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Hex the Patriarchy: About the History of Feminist Witchcraft and How Witches on Social Media Correspond to It and Shape It

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Abstract

"Hex the Patriarchy" examines the interplay between feminist witchcraft and social media. Given the rising visibility of feminist witchcraft on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, the paper delves into the historical evolution of feminist witchcraft from the second wave feminism to the present fourth wave, which is marked by its online mode of resistance. Through social media, contemporary feminist witches draw upon and reframe historical feminist struggles, adapting witchcraft's symbols of resistance and empowerment to suit a global, intersectional feminist discourse. By analyzing digital platforms, the paper illustrates how these contemporary witches navigate, transform, and commodify witchcraft, creating both spaces of community and personal branding. The study ultimately positions digital feminist witchcraft as a complex and evolving force within the broader feminist movement, using the online world to foster solidarity while contending with commercialization and visibility.

Keywords

feminism, witchcraft, feminist witchcraft, Neopaganism, digital religion, social media

Introduction

Feminism related to witchcraft on social media gets its fair share of attention in the news, magazines, and various blogs, however, the academic research on that subject matter is still very slim. This paper targets this lack, by offering an overview and analysis of how the history of feminism and feminist witchcraft shapes and gets shaped by social media witches today.

After clarifying the use of the term "witchcraft" in this paper, the interwovenness of feminism and feminist witchcraft will be demonstrated, followed by an analysis of feminist witchcraft on social media, demonstrating how digital (feminist) witches take on aspects of earlier feminist (witchcraft) movements and at the same time are a testimony of a new feminist wave that has its home online.

Witchcraft?

In this paper, the term "witchcraft" is used in the Neopagan[1] understanding, commonly meaning practice of magick[2] like divination, healing, spell work, herbalism, etc. (Nice, 2018: 16). Within the context of Neopaganism, witchcraft is most often an associated practice within Wicca, a modern Pagan "magico-religion",[3] its founding associated with Wiccan priest Gerald Gardner in the 1950s in the UK, that focuses on nature, magick and the worship of a variety of deities, at the core often times the Horned God and the Triple Goddess (White, 2016). The relationship between Wicca and witchcraft can become quite complex, with most – but not all – Wiccans identifying as witches, and certainly not every witch as a Wiccan (Nice, 2018: 16). Still, it is quite common to use the two terms interchangeably within the neopagan discourse.

Witchcraft can, however, be found in a wide ray of contexts – within and outside of Neopaganism. Within Neopaganism, practices of witchcraft are not restricted to Wicca, but can also be found in Eclectic witchcraft (the practice of witchcraft methods across paths), to give one example. Outside of Neopaganism, we can find the subject witchcraft amidst a variety of societies – for example amongst the Azande in Congo or the Native American Navajos. However, the meaning of what witchcraft encompasses can change radically depending on the context. For example, while in the western context witchcraft is most commonly associated with the use of magick and sorcery, the Azande view witchcraft and sorcery as two distinct phenomena (Lewis & Burton Russell, 2024; Evans-Pritchard, 1937).

Within this essay, I will clearly distinguish between "witchcraft" and "Wicca", with "Wicca" referring to a distinct Neopagan religious system, and "witchcraft" to the Neopagan practice of magic(k).

History of Feminist Witchcraft

To understand the current dynamics of feminist witches on social media, it is essential to get an understanding of the history and main aspects of feminist witchcraft altogether, as this heritage acts as a foundation and influence on current digital feminist witchcraft. The focus will lie on the rise of feminist witchcraft in alliance with the second wave feminism, followed by exemplifying the individual and womanhood-centered character of feminist witchcraft within the third wave of feminism, concluding with the digital realm that constitutes the fourth wave feminism and its witchcraft expressions. Finally, a short analysis of witchcraft representations in the media across the feminist waves will be outlined.

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1 Neopaganism refers to new (reconstructed) practices of pre-Christian traditions arising in the 19th century, such as Druidry or Wicca (White, 2016: 5f.).

