Neo-Paganism on TikTok:

Negotiating Religious Identity, Community & Authority Online

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Introduction:

The 19th century saw the emergence of new religious movements such as New Age, Wicca and Neo-Paganism. As Western modernity changed, people responded by attempting to carve out new identities and reposition humanity within the natural environment (Zwissler 2018). These are religious traditions which have continued into the 21st century, where "modernity" has continued to transform. The question now is how spirituality transforms in the age of easy digital communication and mobile devices. This small scale ethnographic study aims to explore how religion exists on social media. More specifically, to take a look at how a spiritual community is formed and interacted with in a digital setting, by focusing on the Neo-Pagan community on the social media application TikTok. The main questions this research is concerned with are: How do people form and interact with community online? How is authority present within the community? How does spirituality fit into the virtual space? Particularly, through a consumption based platform such as TikTok?

Methods & Fieldsite:

The methods utilized in this research were participant-observation, semi- and un-structured interviews, as well as screen-capturing in app content and saving posts for thematic analysis. These methods were selected in-order to familiarize myself with the norms within the virtual community, such as common post types and content, symbology and practices, as well as gain insights into the community from an insider perspective. The population studied during the course of this research was defined as people who self-identify as Neo-Pagan practitioners,

hereafter referred to as "witches" or "practitioners" as these are the most used terms within the community. At the onset of the research, the target participants were active members of the Neo-Pagan TikTok community, also known as "WitchTok". A community which derives its name from a colloquial language trend. The portmanteau "WitchTok" follows a common trend on the app, adding the suffix "-Tok" onto an adjective to create a proper noun denoting the name of the community (also seen in "CarTok", the automotive enthusiasts of TikTok). After having difficulty locating participants, the criteria was widened to include individuals from other Neo-Pagan online communities, who are familiar with WitchTok. As a result, this research is based on the experience of four key interlocutors aged 21-30: two of which are active members of WitchTok, and two who have encountered it but are more active in other virtual spaces which are associated with Neo-Paganism.

The social media app TikTok was the primary fieldsite for this research and was where the majority of my participant-observation occurred. Although at times, I found myself exploring other related forums and websites, such as the Reddit forum "r/witch". TikTok is a short video sharing platform, where individuals can utilize an array of video editing tools, filters, and effects, as well as have the ability to add audio to create videos which can be up to 60 seconds in length. Users are able to use pre-existing audio or upload their own, including the ability to create voice-over effects. Posts can be classified and promoted through the use of hashtags and 'trending' audios. App users have the ability to make public or private profiles consisting of a username and a personal page which displays a customizable biography, profile picture, and a link to outside sources (such as other social media pages or websites). All users have the ability to follow other users, comment on posts publicly, privately message users one-on-one, as well as "like" and share posts, either in app or to outside sources. Some users have the ability to

livestream, a feature which is available to users with sufficient followers; although the exact number required to unlock this feature is unclear and under debate by the TikTok community. Those able to livestream have the chance to interact real-time with their followers through a comment section which is available concurrently to their live video. Users can also "duet" other people's posts. This is a type of re-posting which entails adding your own video onto the original user's post. Overall the platform can be seen as consumption-based. The majority of posts are intended for entertainment, and include content such as comedy skits, vlogs (video-logs), choreographed dances, or short do-it-yourself project guides, among other things. Compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook or Reddit, the ability to communicate with others directly is limited, and group discussions are constrained to single comment threads.

Throughout the research process I began to question the effectiveness of participant observation in a virtual setting. In his chapter "Participant Observation" from *Ethnography Essentials* (2010), anthropologist Julian M. Murchison writes of the importance of balancing participation and observation in the field in order to utilize it as effective methodology. He notes the importance of considering how you are participating and with whom (Murchison 2010, 87). Sitting and scrolling through an app felt more like observation than participation, and I struggled to determine more effective ways to participate with the community. Eventually I came to the realization that participation and observation co-exist in a digital venue. By simply exploring the same virtual space by means of the same tool I was, in a significant way, participating in essentially the same manner as members of the community. While practitioners perform embodied rituals offline, something I did not participate in myself, the online space is about socialization and identity. Through a digital space it becomes easier to directly participate as a group member would. Of course my subject-position is different, I lack the knowledge to

accurately interpret everything I see from the same lens as that of a community member. Thus, I relied on public comments left by community members, as well as the experience of the research participants, to judge the reception of videos within the community.

