

**#WitchTok; An Examination of Female Empowerment And An Emphasis On The
Creation of the “Witchy Aesthetic”**

by

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According to a CNBC article as of September 27th, 2021 Tiktok has over 1 billion users monthly. This number exceeds the 700 million users the company reported in the summer of 2021 (Bursztynsky 2021). On Tiktok, content creators post short videos ranging from 1 to 10 minutes in length. In said videos, users use a variety of different sounds, filters, edits and duets in order to create their content (Rosenblatt 2022). Often videos on Tiktok are linked to larger online communities on the app. Some of these communities include: BookTok (a community of people on Tiktok centered on the discussion of books), FoodTok (a community of people on Tiktok that discuss different foods and recipes) and even FrogTok (an online community on Tiktok that centers on the discussion of frogs). In my research I have chosen to focus on WitchTok, an online community based on Tiktok that centers their content on the beliefs, practices and ideas surrounding the practice of witchcraft or the craft for short. On WitchTok the community has amassed a staggering total of 26.2 billion views and continues to grow.

Clearly these numbers are shocking to say the least however, this is not the first time that there has been a large public interest in the craft. During the 1970's witchcraft, also known as the Goddess movement, alongside the New Age and feminist movements was revitalized in popularity (George-Allen, 2020, pp.272). With the help of feminist scholars that headed the Goddess Movement the practice of witchcraft allowed women to be empowered through the worship of a female Goddess. Texts such as Christ's (1979) *Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections*, Starhawk's (1979) *Witchcraft and Women's Culture* as well as Budapest's (1979) *Self Blessing Ritual* allowed women to empower themselves through a religious practice that solely focused on the divinity and power of women.

While there has been extensive research on how the craft empowers women in traditional in person practices of witchcraft there has been little research that discusses how female

empowerment translates to witchcraft practices in online spaces. Additionally, through my research I have found no articles discussing the potential for the practice of witchcraft on Tiktok to promote female empowerment. With this in mind, in my research I question whether or not witchcraft practiced on Tiktok creates a space for female empowerment. Through my content analysis of those videos I found that although there are some aspects of WitchTok that are related to female empowerment, the major emphasis of the platform is to create consumerism and contribute to the “witchy aesthetic”.

In my literature I discuss the various ways in which witchcraft as a practice empowers women. In the first section of my literature review I first discuss what the witch represents, why this representation is important as well as how the symbolism surrounding the idea of the witch has been and continues to be used in witchy activism movements to this day. In my next section I will establish healing as an important contribution to the empowerment process. Additionally I establish witchcraft as a tradition that produces healing for women both on an individual and communal level. Finally, I end my literature review by discussing how online religious communities are created, how this translates to the online witchcraft community as well as how this type of community has the potential to create consumerism in the craft.

The Creation of the Feminist Witch.

In the practice of witchcraft the imagery of the Goddess is particularly important. Through the worship of the Goddess who is embodied in the witch, women are able to see themselves in a light that portrays them as powerful beings rather than fragile damsels in distress. As Christ (1997) states in her article the portrayal of powerful women in a religious context is crucial in the liberation and empowerment of women. She continues on to state that in order to fully break free of a social institution that values men over women, otherwise known as the

patriarchy; one must worship a female Goddess rather than a phallogocentric God (Christ 1997, Patriarchy 2005). This sentiment is reiterated when Christ (1997) writes, “religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate... [a woman] can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God (Christ,1997, p.275).” In other words through the devotion of a male God women are never truly able to break away from patriarchal ideals of male superiority. The only true way in which women are fully able to liberate themselves from patriarchal tyranny is through the worship of a female Goddess. In this way through the worship of a female Goddess rather than a male God women are able to see themselves as divine in their own right.

Therefore, by aligning oneself with the Goddess a woman is able to symbolically break free from patriarchal power. I argue that the same notion can be applied to what the witch symbolically represents. By aligning oneself with the symbolism surrounding the witch, women are able not only align themselves as women outside of the patriarchal gaze, but are also able to empower themselves through the imagery of a powerful woman such as the one represented in the witch.

In terms of the witchcraft movement the imagery of the witch has been used in order to evoke political change. Take for example the WITCH demonstrations during the Halloween of 1968. In this protest the witches gathered around Wall Street and, “pit their ancient magic against the evil powers of the Financial District—the center of the Imperialist Phallic Society (Rountree, 1997, p.215).” In this demonstration WITCH directly fought against a well-known patriarchal institution. That being said, WITCH also took a stance against what I would argue is one of the most well-known centers of capitalism in the United States. Therefore, in this demonstration

WITCH not only used the image of the witch to represent a woman who distances herself from the hetero-patriarchy but also used the witch to represent a woman who defies capitalism as a patriarchal institution. As Christ (1997) stated before, the image of the Goddess is used in order for women to express themselves as someone outside of patriarchal control (277). That being said I would argue that the imagery surrounding the witch embodies the same type of resistance against patriarchal standards within a hetero-patriarchal capitalistic society.

In current feminist and political movements witchcraft has also been symbolically used as a way in which protesters are able to distance themselves from the hetero-patriarchy. Such political movements include a feminist movement in Poland called the First Official Rally of 21st Century Witches (Anczyk and Malita-Krół 2017) and the protest against the 2016 election of Donald J Trump called the #MagicResistance movement (Fine 2019). In the First Official Rally of 21st Century Witches, the goal of the rally was to allow women, “who are 21st century witches according to the Catholic Church to meet and discuss all the problems of being a woman in modern times (Anczyk and Malita-Krół, 2017, p.222).” In terms of symbolism I argue that the Catholic Church represents the larger patriarchal society. Additionally, in this context the witch is thought to represent any woman who has been vilified by patriarchal institutions. In this sense the curators of the First Official Rally of the 21st Century Witches are using the symbolism of what a witch is in order to make a direct statement against larger patriarchal institutions. Similarly, the #MagicResistance Movement also uses the imagery of the empowered witch in order to further its agenda.