2 Wiccans use the term "magick" instead of "magic", as the latter is associated with illusions and tricks (card tricks for example) known from magic shows (Nice, 2018: 16). Historically, the term can get traced back to Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) who used the added "k" to distinguish it from the in his words "primitive and pre-scientific" magic, as his magick is a scientific form, based on the spiritual consciousness of people and its psychological and physiological conditions (Stausberger, 2020: 211).

3 Term applied to Wicca by anthropologist Loretta Orion (1994).

Second Wave Feminism

Feminist witchcraft finds its start within the second wave of feminism, dated at the early 1960s until the late 80s, starting in the US and spreading from there to other Western countries. This feminist wave can be regarded as a reaction to the women's (involuntary) return to being solely housewives and mothers after the Second World War, after taking on jobs of the men who were in war. The feminist movement evolved around public and private injustices, addressing "issues of rape, reproductive rights, domestic violence and workplace safety" and was aiming to reform the inferior image of women portrayed in popular culture (Anand, 2018).

Within this Second Wave of Feminism the term "witch" became reappropriated by radical political feminist groups as a symbol of female knowledge, power and honor "symbolizing an ancient history of resistant fighters and martyrs of patriarchal oppression" (Coleman, 2009: 15), relating to the stigmatizing history of women that have been classified as witches and were burned both by Protestants and Catholics. These two Christian denominations have used the witch trials in the light of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, "to attract the loyalty of the undecided Christians" (Leeson & Russ 2017: 2067). Heavily associated with the witch hunts are also the Puritans and their famous witch trials in Salem Massachusetts (Leeson & Russ 2017: 2067f.).

Regarding this violent history, the term "witch" became used in the context of political rebellion (Coleman, 2009: 32), within the second wave of feminism. A prominent example for this usage is W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), an umbrella term for certain independent but connected feminist activist groups in the US in the late 1960s (with off-springs, like the Redstockings, still present – Brownmiller, 1999: 49). These groups appropriated the popular image of the evil witch that overlaps with characteristics that women were taught not to be – like independent or aggressive (Eller, 1993: 53ff.). The aim of W.I.T.C.H. was and still is to demolish patriarchal structures in society by using witch-themed political stunts, like hexing the Wall Street while marching in witches' costumes, resembling the portrayal of evil witches with long black gowns and pointy hats (Eller, 1993: 97). In the *W.I.T.C.H. Manifesto* (1968), the organization outlines their philosophy regarding the reappropriation of the witch, by claiming that "witches […] were the original guerillas and resistance fighters against oppression […]. WITCH lives and laughs in every woman. She is the free part of each of us." (W.I.T.C.H., 2020).

The persecuted and rebellious female identity of the witch is thus being projected within the contemporary feminist movement, allowing feminist protest to be anchored within a historical tradition. Witchcraft discourses then made their impact on political narratives, by centering the female body as an inherent part of political agendas, leaving its traces especially within the feminist health movement and the opposition of patriarchal and knowledge hierarchies. This is because the amplified narrative of the witch is now linked to the persecution and repression of their embodied knowledge – specifically as healers (Lenz, 2008: 107; Kwaschik, 2023: 172ff.).

> It [The Women's movement – author's note] intentionally challenged existing knowledge cultures in the name of female experiences that had been excluded from sociopolitical debates and academic institutions. […] The witch myth was prominently linked in and through feminist actualizations to the question of an alternative female knowledge production. The witch legitimized the quest for alternative and "buried knowledge," representing herself as a persecuted knowledge culture that produced and disseminated knowledge about the female body and female health, in unity with nature. Her magic and naturalist knowledge was set in sharp contrast to the "system" of institutionalized modern science. (Kwaschik, 2023: 174).

In this light, the feminist health movement aimed to oppose the oppressive, male dominant, medical system. In this quest, the narrative of the witch became fruitful, as it declares women as historically being healers and medicine being a heritage of women (Ehrenreich & English, 1973: 3f.). "However short the dominance of this historical image may have been, witch knowledge became the model of a self-determined approach to women's bodies, women's health and alternative medical practices, the effects of which continue to reverberate today." (Kwaschik, 2023, 178). The booklet *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (Ehrenreich & English, 1973) can be named as an important contribution, linking the past and present persecution of women,[4] cohering them to one shared political struggle: the women's health movement. This feminist discourse, referring to witchcraft, resulted in the establishment of women health centers, respective magazines, self-help groups, etc.