Historical Context:

The discipline of anthropology has been tied to new religious movements such as New Age and Neo-Paganism from their beginnings. Born out of early anthropological writings on pre-Christian religions, Neo-Paganism is a relatively broad categorization of beliefs and groups which aim to revive pre-Christian Pagan ritual practices (Zwissler 2018). The main focus of which is honouring nature, self improvement, and balancing social relationships. Rituals tend to revolve around natural cycles such as the seasons, astronomical and lunar events, and life stages (Zwissler 2018). The importance of rituals in Neo-Paganism creates a strong emphasis on embodied experience and material culture within the religion. Additionally, the emphasis on bettering the self, alongside the rejection of formal institutions in favour of shared morals, results in a very personalized spiritual practice.

The focus on community and balanced relationships found within Neo-Pagan beliefs, has been seen as connecting the religion to, as well as influencing, social justice movements throughout recent decades; such as feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental activism (Zwissler 2018). As a result of feminist critique of patriarchal institutions – including religions – a specific branch of Neo-Paganism referred to as "feminist witchcraft" emerged during the 1970's (Greenwood 1996). While traditional witchcraft tends to focus on the complementary binary of gender, especially in Wiccan beliefs, feminist witchcraft rejects the gender binary as patriarchal ideology which must be overcome. An ideology which became more prominent in the

wider Neo-Pagan community over time. Yet, the individualistic nature of Paganism, alongside New Age religion, has been critiqued as stemming from Western capitalist ideology, thus working to promote the commodification and appropriation of spirituality (York 2001). In particular, New Age and Pagan beliefs are rooted in the idea of a universal origin of human spirituality, resulting in an eclectic practice which draws from many global religious traditions (Zwissler 2018). Consequently, this is critiqued as both a continuation of the capitalist-imperialist mindset and an active homogenization of culture, as spiritual practices are taken and simultaneously reduced to being "one in the same".

In addition to this, media such as books, TV, and magazines have played an important role historically, in the spread of Neo-Pagan spirituality, which has been on the rise in recent decades (Ranser and Tiidenberg 2020). In her study on Neo-Pagan forums Giulia Evolvi suggests that beyond the characteristics which are generally associated with Neo-Paganism – non-Abrahamic beliefs, polytheism, veneration for nature, feminism, and the importance of ritual over belief – extensive use of the internet should also be considered a defining factor for Neo-Paganism in the modern day (Evolvi 2020). Neo-Pagan resources, forums, and other content have a long history on the internet, but what does the community look like on new social media?

Findings & Data Interpretation:

In analyzing the interviews, participant-observation notes, as well as saved posts and screen-captures, unique themes within this online community began to emerge. The short duration of the study means the data collected is skimming the surface, and is not an all-encompassing look at the WitchTok community. Following the interviewing process, and a period of participant-observation within the online space, the collected data went through

thematic analysis of common elements and phenomena (Boellstorff et al. 2012). From this list emerged a number of key trends and themes.

One of the first things that caught my attention about WitchTok is its unique visual *look*. Even a cursory glance on hashtags related to Neo-Paganism reveal a coherent visual aesthetic. Crystals, tarot cards, candles, and plants are all common visual elements among the posts. Videos documenting the creation of spell jars for attracting love and wealth, altars to transcendent beings, and explanations for which crystals to use for what intention, populate this corner of the internet. Neo-Pagan practitioners, or witches as they have elected to call themselves here, record their personal spiritual journeys and give advice to other community members. The comment sections are filled with inside jokes and shared slang. One of the most prominent terms which continues to appear is "baby witch", a phrase used to refer to new practitioners or label yourself as such. The most common forms of rituals which can be found here are ones for energy cleansing to bring positivity into one's life, techniques for manifestation utilizing the law of attraction, and ways to acquire personal guidance through spiritual beings or divination tools, such as tarot cards or pendulums.

People identify themselves as members of the community through use of hashtags on public posts, or posting content related to Neo-Paganism. Additionally, many people include different signals in their username or bio. This generally takes the form of the term "witch" or "WitchTok", the inclusion of a humorous statement related to being a witch, and sometimes declaring a core aspect of one's practice, such as "tarot reader". A number of users also include their years of experience in their bios. Of course this only applies to people who participate in the content creation aspect, or publicly self-identify as a witch. Many more people do not use these signals or post about their own spirituality, yet interact with WitchTok posts and adhere to

Neo-Pagan rituals and beliefs. A more subtle marker in the online space is the use of emojis.

Figure 1 below includes the most used emojis as found in the post captions and bios of users on

WitchTok. TikTok bios can only contain 80 characters maximum, so emojis allow users to

visually enhance their bios and mark community affiliations in a condensed and visually

appealing manner. The emojis pictured below are associated with WitchTok, although not

exclusively. Another example of this phenomena would be the pride flag emoji, which directly

connects a user to the LGBTQ+ community denoting personal identity or an inclusive space.