The #MagicResistance Movement started in 2016 in opposition to the election of former President Donald J Trump. Shortly after the election author Micheal Hughes released what he called, “A Spell to Bind Donald J Trump and All Those Who Abet Him” (Fine, 2019, p.70). In

response to Hughes' spell the #MagicResistance movement was created in which self-proclaimed witches practiced spells aimed towards Trump. In the #MagicResistance Movement a witch is not directly related to female empowerment, but instead refers to anyone outside of the hetero-patriarchy (Fine, 2019, p.79). That being said, the idea surrounding what a witch symbolically represents is the same within both movements. In modern political movements the symbolism surrounding what it means to be a witch is used in order to empower those discarded by hetero-patriarchy. Therefore, by identifying themselves as witches, protesters transform themselves as powerful beings outside of the patriarchy.

From the WITCH movement of the 1960's to the First Official Rally of the 21st Century Witches and the #MagicResistance movement the ideology surrounding what it means to be a witch has been used to uplift and empower women around the world (Rountree 1997, Christ 1997, Anczyk and Malita-Król 2017, Fine 2019). In a world that idolizes everything male, to identify as a strong empowered woman such as the witch is to directly defy the constraints in which women are forced to live under the patriarchy. Therefore, in my research I would like to look at the ways in which the image of the witch is constructed and used on WitchTok. Additionally, based off the political movements associated with the craft I would also like to further explore whether or not the witchcraft presented on WitchTok has any political affiliation. By looking further into the creation of the image of the witch and any potential political activism on WitchTok I will be able to gain a deeper understanding of potentially empowering aspects of the WitchTok community.

An Empowerment Interpretation of Healing and Community

While political action is an important part of empowerment, another important aspect of gaining empowerment through the craft is healing oneself and healing others through

community. In their article, Czerny and Lassiter (2016) discuss the importance of healing in the attainment of empowerment. Furthermore they go on to say that by healing oneself women are able to gain autonomy and understand their self-worth which is a crucial step in the gaining of empowerment (Czerny and Lassiter, 2016, p.315). Based on previous research it has been found that witchcraft promotes healing practices through healing practices on an individual level as well as a communal level. That being said, within the witchcraft community there are also practices that have the potential to be disempowering.

On an individual level witchcraft implores its practitioners to heal themselves through the worship of their bodies and the celebration of womanhood. One prime example of healing one's body comes from the Self Blessing Ritual written by Budapest (1979). In this ritual a woman blesses her entire body starting from her head and going down to her feet. However, what is especially noteworthy is that in this ritual the woman blesses her breasts and is even instructed to caress her vulva. While caressing her vulva the woman then says, "bless my genitals that bring forth life as you have brought forth the universe (Budapest, 1997, p.270)." From an outsider perspective it might seem like a peculiar practice to partake in. However, the practice goes deeper than simply anointing one's genitals and praising an unnamed Goddess. In contemporary society women are shamed for their bodies. Look at any diet advertisement. The message is clear. You as a woman should be ashamed of your body. You as a woman should hate yourself and your body, so buy my product to hate it less. The same type of messaging goes into menstruation. In the world there is a clear message that you should be ashamed that you dare have a period (Christ 1997). From small pocket sized tampons to discreet packing that hides the contents of the used period product inside the subconscious messaging is that you as a woman should be ashamed. When you have your period you should want to hide the evidence. There is a

similar sentiment surrounding childbirth. Christ (1997) argues that, “giving birth is treated as a disease requiring hospitalization, and the woman is viewed as the passive object, anesthetized to ensure her acquiescence to the will of the doctor (280).” In other words childbirth through the patriarchal lens is not seen as a healthy and natural process. Instead, childbirth is treated as something that needs to be fixed, that a doctor and the medical industrial complex need to control. In this way it can be seen that healing oneself in witchcraft is incredibly empowering. Through the act of taking agency of their bodies through the craft, women are able to empower themselves to love themselves and everything that makes them uniquely female.

While healing oneself and one’s body is an important part of the healing process of witchcraft, healing through community is equally as important. In her ethnography, Longman (2018) attended 20 women’s circles in order to better understand the ways in which women’s circles empower women on a spiritual and emotional level (5). Through her research Longman (2018) found that in these circles, women were able to create deeper, more meaningful connections with one another that they felt unable to create in the real world (11). This sentiment of sisterhood is echoed in Harris’s (2005) ethnography of the Wiccan women’s circles that she attended. Harris describes a small group of 8 women that met together 2-3 times a month. In these meetings the women had a particular emphasis on healing themselves and others (Harris, 2005, p.258). Through their sisterly bond they not only detailed gruesome events from their lives, but also offered support to their fellow group members. One of the ways in which they supported their group members was by making healing charms to help those who were struggling (Harris, 2005, p. 259). Harris (2005) describes a particular emphasis on the creation of healing charms for her lesbian sisters that struggled with homophobia (259).

The practice of witchcraft has been seen as a safe space for all types of witches regardless of sexual orientation. In fact a study done by Horne and Smith (2017) found that when surveyed, LGBT+ people reported that Earth- Spirited Faiths such as witchcraft were more accepting of LGBT+ members. In the study 90.6% of participants that practiced an Earth Spirited Faith reported that their faith recognized LGBT+ anniversaries. Additionally it was found that 64.2% of participants reported that their faith had coming out celebrations and 93.7% reported that their faith had ceremonies that celebrated their commitments towards their partner (Horne and Smith, 2017, p.244). As discussed in the previous paragraph one way in which witches heal their LGBT+ sisters is through the creation of healing charms. Another way is through a practice called the “circle of allies”. In this practice a group of witches stand together in a circle. One by one those who identified as LGBT+ would come into the middle of the circle and talk about the struggles they faced surrounding their queer identities. Once everyone who identified as LGBT+ was in the middle of the circle the leader of the circle would say, “see who your allies are ” and “now see who supports you in this experience” (Roberts, 2011, p.246).

Healing is an important part of empowerment. In terms of individual healing, in a world in which a woman’s body is constantly being monitored and surveyed, to celebrate one’s body is to directly empower women to take control in their lives. Additionally, through the creation of communities in witchcraft women are able to celebrate and empower themselves. This is especially true through the ways in which the witchcraft community celebrates all women, not just one type of woman. Therefore, in a sense by creating a space for LGBT+ women to be themselves, they empower women who may not have been empowered under the patriarchy.