So far, the reappropriated term "witch" which was associated with feminist ideas and was used as a part of political rebellion was lacking actual witchcraft practices behind it. This changed with Zsuzsanna Budapest who started to gather women in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, to teach them new forms of feminist spiritual practices, by bringing the feminist ideas of the second feminist wave into the spiritual realm (Coleman, 2009: 15).

Her teachings were influenced by radical and cultural feminism. Radical feminism wants to erase gender as a social category and oppose patriarchy, as this constitutes the root of women's oppression. Radical feminism pleads that male and female roles are being taught and learned, instead of being based on biology. To overcome the dominating male power, radical feminists believe in the concept of "sisterhood", meaning that women have to get together in unified revolutionary groups. Cultural feminism on the other hand can be regarded as a counterculture to radical feminism, which does not want to erase a gender-based society but rather wants to flip the cultural preference of men over women (Feraro, 2020: 61). Budapest is regarded as the founding figure of spiritual feminism and of the feminist Dianic Wicca[5] religion, which is inseparably linked to the first. (Coleman, 2009: 15).

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[4] The past refers to the persecution of witches and their medicinal knowledge and position; the present refers to the male dominance in the health system.

[5] Dianic Wicca, which will be outlined in greater detail further below, being influenced by radical and cultural feminism, can be localized as a more militant form of feminist witchcraft. This becomes apparent as only "women-born-women" are able to join (a highly critical aspect, especially regarding transgender debates).

Spiritual feminism arose out of a critique of patriarchal, sexist, and male-centered structures within religions like Christianity, where the organization as well as the cosmology was/is subordinating women. Feminist spirituality as a religious movement seeks to change these structures by giving women power, value and a voice in religious contexts and as a consequence within society as a whole (Winter, Lummis, & Stokes, 1994).

Spiritual feminism, having had the highest influence on witchcraft in the USA, is crucial for the development of feminist witchcraft. For example, Wicca, even though originating from the UK in the first half of the 20th century, got its feminist influences mainly from the US (Coleman, 2009: 15), resulting in the emergence of feminist Wiccan paths like Dianic Wicca, which will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

Third and Fourth Feminist Wave

Feminist witchcraft after the second wave feminism period is thought by scholars who reject the postfeminist paradigm[6] as taking part in and shaping a new wave of feminism that is rooted in a uniquely female order (Kostopoulos-Riganello, 2009: iii), manifesting itself for example in goddess-centered religions, where women are linked to the sacredness and the divine (Eller, 1991). Especially the writings of the philosopher Luce Irigaray (1993; 2004) are influential in this development, arguing that "women must reclaim their own space and imagine the Divine as female to obtain full emancipation" (Coleman, 2009: 3).

The third wave feminism (beginning in the early 1990s), deriving from earlier movements and building on them, deals with the main issues of intersectionality, diversity (e.g., transfeminism), and challenges heteronormativity. According to some interpretations, third wave feminism focuses less on collective struggles but rather emphasizes individual pursuits (Coleman, 2009: 22). This correlates with the structures of said Goddess religions, where each member is trying to individually grasp the purely female symbolic system, "a part of the human consciousness inherent in all of us" to bring it forward and integrate it into ones' everyday life. (Coleman, 2009: 39) The third wave feminism thus correlates with feminist witchcraft developments at the time, by putting the individual in the foreground and centralizing femininity in religious organizations.

One example of witchcraft streams located in the third feminist wave (having its roots how in the second feminist wave) is that of Dianic Wicca, a Goddess religion and one of the most radical feminist witchcraft streams, as "Dianics have taken the consciousness-raising and feminist politics of the 1970s into the realm of the spiritual" (Coleman, 2009: 44).