Many members of the WitchTok community also identify themselves as members of the

LGBTQ+ community, as non-binary, or as allys to the community. This affiliation is often also

achieved through their bios. The most common emojis found within the WitchTok community

are celestial bodies, or are related to the natural world, astrology, or divination. An unsurprising

trend as these all visually relate to key elements of Neo-Paganism.

Figure 1: The most common emojis found in the captions and bios of WitchTok users. Variations of the moon phases and alternate zodiac symbols can also be found.

One of the first questions posed to the research participants was, what drew them to Neo-Paganism? All of the interlocutors recounted an initial interest in mythology, astrology or tarot cards as leading them to Neo-Paganism. Three out of the four discovered the religion through the internet, while a family friend of the fourth interlocutor was a tarot reader. This sparked an interest which eventually led her to become a practitioner. After many years of practicing tarot and astrology exclusively, this interlocutor became interested in witchcraft and began researching and practicing rituals. Each person's practice is extremely personal and customized, in which rituals are chosen if they fit the individual's spiritual "intentions" or their "path", which almost always revolves around self improvement or some manner of growth. Rituals and beliefs are drawn from many religious traditions from around the world and throughout history, including ancient Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies, European folk religions, and Hinduism among others. Interestingly, one of the individuals I spoke with considered themselves an "agnostic eclectic pagan", explaining further that they use rituals and the magick tradition for self-improvement but do not believe in any cosmology. Another informant identified as an "eclectic pagan", which seems to be a term used to differentiate oneself from the Wiccan subset of Neo-Paganism. While no one on WitchTok seems to have an issue referring to themself as a witch, one interlocutor discussed how this is less common in other Neo-Pagan communities online. Where people prefer the terms "practitioner" or "Pagan" as to avoid the stigma associated with the term "witch".

It is hard to gauge the size of the WitchTok community, and even harder to define who fits into it. The hashtag "#witchtok:" has over 11 billion views as of March 2021. A number which, at the time of writing this, has increased by 200 000 000 views in the last week alone. Users who publicly post about being a witch have follower counts ranging from a handful, to a

couple thousand, to over a million. As mentioned earlier, not all practitioners publicly identify on the app, and many non-Pagan users interact with WitchTok posts as well. Users who post guidance and tutorials, who are considered "creators" or "influencers" on this platform and within this community, usually provide links to outside resources for more in depth information about ritual practices and beliefs. Although, it is not uncommon for WitchTok members to include links to personal shops, hosted on websites such as Etsy or Depop, where they sell ritual objects such as crystals, herbs, and candles. Many members also sell their services as tarot readers or psychics.

Overall, online spaces play an important role for all the research participants. They use the internet to locate resources, ask other practitioners for advice, or to simply socialize with other witches. TikTok provides a unique experience for members of the Neo-Pagan community, creating a space for entertainment creation and consumption. Yet, the app's limiting factors – such as the 60 second maximum on videos, homogeneous post type, and its communication features – inhibit in-depth group discussion, resulting in a community identity which is abstract in nature. Furthermore, the two interlocutors who spend more time and rely more heavily on other Neo-Pagan online spaces both criticized the quality of information available on WitchTok. One went so far as to state that: "the sheer authority with which people on that app speak while getting things either completely wrong or overblown, astounds me", later adding that while she does not turn to WitchTok for important information, she finds the space "aesthetically compelling".

Despite the eclectic nature of Neo-Paganism, there is collective effort on WitchTok to define and respect "closed practices", a term referring to ritual practices which are associated with particular cultural groups, and generally agreed upon that only members of those cultural

groups should participate in. The most prominent examples of this are smudging and Santa

Muerte. The latter being a female deity from Mexican Neo-Paganism specifically, the former

being a smoke cleansing ritual practiced by North American Indigenous groups, which involves

burning bundles of sage or other sacred medicinal plants. Both smudging and the use of sage is

agreed upon by the WitchTok community to be a closed practice, an ideology popularized out of

solidarity with Indigenous communities who have been speaking out against the appropriation

and commercialization of their culture, as well as the potential ecological impact of mass

harvesting white sage in California (Leopold 2019). Members of the community will speak up

against non-Indigenous TikTok users who use or sell white sage, aligning the community with

current leftist views on cultural appropriation and social justice. This is a dominant stance within

the community which reflects the influence of social justice movements in Neo-Pagan

communities, as suggested by Laurel Zwissler (2018). It also positions the community in

opposition to the typical critiques of the religion as being culturally appropriative in nature.