Media Meets Commercialism: An Analysis Of Commercialist Tendencies Within the Craft

In my previous section I argued that one of the most important aspects of female empowerment through the craft is the creation of community and healing through said community. However, research has shown that a majority of those who participate in the craft tend to use the internet as their primary source of community building (Jenson and Thompson 2008). Research has also shown that online religious communities function differently than in person religious gatherings (Campbell 2012, McClure 2017). Therefore, in order to fully understand the WitchTok community it is important to understand how religious institutions function in online settings.

In online settings religious communities act as forums in which practitioners do not necessarily subscribe to one religion. Instead, in online spaces practitioners are able to be exposed to a multitude of religious ideals and practices. Through this sharing of information, people are able to choose which ideas they agree with the most and apply said ideals to their individual lives (Campbell 2012, McClure 2017). In terms of witchcraft specifically, it has been found that in witchcraft communities online, “a member’s sense of belonging comes from engaging in information sharing about solitary magical acts’ and that, “sharing discursive reinterpretations of symbols and forms related to religious practice creates an experimental environment, allowing members to come together, yet separately live out their faith. (Campbell, 2012, p. 683)” In this way members of online religious communities are able to create connections with each other through sharing, analyzing and critiquing shared religious practices.

Therefore I argue that one of the ways in which WitchTok could be empowering for women is through the creation of an online witchcraft community that differs from traditional religious practices. In traditional religious communities women are only given a finite amount of information that is filtered through a religious authority. Hence by creating a community that

analyzes and distributes religious information; women are able to obtain religious solidarity within the online witchcraft community while simultaneously being able to choose which practices work best for them as an individual.

That being said, some online religious communities as well as several members of the broader witchcraft community have used their platforms in order to promote their own financial gain (McClure, 2017, p.484). Based on this information several scholars have argued that there has been an emergence of consumerism within the craft (Ezzy 2006, Miller 2022, Waldron 2005). Consumerism is defined as, “a way of life rooted in mass production and the marketing industry...where social identity and prestige are constructed, experienced, and signaled through the purchase and possession of consumer goods and services (Tauxe 2012).” Therefore, it can be argued that the practicing of the craft through a consumerist lens leads to a construction of identity that emphasizes the obtainment of goods over the creation of female empowerment.

This sentiment of consumerism is echoed by Miller’s study in which the author sought to understand the connection between consumerism and WitchTok (2022). Through a content analysis of over 1500 videos Miller (2022) found that the practice of witchcraft on Tiktok participates in the larger consumerist society by emphasizing the practice of witchcraft through material goods (Miller, 2022, p.4), and the creation of the “witchy aesthetic” (Miller, 2022, p.7). Content creators put an emphasis on materialism in their practices by not only encouraging consumption, but also by actively profiting from this mindset they have created by selling their products on the app (Miller 2022). Creators sell anything from “Beginner Witch Kits” (Miller, 2022, p.13), to “Witchcraft Herb Kit[s]” (Miller, 2022, p.11) and even “moon water” to the plethora of potential consumers under the guise that by buying these items one will be more spiritually aligned.

Female Empowerment Through a Commercialist Lens

With that being said, this idea of consumerism overtaking the craft can be linked to widespread commercialization within the female empowerment movement . In recent years corporations such as the soap company Dove, the phone and internet provider Verizon as well as the clothing company Under Armor (Gregorian, 2021, p.15) and even the paper towel brand Brawny (Drake, 2018, p.15) have all embarked on “Femvertisement” campaigns or advertisements that target female empowerment (Drake 2018). While some may argue that the use of strong women in advertisements encourages female empowerment, others are more skeptical of the motives behind this type of advertising. In the feminine hygiene company Always’s #LikeAGirl campaign young girls were encouraged to reclaim what it means to do something “Like a girl” (Gregorian, 2021, p.12). Many praised the feminine hygiene company for encouraging young girls to reclaim their power and redefine a phrase that is meant to disempower women. However, when interviewed, account executive Shaina Holtz who was in charge of the campaign alluded to different motives for the campaign. When asked the motive surrounding the #LikeAGirl campaign, Holtz attested that one of the main goals of the campaign was for Always to connect with a younger audience (Gregorian, 2021, p.17). In this way companies that use methods of “Femvertisements”

“Femvertisements” are not limited to large companies putting out content via print ads, commercials and other forms of advertisements. The use of “Femvertisements” is also used by content creators on social media platforms. Various influencers on social media apps have used female empowerment on their platforms in order to sell their viewers either a sponsored brand or their own merchandise. For example, in December of 2018 Weibo vlogger Weibo Zhuzi embarked on her “The Big Women” campaign sponsored by the cosmetics brand Bobbi Brown.

In her vlogs Zhuzi interviewed two women, Nona Catusanu and Mary Beth Barone, while the women talked about their personal stories as well as stereotypes within the industries they worked in and how they personally define beauty while existing as “big women”(Xu, 2020, p.234). A big woman in this context refers to a woman who is considered plus size. Additionally, in Spain Youtubers The Tripletz launched their own anti-bullying campaign (Tortajada and Willem, 2021, p.66). In their quest to end bullying in Spain the Youtubers sold T-shirts that reclaimed common insults said to *chonis* which is a word used to describe lower class women who dress provocatively (Tortajada and Willem, 2021, p.65). Like the “Femvertisements” both these creators used pseudo female empowerment in order to market their products to female consumers. In Tortajada and Willem’s (2021) article it is not stated whether or not The Tripletz’s “Femvertisement” tactics worked. However, in Xu’s (2020) article it was found that viewers of Zhuzi’s vlogs found them empowering and saw this type of video as a way in which Zhuzi was changing societal norms rather than seeing it as the advertisement campaign that it actually was (237). The prevalence of “Femvertisements” and self-reported female empowerment by those targeted in said advertisements raises a debate on whether or not female identifying individuals can truly be empowered while simultaneously being marketed to.

On one hand female empowerment can be seen as a way in which influencers such as The Tripletz and Zhuzi are trying to gain notoriety and an increase in subscribers through female affirming acts. The creation of merchandise surrounding female empowerment makes me further question the motives of The Tripletz and Zhuzi. Are these creators truly trying to empower women? Or are The Tripletz and Zhuzi simply using female empowerment for their own financial gain?