Dianic Wicca is linked to the feminist Wiccan tradition in Los Angeles that has offered teachings and public rituals for women since 1971. The Circle of Aradia, a Dianic Wiccan grove founded in 1988 by Ruth Barrett, follows this tradition by facilitating courses and public rituals about Dianic witchcraft (Coleman, 2009: 22f.), evolving around women's empowerment and the issue of power within a pa-

[6] This heavily criticized paradigm describes the time after the second feminist wave, where women allegedly reached all their goals, leading to a decrease of interest in feminism (Kostopoulos-Riganello, 2009: 12).

triarchal society (Coleman, 2009: 173). Dianic Wicca is the only Wiccan path that is in its organization and understanding of the Divine thoroughly feminine. This means that only "women"[7] are allowed to participate in this religion and their rituals. An anchoring point for this separation in ritual and ceremonial work between sexes are the so-called women's mysteries, that refer to "women's unique biological rites of passage and the ways in which our female bodies inform our diverse life experiences". The main mysteries are birth, menarche, giving birth, lactation, menopause and death (Temple of Diana Inc., 2024). Furthermore, only one female divinity gets recognized who does encompass all – including the masculine (Coleman, 2009: 1). In comparison, the mainstream Wiccan cosmology entails female and male divinities that are personifications of nature with equal power, representing balance (Nice, 2018: 58).

The main goal of the Circle of Aradia and its teachings is "to recognize and eradicate patriarchy from within and without and to begin to imagine, as well as create, an [non-patriarchal – author's note] alternative" (Coleman, 2009: 28). They exclude males in their grove (until patriarchy has ended) to be able to create a religion that is freed from the constrictions that come with traditional patriarchal religious organizations and to create a safe space where experiences of patriarchy can be expressed freely and without explanation, resulting into a self-determined idea of womanhood (Coleman, 2009: 24–28, 43).

In contrast to the outlined second and third feminist wave, the fourth wave is defined less by its ideological frames but through its medium. As such, the fourth wave of feminism, starting in the 21st century, is characterized by social media and the internet being the main drivers for activism and feminism, appealing especially to the young and focusing on intersectionality – the overlapping and simultaneity of different categories of discrimination against one person (Trammell, 2020: 17f.). The fourth wave of feminism is characterized by its channels, where everyday usage of digital mediums by individuals enables communicative infrastructures needed for the mobilization of local and international feminism (Thrift, 2020). Just as feminism as a whole got adapted into the digital realm, so did feminist witchcraft. The subgroup on Reddit r/WitchesVsPatriarchy can be used as one example of such fourth wave feminist witchcraft, addressing intersectional issues, especially around identity, trans issues, gender politics, and disabilities (Winqvist, 2023: 45).

An example of how digital feminist witchcraft is connected to the historicity of feminism is a study conducted around the hashtag #WitchTheVote. This hashtag was used around the US midterm elections in 2018, as a response to Trump's win in 2016. It aimed to promote "witch-worthy" candidates and to animate witches to vote. The usage of the hashtag worked through the means of reflective nostalgic activism.[8] Users make use of the pop-culture image of the witch, especially deriving from the 1990s. (Past) Imageries of witches in popular culture get reimagined, critiqued, mediated, and used for feminist activities, by pointing to the character of

[7] Dianic Wicca classifies women as females born female (meaning with biological female markers). The Dianics' understanding of what a woman is gets heavily criticized, especially on social media, as its exclusion of transwomen gets interpreted as transphobic.

[8] "Instead of restoring the past, reflective nostalgia critically engages with remembering as a self-aware practice ambivalent in its longing for time and place." (Mulvey & Keller, 2023: 4).

resistance that the narrative of the "witch" embodies. In #WitchTheVote, witches draw on nostalgic memories of past cultural witch representations to articulate their feminist politics and mobilize for social change (Mulvey & Keller, 2023: 1ff.).