Discussion:

While WitchTok represents the continuation of historically prevalent aspects of

Neo-Paganism, such as it's eclectic and individualistic nature, the virtual space presents an

opportunity to consider the relationship between community, religion, and technology. Through

this short ethnographic study of WitchTok, questions of identity and authority begin to arise. In

recent years, a number of studies have been done on Neo-Pagan communities online, exploring

how authority is negotiated in virtual venues. In 2020, researchers Berit Ranser and Katrin

Tiidenberg published their ethnographic study of Estonian witches on Facebook, wherein they

describe how witches utilize Facebook's hierarchical group set-ups to mitigate community

activity and legitimize spiritual leadership (Ranser and Tiidenberg 2020, 6). Individuals who

hold the title "administrator" or "moderator" are generally viewed as having greater knowledge and experience. Something also prevalent in Giuli Evolvi's study of "The Celtic Connection", a Neo-Pagan forum, where moderators referred to as "Council Elders" administer the public forum and provide advice (Evolvi 2020). Within WitchTok, individuals have control over their own posts, and app moderators have the power to ban content which violates community guidelines. Yet, no formal power structures exist within the Neo-Pagan community itself, so how is authority negotiated? Evolvi suggests that:

> "When discussing religious authority, scholars often refer to Max Weber's [...] categories of legal, traditional, and charismatic authority. From this perspective, authority is not solely a form of domination, but also a system of legitimation gained through social performance and symbolic construction" (Evolvi 2020)

This theory of authority alongside the concept of "consensus based authority" outlined by Digital Religion scholar Heidi A. Campbell (2017), illuminates how authority may function on TikTok. Campbell suggests a shift away from traditional authority in new media, where authority becomes detached from institutions and transforms into something which is transitory, personal, and based in connective actions (Campbell 2017, 19). Within the WitchTok community, individuals gain a following, thus claim authority, based on their content, personality, and experience level, a circumstance which reflects these constructions of religious and media authority as negotiated through social performance and interactions. Individuals grow their platform via online activity, and experience may play an important role in claiming authority within the WitchTok community. The inclusion of years of experience as a witch, and the label "baby witch" are ways of informally ranking community members as to negotiate influence and authority.

The material and visual culture of the WitchTok community is also illuminating. In an article co-authored by Evolvi and Campbell, entitled "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion

Research on Emerging Technologies" (2020), it is suggested that the coalescence of textual and visual elements available online, allows for "the articulation of religious identities through the creation of aesthetic representations" (Campbell and Evolvi 2020, 8). Which can, in turn, foster a sense of community belonging through the circulation of these representations. The repetitive use of emojis, and the recurring material motifs present in WitchTok videos augment this perspective. Campbell and Evolvi also suggest that the internet presents a venue for intensified identity performance, which allows for heightened autonomy in defining one's beliefs and ideologies, as well as connecting to people with similar interests (Campbell and Evolvi 2020, 8). The visual aspects of TikTok, the textual elements such as emojis but also video content more generally, in which one can present their personal appearance, material belongings, and express their personality and beliefs, allows for the creation and claiming of identity. When multiple people begin to perform in the same manner, group identity can become consolidated. Furthermore, Giulia Evolvi dives into the concepts of materiality and mediation in her study of "the Celtic Connection" forum. She describes how the strong material dimension of Neo-Paganism can become enmeshed with new media through referencing material and embodied experience in the online space, and visually enhancing online experiences to promote imagination and connection (Evolvi 2020). In this way, the visual experience and the visual coherence of the WitchTok community as well as the notable presence of ritual objects pictured within the virtual space, works to construct a religious identity and fosters a sense of connection through shared, but individual, embodied experiences offline. Further research in this setting and other religious settings online, has the potential to provide insight into the power dynamics which emerge through new media. As well as illuminate processes of identity formation and negotiation at the individual and group level.

Conclusion:

This research project sought to understand how spirituality fits into virtual venues, more specifically how authority and community identity are negotiated in a consumption-based social media platform. Building on the research of Berit Ranser and Katrin Tiidenburg, Giulia Evolvi, and Heidi A. Campbell, the methods of participant-observation, and interviews with key informants unveiled unique insights into these questions in regards to the WitchTok community. The aesthetic quality of WitchTok suggests the potential for the visual features of online spaces to contribute to identity formation and assertion. The heightened social performance which is afforded by online spaces, may also contribute to individual and group identity solidification. The theory of social performance and interaction contributing to a new form of authority which is temporary and personalized, may be reflected on WitchTok, where individuals gain followings based on their personality, content types, such as tutorials or guidance, as well their experience in regards to the knowledge and embodied rituals of Neo-Paganism. WitchTok also reflects the continued and changing aspects of Neo-Pagan religion. Here, enduring emphasis on the self and embodied rituals are evident, as is the material dimension of the religion. Yet, community inclination towards social consciousness and environmental activism suggest changing perspectives on the open-market appropriation of religious traditions as critiqued by scholars throughout the years (York 2001).

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