On the other hand, women could be empowered by The Tripletz and Zhuzi. In their campaign, The Tripletz sought to use their platform in order to raise awareness towards an issue that many women in Spain faced on a daily basis. Additionally, in her campaign Zhuzi was able to raise awareness for the various issues that plus sized women especially in Asian cultures endure in their day to day lives. Similarly, many Zhuzi's subscribers commented that they found these videos empowering for them. Therefore, to say that Zhuzi's social media campaign isn't empowering due to the capitalist undertones is to potentially say that these women are experiencing false consciousness. Thus, by saying that women are unable to be empowered by feminist advertisement campaigns we as researchers are denying women's lived experiences and thus disempowering women by telling them what can and can't empower them.

That being said, "Femvertisement" campaigns are not the only way in which female empowerment can be seen in social media settings. In several studies it was found that young women and millennials see social media as a prime way to share historical and present information about the feminist movement. Through the use of social media young women and millennial women alike are able to spread information about their causes on a larger scale than they were able to previously (Tortajada and Willem, 2021, p.65). In this larger platform women are able to educate other about feminist issues such as inequality and sexual violence that they may have not been able to reach previously (Jackson, 2018, p.41). Additionally, young feminists and millennial women both use social media outlets in order to network with other women and create community through this sharing of information. I argue that while social media may breed pseudo female empowerment through the use of "Femvertisements" it is also a place where women are able to connect with one another and create community. With this community

building under the shared passion for feminism I argue that women are able to empower one another.

However, large companies such as Always, Brawny and Dove have used the symbolism surrounding female empowerment in order to gain consumer capital. This type of consumerism has also trickled into the practice of witchcraft in general as well as into the WitchTok community. With this information in mind I question whether or not the WitchTok community is empowerment based or is just another form of “Femvertisement”. That being said, as found in Jackson’s (2018) study social media can also be a place where feminists are able to share knowledge and further connect with likeminded people. Therefore, I would argue that the types of videos put on Wichtok will empower women by sharing knowledge of the craft with viewers while also creating a sense of community on the platform.

Methodology

In my study I content analysis of 50 videos under #WitchTok on the Tiktok app to determine whether or not the witchcraft practiced on Tiktok creates female empowerment. In order to obtain the videos underneath #WitchTok I went to the discover page on Tiktok and typed in WitchTok. Then on the top of the page I clicked the Hashtags button. After clicking the Hashtags button there are a list of hashtags of which #WitchTok has the highest amount of views which total 25.4 billion views on all of the videos listed under #WitchTok. Once I clicked the #WitchTok button all of the videos created under #WitchTok were listed presumably with the most popular videos being at the top. In order to get the most inclusive data I selected a variety of 50 different videos from #WitchTok in order to have a sample that most accurately represents the videos listed under the hashtag. By conducting my research based on a variety of data rather

than simply the first 50 videos listed on the page I aimed to get the most inclusive number of videos that represented WitchTok as a whole rather than simply the most popularized videos.

With that being said I would also like to argue some limitations with my study. One of these limitations is that as an undergraduate researcher I did not have the time or resources in order to conduct a large study such as the one conducted by Miller (2022) in which he collected data from over 1500 videos under #WitchTok. Therefore, my data may be skewed due to the lack of content available in my analysis. Additionally, in order to truly know whether or not practitioners believe that WitchTok is a place that fosters female empowerment it would be more effective to have in depth one on one interviews with those who practice witchcraft on WitchTok. However, in order to obtain testimonials from participants within the WitchTok community I would have needed more time and resources in order to contact practitioners on the app with no guarantee that they would respond.

Another factor that could potentially contribute to the skewing of my research is my own affiliation with the WitchTok community. Although I do not practice witchcraft on TikTok I have been exposed to a number of videos that would be classified within the WitchTok community. Additionally, I have also incorporated various aspects of the craft that I have learned through the WitchTok community into my personal life. Through these aspects of the craft that I have weaved into my own life I have found personal empowerment. Therefore, I as a researcher am biased towards the idea that the witchcraft practiced on WitchTok is in fact empowering.

Based on previous research on witchcraft I hypothesize that the videos listed under #WitchTok will be empowering due to 1) how they use witchcraft for social and/or political activism (Anczyk and Malita-Król 2018, Fine 2019) 2) creating content that encourages healing (Stawhawk 1979, Harris 2005, Roberts 2011) and 3) creating a community that fosters

empowerment through community building (Starhawk 1979). That being said, this is simply a hypothesis based on previous research. Therefore, there could be other ways in which the videos listed on the app are empowering that were not covered in previous research. Additionally, not all of these parameters need to be fulfilled in order for a video to be deemed as empowering. This is only a guide as to what may or may not make the videos on WitchTok empowering.

Contrastingly, in my research I also found ways in which witchcraft can be seen as disempowering. Based on research done by Ezzy (2006) and Miller (2022) it has been found that witchcraft, including the type of witchcraft conducted on WitchTok, has been used as a way to encourage consumerism. This directly goes against the very principles that witchcraft has been based on. Therefore, in my content analysis I will also be coding for ways in which the witchcraft practice on Tiktok could be based in consumerism which would put into question whether or not a practice tainted by consumerism can truly be powerful. Overall in my research I aimed to understand whether or not the witchcraft practiced on Tiktok truly creates female empowerment while also taking into account the various ways the practice could be seen as disempowering.

Results

As a result of my research I found that there were several videos that encouraged empowerment. This includes 1 video that talks about using witchcraft for political change, 10 videos that encourage the creation and implementation of boundaries, and 4 videos on healing oneself through the craft. Additionally, as hypothesized, the witches on WitchTok have created an online community through the sharing of spells and other forms of information on the app. However, I also found through my research that the main focus of the WitchTok community is the creation of the “witchy aesthetic”. In this section of my paper I aim to discuss the various ways in which

the “witchy aesthetic” is constructed and reproduced within the videos I surveyed. Additionally in this section I will discuss how the “witchy aesthetic” relates to consumerism, how it is used to market products and discuss the various ways in which the practice of consumerism has seeped into various practices on WitchTok. I then will go on to discuss the videos that do fit into my hypotheses. These videos include ones that discuss political activism in which only one video in my study fits into this category. I then go on to discuss how the videos on Tiktok encourage healing oneself and healing through the setting of boundaries. I finally discuss WitchTok as a community. Specifically I will discuss how the WitchTok community is made, how community members encourage others, as well as the potential downfalls of the WitchTok community as a whole and how said downfalls can be disempowering for women.