Feminist Waves and Witch Representations

Alongside those feminist waves, the depiction of witches in the media has changed and adapted. Around the same time, the movie industry experienced a new rise of interest, marked by the so-called New Hollywood movement (1960s–80s) in the US, in which filmmakers took on more independent roles in the production, incorporating more radical approaches into the mainstream film industry (Heckmann, 2020).[9]

The TV-show *Bewitched* for example aired at the beginning of the second wave in 1964, depicting the main character witch according to female beauty standards and gender assignments of that period, like being submissive to the husband. These gender attributes were coming under critique within the second feminist wave (Harris, 2020: 40), leading to changes in society that spilled over to media depictions, including the image of the witch. Thus, since the 1990s, the picture of witches in visual media became more and more positive, showing influences of the second wave of feminism – as witches are now represented as young, tough, aggressive, empowered, kick-ass women, transmitting "girl-power" (Berger & Ezzy, 2009: 502–504).

Current Shows like *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018) correlate with the fourth feminist wave, as the main character and a witch stands up against male dominance and for trans rights, founding the WICCA organization, Women's Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association, embodying the intersectional focus of that wave (Harris, 2020: 42). Important to note here is the relation between witchcraft representations in visual media and the interest in witchcraft practices:

> The visual media representations of empowered young female Witches are important as part of a cultural milieu within which Witchcraft becomes attractive to young women and to a lesser degree young men, the media must also be seen as a response to the growth of interest in Witchcraft. (Berger & Ezzy, 2009: 511).

So, what about the social media?

Feminist Witchcraft on Social Media

> *Why Is Digital Witchcraft So Appealing to Young Women?*
> As Christianity increasingly dwindles in popularity with young Americans, the occult is offering girls a safe, flexible, and feminist-friendly alternative. (Fustich, 2017).

[9] Film makers associated with the New Hollywood movement are, amongst other, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas.

> *They Wear Balenciaga, Cast Spells on Instagram Live and Swear by Sound-Healing – Meet the New Breed of London Witches*
> Forget broomsticks and pointy hats, modern urban witchcraft blends feminism, wellness and a sprinkling of savvy social media marketing into a potent brew. (Wills, 2021).
>
> *WitchTok: Content Creators are Bringing Witchcraft to Mainstream Social Media*
> From crystal healing to tarot card readings, this TikTok community has become one of the platform's most recognizable subcultures. (Delgado, 2021).

Headlines like these have been flourishing on the internet in the last couple of years, highlighting the upcoming of witches on social media and their feminist take. With hashtags like #witch that have been used over 20, 4 million times on Instagram or Reddit subgroups like r/WitchesVsPatriarchy with 747 0000 members (as of 4. 5. 2024), there is no denying that (feminist) witchcraft has found its place on social media, including other platforms like YouTube or Pinterest as well. Especially the rising subculture on TikTok with the hashtag #witchtok has been viewed over 49, 7 billion times and has shown immense growth since 2019 (Delgado, 2021). This can be interpreted as evidence for the gaining popularity of digital witchcraft. From tutorials for spellcasting, tarot readings, and crystal descriptions, to healing guides, everything can be found within this online witchcraft community through posts, pictures, and videos. It is "a spiritual path that moves at the speed of pop culture, a fact that magnifies its relevance, and perhaps even its radicalism" (Fustich, 2017).

But not only is witchcraft itself prominent on social media, but the feminist takes on the craft. This can be seen when comparing members of subgroups on Reddit. For example, while the subgroup r/Witchcraft[10] has 472 000 members and r/Wicca[11] 170 000, the feminist subgroup r/WitchesVsPatriarchy[12] holds 753 000 members – a substantial difference.

Especially, influences of the Wiccan religion and its feminine language, with concepts like "Mother Earth" and a focus on female power and self-healing are dominant within digital feminist witchcraft (Morrison, 2020). It is also interesting to note that the vast majority of witches asked in surveys and research defines itself as taking part in the feminist cause – often seeing both witchcraft and feminism as intertwined (Morrison, 2020). Wendy Griffin (1995), scholar of women's, gender and sexuality studies, demonstrated that witchcraft is often used to counter patriarchal power structures, making covens oftentimes a "safe space" for marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQIA+ community. One specific research on this topic was done by Winqvist (2023: 27f.) on the Reddit subgroup r/WitchesVsPatriarchy that found a connection between witchcraft and empowerment, as many interviewed

[10] See r/Witchcraft (2024).
[11] See r/Wicca (2024).
[12] See r/WicthesVsPatriarchy (2024).

witches referred to witchcraft as a "women's craft". An analysis of the commentary sections of the subgroup also showed the themes "women", "self-help" and "feminism" to be prominent and interconnecting. These findings correlate with those of writer Ellie Orrell (2019: 7ff.), who demonstrates a connection between the rising popularity of online witchcraft spaces and the notion of female empowerment, visible through a correlation of feminist hashtags such as #HeforShe or #TimesUp, and the common usage of the term "sister" when referring to other members of the (online) community.

