focuses on publicly available Reddit threads, which show how Tarot users articulate meaning and legitimacy in a relatively open and anonymous setting. However, this approach has limits. First, it privileges users who are articulate, digitally literate, and willing to share their views in public forums. It may underrepresent more private, embodied, or non-verbal aspects of Tarot practice. Second, the asynchronous and often fragmented nature of online discussion means that we cannot fully trace how meanings evolve over time or in different contexts (e.g., face-to-face readings, long-term client-reader relationships).

Future studies could complement this work with ethnographic research or interviews to explore how discursive strategies identified here, such as boundary-making or rationalization, are enacted in other settings. Comparative work across platforms or cultural contexts could also clarify how Tarot's legitimacy is constructed differently depending on audience, medium, or local spiritual traditions. While our focus has been on English-language discourse, further research might also explore how Tarot is framed in non-Western or multilingual communities, where different epistemic vocabularies and religious frameworks may apply.

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Cătălina Enoiu is a sociologist with a master's degree in Social Deviance and Criminality and a graduate of Law. She has worked for five years as a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, where she was involved in organizing and delivering seminar courses. Her academic interests focus on the sociology of deviance, carceral institutions, and marginal knowledge practices. She has conducted both fieldwork and research in prison settings, combining empirical inquiry with critical perspectives on social control and legitimacy.