Consumerism Within the Craft, Creation of the Witchy Aesthetic

As stated previously in my literature review WitchTok as well as the broader witchcraft community have been known to promote capitalistic and consumer oriented practices. This sentiment was noted in particular by Miller (2022) who in his study on WitchTok found that the main focus of WitchTok is the creation and reproduction of consumer capitalist structures. In particular Miller noted that there was an emphasis on what he coined the “witchy aesthetic”. In his article Miller (2022) defined the witchy aesthetic as, “involving dark colours, particular symbols, plants, candles and crystals.” However, I would like to expand this definition based on my research to include the presence of zodiac signs, Halloween themes, altars, incense/smoke and tarot cards.

By creating and recreating the “witchy aesthetic” in their videos, creators on WitchTok use the “witchy aesthetic” in order to gain more likes on their videos as well as to create a market place that caters to this aesthetic. This can clearly be seen in my research. Out of the 50 videos I

researched there were only 3 videos that did not use any form of the “witchy aesthetic”. Of these videos the most common themes were the wearing of dark clothes by the practitioner (32%), crystals (32%) and candles (28%).

An example of the “witchy aesthetic” can be seen in @phoebemcegan’s video. In the video viewers can clearly see @phoebemcegan’s altar in the background which contains a lit candle, assorted glass bowls, and a smoking stick of incense. The video starts with the snippet of a song by the group October Country called “My Girlfriend Is a Witch.” @phoebemcegan starts her video by looking into the camera and lip synching the lyrics, “I know my girlfriend. Is a Witch.” The song then cuts to a musical portion in which @phoebemcegan looks into the distance with a straight face. As the music goes on a smile slowly creeps onto her face while the incense continually waves smoke around the room.

In @phoebemcegan’s video she relies on elements of the “witchy aesthetic” such as the items on her altar and the sound she chooses in order to authenticate her as a witch. It is therefore implied to the viewer that as long as one buys candles, incense and other items associated with the “witchy aesthetic” that they are automatically deemed to be a witch. Therefore, through the “witchy aesthetic” there is an overall emphasis on the consumption of goods in order to legitimize one’s practice.

The overall idea of consumption through the “witchy aesthetic” is reinforced by videos on Wichtok that solely focus on the buying and selling of goods. Based on my research I found that 5 of the videos or 10% of all videos surveyed were either showing off a product they had just purchased or were encouraging users to buy a product they were selling.

One of these products was a Declan’s Mining Co bucket which was posted in @emilymakesit101’s video. In her video @emilymakesit101 shows off a new Valentine’s Day

Edition bucket from Declan's Mining Co. In the bucket there is an assortment of crystals covered in dirt that consumers are supposed to dig for. While I don't know whether or not @emilymakesit101 has any affiliation with Declan's Mining Co, based on the video it seemed as though she was trying to sell this product to the audience. This is clearly evident when @emilymakesit101 opens up the bucket and exclaims, "they add some tiny little sifters which are so adorable" and "every single piece in here is super unique." In this way @emilymakesit101 is directly trying to encourage the audience and consumer to buy this product. That being said, other than the use of crystals there was no other use of the "witchy aesthetic". Therefore, it could be argued that it is only creators that are selling their own products that heavily use the "witchy aesthetic".

That being said, in my research I found that the majority of creators were trying to sell their own products. Products included a vampire shapes popsocket by @claytheist, an amethyst color changing mug sold by @moonscrystaluck, and a wand carved out of the crystal selenite sold by @greyson_backshall.

However, creator @sedonarayz differs in her approach. The video opens with @sedonarayz sitting down at a table. Her long black hair sits at her shoulders matching her large black cat eye sunglasses and her black top. In her hand she holds a lit lighter with what appear to be angel wings on the back. In the background Baby Tate's song I Am (feat. Flo Milli) belt out the lyrics, "I am healthy/I Am wealthy/I am Rich/ I am that bitch." The text above @sedonarayz's head reads "Bad B*tch Spell" with a butterfly emoji next to it. While the caption below the video reads, "Daily confidence boost, YOU ARE THAT B*tch". @sedonarayz starts by purifying the small jar she is using with incense. The next scene cuts to the small jar now full with rose, lavender and jasmine with the text above now reading, "attracts money, beauty,

confidence and happiness.” Next more herbs are added to the jar along with a cork. While @sedonarayz pours what appears to be sparkly purple wax onto the jar to seal it the text above changes and says, “What I used: roses, lavender, jasmine, Bad B*tch oil, attraction oil, love oil, money drawing oil.” The final shot in the video features @sedonarayz smirking at the viewer while wearing the spell jar around her neck. The text reads, “on my etsy”. While the other videos featured in my content analysis used the practice of witchcraft on Tiktok in order to show off or promote a particular product, @sedonarayz’s video differs in that the video does not solely use the “witchy aesthetic” to promote her product. Instead, she uses the “witchy aesthetic” along with the illusion of female empowerment.

This advertisement relates to the general theme of what Drake coined “femvertising”. In these types of videos advertisers of a certain product use the concept of female empowerment in order to sell their product and their brand to consumers. That being said, as I previously stated there is a continually blurred line between empowerment and disempowerment through the use of advertisements. The question at hand does not become whether or not this video is empowering. Instead the question is whether or not consumerism automatically converts the empowering to the disempowering.

On one hand, by creating a video such as the one that @sedonarayz did there is a reinforcement of the idea that the only way in which a woman can be empowered is through the consumption of goods. The only way in which we can be attractive is by spending hundreds of dollars on makeup, spray tans and Brazilian waxes. The only way in which we as women can fit into a predominantly patriarchal society is by hiding natural processes such as having periods and children in a way that makes men comfortable and is pleasing to the overall patriarchal structure. Therefore, through the commodification of the practice of witchcraft the underlying

message is that the only way in which you can be a good witch is if you consume goods in order to truly fit into the “witchy aesthetic”.