So, what relationship do social media and feminist witchcraft specifically have? The following chapter answers this question by first taking a look into the general dynamics of feminism on social media and, secondly, by outlining the appeals that social media has particularly on feminist witchcraft.

Social Media Feminism

Feminist witchcraft on social media has to be understood as embedded within the fourth wave of feminism, which, as we recall, is characterized by the internet and social media as its main drives.

Feminism in general has taken over social media and revolutionized through it at the same time. As women are underrepresented in traditional media,[13] social media offer a place to potentially close that gap at least a bit. A study conducted by the Qatar Computing Research Institute (Magno & Weber, 2014) has shown that in countries with significant gender inequalities in the "real" world, women tend to have a comparatively more significant online presence.

Social media creates, regarding feminism, especially for women, a place where people from different backgrounds can make their voices be heard, tell their (shared) experiences and through that form a bond and solidarity. This changed feminism in a sense that the quite common modern-day feminist approach of individualism and self-sufficiency can be observed as being replaced by more community-based approaches (Powell, 2018).

The #MeToo Movement, which started in 2017 by actresses in Hollywood who spoke out against sexual abuse and sexism, encouraging women all over the world to share their testimonies or the #StandWithWendy hashtag in 2013 used by women who were not able to attend a protest at the Texas State Capitol against an abortion bill, can be taken as prime examples of how social media opens up a space for participation in feminist activities and enables the spreading of feminist ideas and agendas (Kuang, 2021).

(Young) Women

Harmony Nice, a now-retired Wiccan YouTuber with 744 000 subscribers and 354 000 followers on Instagram, shows through her demographics, consisting of 89 % women between the ages of 16 and 25, that especially young women are drawn to content similar to hers: focusing on mental health, meditation, healing, and witchcraft/Wicca – all with a feminist take (Morrison, 2020). While the younger generation is generally more prone towards the use of social media, with people

[13] According to a study in 2017 by the Women's Media Center, women get only 38 % of bylines in media such as print, TV, wire news or the internet (see Women's Media Center, 2017).

of the age between 18 and 35 representing the largest audience on Instagram and male users outnumbering females slightly within that age group (Sehl, 2021), the question remains why women are drawn to witchcraft content much more often and why this content in general experiences such a boost.

An underlying explanation can be found through the observation that more and more (especially young) people are leaving the Christian church and at the same time increasingly find interest, amongst other, in the occult, appealing through its non-dogmatic character and often feminist connotation. Especially witchcraft in the Wiccan context, relying on a balance between female and male powers, offers an alternative to current patriarchal structures that speaks to women particularly. This finding can for example be noticed in the USA where 8 % of the population left Christianity behind between 2007 and 2014, with "only" 56 % of Millennials[14] identifying themselves as Christians (Fustich, 2017). Similar research findings were presented by the Pew Research Center, which, in its 2014 Religious Landscape Study, found a decline of 7, 8 % of Christians in the US from 2007 to 2014 and a rise of 0, 3 % in Paganism and Wicca, with a 10 % increase within the Millennial generation (Pew Research Center, 2014). During that same period, there was an observed rise of 1, 2% of people changing their religion to non-Christian beliefs – most of them Millennials. The rise in interest in Wicca can be observed with an increase from 134 000 to 342 000 practitioners between 2001 and 2009. Most of them – again – Millennials and particularly females, who are more and more drawn into the occult and spiritual (Fustich, 2017). „As Christianity increasingly dwindles in popularity with young Americans, the occult is offering girls a safe, flexible, and feminist-friendly alternative." (Fustich, 2017).

Peer-reviewed studies on this subject of demography are more than sparse, due to the fact that witchcraft and Paganism as a whole lack formal institutional membership status and that approximately 79 % of practitioners are solitaires (Reece, 2009: 73). Still, Gwendolyn Reece (2016: 77), scholar of contemporary Paganism, author and Pagan priestess, showed in her peer-reviewed study, based on an online survey in the USA on contemporary Pagans and the notion of stigma, a participation of 73 % females, 24 % male, and 3 % gender non-conforming. A study of the TikTok Hashtag #witchtok by Miller (2022: 18) suggests that while around 60 % of TikTok Users in the US are female, the percentage on WitchTok is ought to be higher. Also, while social media do not provide us with demographic analytics on other peoples' channels, we do see that the vast majority of witchcraft accounts and channels popping up belong to females. To name a few: Annabel Margaret (aka. the Green Witch), Olivia Graves (aka. the Witch of Wonderlust), the Heart Witch, or Afura Nefertiti.

Other than that, when searching for social media witches online, published articles (for example from *Cosmopolitan*, *BBC* or *Wired*), clearly showcase (young) female practitioners at large. While this does not say much about the actual demographic, it does show under which light modern witchcraft on social media is being portrayed today, and thus, which group is being its target.

The reason why especially women are drawn to witchcraft practices can be explained, without repeating the entirety of the history of feminist witchcraft, by the

[14] Generation born between the early 1980s and late 1990s.

fact that witchcraft has always been associated with females within the Western context, appealing to them through its intersection with feminist ideas at least since the 1970s and the second wave of feminism. It is for example the demonstrated reappropriation of the term "witch", "a word and an identity that has been manipulated to ostracize, torture, and murder women for centuries", that still gives women a feeling of power and liberty (Fustich, 2017).

An example for this appropriation on social media is the YouTuber and influencer Mia Magik, who not only declares herself a witch but also prefers to wear a dark pointy hat – just like the early and still prominent depictions of the old evil witches – as a fashion statement but also as a way of breaking the stereotypes associated with witches (Sky Life, 2020).

Why Online?

The YouTube video *Hex the Patriarchy* by Mia Magik, which inspired the title of this paper, shows her 33,000 large audience how she brought the Goddess back to Rome.[15] A city that, according to Mia, lost a vast part of its femininity and representations of Goddesses. By holding on to the frequency of the Goddess in herself and performing prayers and spells in Rome and next to the Vatican – "the stronghold of patriarchy" – she aims to bring back balance by reactivating the energy of the Goddess (Mia Magik, 2019). Another video of her talks about her use of menstrual blood in spell work as a way of honoring the substance that has and still is disempowering women, as the menstruation cycle often gets described as gross and taboo (Sky Life, 2020). Mia's feminist witchcraft approaches are not an abnormality within the digital witchcraft community. But what makes social media platforms as popular as they are for sharing those beliefs and practices?

We already discussed why feminism on social media is on the rise – mainly due to its ability to give unheard groups a voice and create bonds of solidarity. I argue that feminist witchcraft – as one branch within social media feminism – relies on the same developments and more. Through the available academic, as well as journalistic/popular literature on witchcraft practices and representations on social media platforms (as used within this paper), I dissected three main aspects that I argue make digital witchcraft so appealing: a) community, b) anonymity, and c) marketing and aesthetics.

Community

Alongside the third wave of feminism, the practice of witchcraft became more and more individualized with the rise of Goddess religions, focusing on the self and one's connection to the Goddess. This development had more solitary witches as an outcome, meaning that they do not practice as often in covens anymore but by themselves. This, however, does not mean that the witches do not seek a sense of community. On Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, etc., various groups and subcultures can be found that share the interest and practice in (feminist) witchcraft and provide a platform for community building (Morrison, 2020).

[15] The term Goddess is here understood as encompassing all female Goddesses in one energy.

Just as the fourth wave of feminism in general drives by strengthening a sense of community and solidarity between especially women and queer people online, the same can be said for within those witchcraft communities.

I argue, however, that the community aspect that was previously found in covens of witches' get-togethers in person does not just "change its place" by going online, but rather takes on a brand-new form, based on the demonstrated broader outreach and possibilities for marginalized groups that the internet can provide.