Additionally, this type of aesthetic has the potential to be damaging to serious practitioners. In one study conducted by Berger and Ezzy (2009) it was found that a majority of witches surveyed saw pop culture representations of witchcraft, such as the ones seen in the tv shows *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as delegitimizing to their practices. Young practicing witches are often seen by adult figures as going through a phase and that they as practitioners should not be taken seriously. Therefore, young witches often have to distance themselves from and critique pop culture representations of witchcraft in order to uphold the legitimacy of their own crafts (Berger and Ezzy, 2009, p. 505).

In terms of the “witchy aesthetic” I argue that this type of aesthetic may disempower young witches in that it too takes away from the seriousness of their practices. By having elements of the “witchy aesthetic” in the videos on WitchTok it implores those outside of the craft to speculate whether or not witches on WitchTok are serious about their religious practices or if they are simply following yet another Tiktok trend.

On the other hand, women may very well gain empowerment through the buying of material goods. Additionally it brings in the question of whether or not the “witchy aesthetic” truly negates any form of practices that could be considered empowering inside of said aesthetic. Authors such as Ezzy (2006) argue that the consumerism that seeps within practices such as WitchTok cheapens the overall message of empowerment within the movement. However, I do not think that there is such a concrete answer to this question. Instead, I argue that while the “witchy aesthetic” may permeate almost all of the videos produced on WitchTok it does not necessarily dismiss the possibility of said videos being empowering.

Witchy Empowerment On Tiktok

Nonetheless in my research I did find several videos that fit into my hypothesis of empowerment on WitchTok. Such videos include 1 video based on witchy activism, 10 videos that include aspects of healing as well as 22 videos that display community building aspects on WitchTok.

The 1 video based in witchy activism comes from the user @cellmates420. In their video @cellmate420 claims to create a spell that benefits the BLM movement as can be inferred by the caption of their video which states, “WITCHES FOR BLM”. To do this @ cellmate420 placed what appears to be a nail, cockroaches, and a piece of paper with a sigil on it into a large clear glass bottle that was sealed with what looks like red, white and black candle wax on the top. I say appears to be in my description in order to denote that @cellmate420 did not list any of the ingredients to their spell jar in their video. Therefore, I am solely relying on what @cellmate420 depicts in their video in order to give a description of their spell work. Additionally, I use they/them pronouns to identify @cellmate420 due to the creator not speaking or showing any parts of themselves during the video. Therefore, I am unable to infer their gender, thus I use they them pronouns in order to identify @cellmate420. Once @cellmate420 shows their viewers what is inside the bottle they prompt take it outside, bury the bottle and put a rusty nail on top of the mound of dirt where the jar is buried.

Despite @cellmate420’s claim of practicing magic to help promote the BLM or Black Lives Matter movement I argue that the emphasis of this video is on the recreation of the “witchy aesthetic” rather than the BLM movement. This can clearly be seen through elements that the creator puts in their video. One element @cellmate420 uses to reinforce the “witch aesthetic” are the colors they use in their video. @cellmate420 uses a dark filter in order to give the video a

dark menacing feel. Additionally the creator solely used items in their spell bottle that were dark colored. Another element that @cellmate420 uses in their video to denote the “witchy aesthetic” is the sound that accompanied the video. In this particular video @cellmate420 chose the theme song from the TV show American Horror Story’s Coven season. This is particularly noteworthy since the sound gives the dark background in the video an even more ominous, Halloween type feel.

Each of the elements of the “witchy aesthetic” in @cellmate420’s video comes together as the sole focus. I would also like to add that there is nothing inherently wrong with creating the “witchy aesthetic” on videos even if they intend to be made for activist purposes. The problem with this video is that there is no information given other than this spell is most likely intended to help the BLM movement. There is no information on what is going on with the movement, who this spell is targeted at, how this spell works or even how people could help support the movement with their own practices. With this information in mind I would argue that magical activism is not a way in which female empowerment is obtained on WitchTok.

Nonetheless, the lack of witchy activism for female empowerment on WitchTok does not rule out the possibility of the witchcraft practiced on Tiktok being a source of female empowerment. In my research I found that 10 videos or 20% of the total videos were based on healing. Based on previous research conducted by Czerny and Lassiter (2016) as well as the theoretical perspective mentioned by Budapest (1979) healing both on an individual and communal level are integral to female empowerment. Through healing women are able to become stronger physically, emotionally and spiritually. In this section I divided up the videos deemed to be healing into healing at the individual level and healing through relational level.

Out of the videos that I determined were healing based, there were 2 that specifically talked about self-healing. The first video was created by the content creator @drainwitch in which she performs a self-love shower spell on herself using area diffuser, lavender, red rose petals, chamomile, mint, and garden sage. In this video @drainwitch encourages her followers to take care of themselves and learn to love themselves as they are.

Another self-love video comes from the user @chaoticwitchchaunt. In this video @chaoticwitchchaunt employs several techniques that she does when she is stressed. Some of these techniques include: putting a piece of black tourmaline (known to repel negative energy) against her forehead on her third eye (a spot on the forehead that is in the middle of the forehead). Another technique that @chaoticwitchchaunt uses is aromatherapy that she rolls on her neck. She then tells the viewer that they should, “mull in their emotions.” In other words @chaoticwitchchaunt encourages her viewers to feel their feelings rather than hide from them. She then states that everything is gonna be fine.

The last video dealing with self-love comes from creator @jasminesgarden23. In her video @jasminesgarden23 encourages her viewers to feel confident and proud of themselves through what the WitchTok and spiritual community call an affirmation. In an affirmation one says a certain mantra either to themselves or out loud. By constantly repeating mantras to themselves it is believed that these affirmations will reprogram a person’s subconscious beliefs about themselves, thus making said affirmations come true. In @jasminesgarden23’s video titled, “A PEP TALK WITH FAIRY GOD SIS: PART 1:” @jasminesgarden23 empowers her viewers through the affirmations that she lists in her video. Said affirmations include, “Ive ascended so high meaningless shit and mfers can no longer fux with me...” and, “i no longer seek validation from the peasantry, because they’re not even vibrating as high as me...” In terms

of vibration in the WitchTok and spiritual community one's vibration refers to their personal level of enlightenment. Those who possess a high vibration are seen a more enlightened or spiritual than those who have a low vibration. In this quote @jasminesgarden23 affirms to the viewer that they are more enlightened than those whose validation they seek. Therefore, she argues that her viewers should not seek approval from others, since other people aren't even on the same level as them. By using affirmations @jasminesgarden23 empowers her viewers to not only love themselves, but to love themselves regardless of what other people think of them. She argues that you shouldn't care about what other people think of you because you are above them and their opinions of you. Thus, @jasminesgarden23 encourages women to empower themselves by loving themselves for who they truly are.

In each of the videos described there is an emphasis on self-love. By encouraging their viewers to practice self-care as well as teaching their viewers methods in order to employ self-healing methods into their own lives, @drainwitch, @chaoticwitchchant and @jasminesgarden23 empower women to love themselves. In her article *Self-Blessing Ritual*, Budapest (1979) emphasizes the importance of self-love for women. Budapest (1979) writes, "Self-blessing rituals are a way of exorcizing the patriarchal policeman, cleansing the deep mind, and filling it with positive images of the strength and beauty of women (272)." In other words in order to truly be empowered under a patriarchal society it is imperative that women practice rituals of self-love. By practicing self-love rituals such as @drainwitch's self-love shower spell, taking care of oneself in times of stress as seen in @chaoticwitchchant's video and affirming one's self-worth as depicted in @jasminesgarden23's video women on WitchTok are able to empower themselves to feel powerful in a patriarchal society that aims to make women feel inferior (Budapest, 1979, p.277).

Another way in which the WitchTok community encourages healing is through the setting of boundaries. According to the article created by Czerny and Lassiter (2016) a boundary refers to a metaphorical barrier between oneself and the external environment that one is surrounded by (317). Boundary creation is specifically important in the healing process. By creating boundaries women are able to gain empowerment by protecting themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually. In my research I found 8 (16%) videos that talked about the setting of boundaries all of which discussed spell work in order to do so.

One example of spell work being used to create and enforce boundaries comes from @thedragon goddess's video. In her video @thedragon goddess discussed an instance in which she used a return to sender spell. The idea behind a return to sender spell is that if someone intentionally or not sends you "negative energy" one is able to use this spell in order to send said "negative energy" back to the original sender.

Another example of spell work being used in order to create boundaries is through a cord cutting ritual. In this ritual two candles are used with one candle representing one person and the other candle representing another person. During a cord cutting ritual these candles are placed approximately 6 inches away from each other. Both of the candles are wrapped together with rope with the rope symbolizing the energetic bond between the two people. Then candles are then lit and as the fire travels down the candles the rope is burned, thus releasing the bond between the two parties represented in the candles. This spell can be used on any relationship that a person would like to be spiritually detached from. Through cord cutting spellwork women are able to give themselves autonomy from those they wish to be freed from. Therefore, by using a cord cutting spell women are able to become empowered by giving them a chance to actively choose who they want and don't want to have bonds with.

Another type of spell that can be used to create boundaries is called a freezer spell. In this spell all you need to do is write the name of a person you don't like on a piece of paper. You then put the piece of paper in the freezer. By doing this you, according to @irlggoose, you are able to put this person in a "witchy timeout". What is especially noteworthy about this video is that in the video the user acknowledges that this video is about the setting of boundaries and actively encourages her followers to create boundaries for themselves. This is evident when @irlggoose puts text in her video that states, "remember its sexy to set boundaries and put yourself first <3."

In each of the videos discussed in this section women are encouraged to heal themselves both as individuals and through the implementation of boundaries. By creating videos that stress self-care, creators make a point to their viewers that they are worthy of taking care of themselves which is revolutionary in a world that often encourages women to neglect their own needs. This sentiment is echoed in the boundary setting videos. By encouraging women to set boundaries for themselves the creators on WitchTok convey the message to women that they are powerful beings that are in control of who they allow and don't allow into their lives thus empowering them.

The WitchTok Community

The final example of female empowerment on WitchTok is shown in the creation of a community on the app. Based on previous research done by Campbell (2012) found that online witchcraft communities build a sense of community by distributing information about the craft to other practitioners. By doing this witches in online communities create a sense of community that functions on the spreading of information. This sentiment was evident in my research on the

WitchTok community. Out of 50 videos 22 videos or 44% of the videos included in my content analysis conveyed information about the craft to their viewers.

This information varied from tarot reading tips (@brayde.wolfe, @theflowerpoweress), how to use crystals (@jaykaizen), the proper use of incense (@thesolargoddess), money spells (@tarotbyolivia), good luck spells (@spell.jar.magick) as well as the spells discussed in the previous section on healing. While some may argue that the sharing of information on spellwork is not empowering I argue the exact opposite. As stated in McClure's (2017) article those who are in online religious groups are exposed to a plethora of religious ideas and practices. Due to this vast amount of information witches on WitchTok are able to see a variety of videos on different practices and chose which practices work best for them (McClure, 2017, pp.485). Therefore, I would argue that through online modes of religious practice women are empowered to break away from the patriarchal institutions seen in traditional religions. Thus, by giving witches information on the craft women are able to gain knowledge without going through traditional religious power structures, thus empowering them.

Yet, there is a downside of having a multitude of different spells and practices on Wichtok. In one video made by @ethereallywicked the user created a video in which she talks about how she did a self-love spell and it "backfired" on her. While @ethereallywicked does not clarify on what she means by a spell "backfiring" it does raise a question or whether or not the spells on WitchTok could have the potential to be harmful to practitioners. Additionally, in her video @aliciadarkmoon talks about how she accidentally summoned a demon while performing a spell she found on the internet as a baby witch. Baby witch is a term often used within the Wichtok community to reference a beginner witch. As a baby witch you are usually just starting out within the craft. Therefore, it could be argued that one of the dangers of WitchTok is the

giving out of incorrect spells. As illustrated by the videos created by users @etherallywicked and @aliciadarkmoon WitchTok could be a potentially dangerous community for inexperienced “baby witches”. By not having any mechanisms to protect naïve “baby witches” from harmful spells it raises the question of whether or not WitchTok is empowering if there is a potential to get hurt by the spells put into the community.

In their video, @riotaddams talks about the potential reasons as to why witches within the WitchTok community could be giving out harmful and incorrect information. In his video @riotaddams discusses the red flags of the WitchTok community in the background of his spell casting tutorial. He argues that one of the biggest red flag within the community is, “the inability to admit that you are not an expert” and that, “most of the content creators here are not experts in at least half of what they talk about.” The user @riotaddams goes on to state that, “in these witchy spaces admitting that you don’t know something is almost an attack on your personal character when it shouldn’t be.”

That being said, the attack on people based on their knowledge or lack thereof is not uncommon in online spaces. In fact according to an article by Jackson (2018) one of the main reasons as to why young feminists don’t post in online spaces is because of potential scrutiny they may receive from other feminists (Jackson, 2018, p.39). Based on the video by @riotaddams that discusses the pressure to always be an expert on WitchTok as well as the videos by @etherallywicked and @aliciadarkmoon that discuss the negative experiences the creators have had on the app I argue that the fear described in Jackson’s (2018) article can directly apply to WitchTok. Therefore, one of the potentially negative aspects of the WitchTok community is that it creates a space in which witches feel unsafe to admit they do not know everything about the craft.

This could also explain why users such as @etherallywicked and @aliciadarkmoon have had such negative experiences on WitchTok. If users feel as though they need to be experts then they might post information that is inaccurate. As stated by @etherallywicked and @aliciadarkmoon inaccurate information is not simply an inconvenience for those in the craft. Instead, the presence of inaccurate information can cause new practitioners that are not knowledgeable on the craft to have the spell backfire and even accidentally summon demons. Therefore, it could be argued that WitchTok could be not only disempowering for women, but it could be a potentially dangerous place for new practitioners to join.

Another major issue within the general witchcraft community is the appropriation of closed practices by white or European practitioners. This sentiment is highlighted in a video made by @cdntheplayers that was duetted by @highking.27. In this video @cdntheplayers explains what a closed practice is while using the story of Kat Restin as a cautionary tale as to why it is so important that these practices remain closed. According to @cdntheplayers a closed practice is one in which you must be invited or born into. Some of these practices include voodoo, hoodoo, voodoo and santeria. The user goes on to say that these religions are not associated with Wicca or witchcraft because they involve a series of spirits who serve, “the one God.” He then goes on to say that these spirits are, “not your friends either”. As the video goes on @cdntheplayers solidifies his right to talk about these practices due to his West African heritage, his family that lives in Louisiana which results him being allowed to practice closed practice religion based on his family’s bloodline. In the case of Kat Restin she, a white girl, tried to summon Papa Legba. However, due to her lack of knowledge on the practice Restin actually summoned Baron Samedi; who in @cdntheplayers’ video is referred to as “Grim Reaper” of hoodoo. @cdntheplayers goes on to say that “appropriation can be fatal” and “black culture is

not a toy”. While the video doesn’t specifically state how Restin died it is believed that she died from conjuring the wrong spirit. Additionally, the video did not state whether or not Restin practiced her craft on Tiktok, however it did state that Restin was a Wiccan. Nonetheless, this video highlights the potential problems within not only the witchcraft practiced on Tiktok, but the witchcraft community as a whole.

As a community, witchcraft has a history of appropriating African American, Latin American (Fine, 2019, p.79) and Native American traditions (Warwick, 1995, p.129). While witches claim that they are respectfully incorporating these traditions into their practices others say that it is cultural appropriation (Fine, 2019, p.79). When talking about the incorporation of Native American traditions one woman went as far to say, “you took our land, you took our children, you took our language, you took our culture and now you want God (Warwick 129).” In a sense one could argue that by taking traditions away from marginalized people, witches are no different than the patriarchal oppressors that they work so hard to fight against. Therefore, it could be argued that one of the ways in which the practice of witchcraft has the potential to disadvantage women of color is through appropriation practices.

Another way in which WitchTok is disempowering for women is through the wide spread disinformation on the app. The WitchTok community creates a space in which new witches, also referred to as “baby witches” are able to interact with a plethora of witches around the world. By creating this community baby witches are able to find more information in order to choose which practices work best for them. That being said, there are also some dangers within the WitchTok community. One of these dangers is there is a potential for baby witches to obtain incorrect information. As stated by users @etherallywicked and @aliciadarkmoon some of the consequences of misinformation is the spell “backfiring” or even the potential for accidentally

summoning a demon. Additionally, @riotaddams talks about the ways in which the WitchTok community can be unforgiving. As stated in their video the WitchTok community often gives out false information in order to keep themselves away from ridicule. Therefore, instead of being a safe space for Witches to practice their craft, WitchTok has become a community that heavily gatekeepers its users.

Conclusion

Christ (1997) saw the practice of devoting oneself to a female representation of divinity as the one true way for women to break themselves free from the patriarchy. Budapest (1997) saw the craft as a way in which women were able to celebrate what makes us uniquely feminine. From the WITCH demonstrations to the modern day Magic Resistance Movement women continue to empower themselves through the practice of the craft (Rountree 1997, Fine 2020). Through my research I aimed to find out whether or not this sense of empowerment translated to the online witchcraft community on Tiktok. In my study I did a content analysis of 50 randomly selected videos under the hashtag #WitchTok. As a result of my research I found that there were several ways in which female empowerment was created on the app. One way that female empowerment is created on WitchTok is through methods of healing displayed on the app. Another way is through community; however it was found that there are many ways in which the community has been seen as disempowering. Despite the many ways in which WitchTok can be seen as empowering the major focus of the community was on what Miller (2022) coined the “witchy aesthetic”. Through the “witchy aesthetic” there is an underlying pressure for witches to participate in consumer culture in order to fit into said aesthetic. Therefore, due to the problems within the WitchTok community as well as the overarching emphasis on consumerism I would argue that WitchTok does not create female empowerment.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations in my research. While I tried to include a variety of videos in order to get a sample that was truly representative of the WitchTok population there were many videos that I did not include in my study due to time constraints. Therefore, I would argue one of the limitations within my research is a lack of a large sample size. Additionally, I focused my research on the content created on WitchTok. I did not interview any practitioners on their thoughts about the WitchTok community due to a lack of connection to participants within the WitchTok community. Therefore, in future studies it would be beneficial to consider interviewing practitioners on the app in order to understand their thoughts about whether or not the WitchTok community is empowering or disempowering for women. This combined with my own research would create a more in-depth understanding about female empowerment or lack thereof on WitchTok.

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