Anonymity

Even though witchcraft and Wicca are generally more and more accepted and known, identifying oneself as a witch can still be dangerous. For example, when dealing with misunderstanding and/or aggression coming from one's close circle, especially when being in a conservative, religious context, as witchcraft is considered a sin for example in Christianity or Islam. Having an online community where one can share their craft can therefore be a safe space, as one's identity can be hidden or revealed as much as one feels comfortable with. This is also a benefit when it comes to online hate that witches are often exposed to by people who see their craft as blasphemous or the "devil's work". Even though online mobbing is already severe, through the possibility of remaining anonymous, the negative online feedback does not have to swap over into the "real life".

Especially for marginalized groups the digital witchcraft communities offer "magical shelters" with groups like the Asian Witchcraft Assembly, The Queer Witch Collective or the Black Femme Witches Brew, whose aim is to provide a safe space for these people, where they can embrace their identity, share experiences, and information and through that build a network and a community (Fustich, 2017).

Marketing and Aesthetics

Shiny crystals, beautiful tarot cards, colorful herb gardens, and handmade wooden art: an aspect of digital witchcraft's popularity that cannot be overlooked is the so-called "witchaesthetic". Combining popular witch aesthetics with the appeal of the visuals and the video format of many social media platforms, as practices are not only read about but can be observed in practice without going to a ceremony (Delgado, 2021), is drawing people to witchcraft content online. Alison Hearn, doctor of media studies, & Sarah Banet-Weiser, professor of communication (2020), argue that aesthetically pleasing posts contribute to feminism acting as a non-disruptive and effectively cheery visual performance. Furthermore, Ross Haenfler (2013), professor of sociology and author, observes that resistance against political and cultural hegemony is characteristic for subcultures.[16] This is visible in the feminist witchcraft movement online, as, for example, gender norms are commonly challenged through the self-presentations of the users (Winqvist, 2023: 44). This development results in a huge space for marketing and profit-making. Witch aesthetic has been used by small and big corporations for commercialization purposes, as witchcraft shifted from having a purely religious connotation

[16] Haenfler (2013: 16) proposes the following working definition of a subculture: "[a] relatively diffuse cultural network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived "conventional" society".

to representing more of a media-appropriated subculture (Souza, 2016; Hebdige, 1979). Images of witches in popular media are influencing this aesthetic, which then, in effect, shapes the view of witches shared by consumers (Winqvist, 2023: 9).

This commercialization is by no means restricted to corporations. Numerous witches provide online services like tarot readings but also sell and promote products and merchandise. From t-shirts with witchy slogans, incense bundles, subscription boxes, and spell kits to hand-painted Ouija boards: through various online shops like Etsy, that can be linked to social media accounts, such (often handmade) products can easily be acquired. Although this trendy marketplace witchcraft promotes the craft and makes it easier to share information, it might be perceived to threaten its legitimacy.

Harmony Nice for example states that: "Some people on Instagram are just interested in the witch aesthetic, which is totally fine but sometimes I feel like it doesn't get taken as seriously because of that." (Morrison, 2020). Nice articulates that through the focus on the witch aesthetic within the digital witchcraft community, the legitimacy of witchcraft, and the often-connected feminist cause, gets threatened. It is argued that marketplace feminism in general (feminism as a drive for advertising and marketing) dilutes the strength of feminism as a political movement, by making social change initiatives a brand identity that does not offer solutions to the movement but rather waters it down. The same can be said for digital feminist witchcraft (Zeisler, 2016).

Another issue, named especially by – or in relation to – BIPOC people, stemming from this marketplace witchcraft occurs when white witches take on elements from Santería or Hoodoo, which may be viewed as an attempt to claim knowledge and/or to promote a more authentic witch aesthetic. BIPOC people might consider this to be cultural appropriation, making the open digital witchcraft community less welcoming for those groups (Fustich, 2017).

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Digital feminist witchcraft is, as shown, deeply embedded within the fourth wave of feminism which builds upon previous feminist movements but changes its dynamics. By having its home online, the feminist discourse and with that hand in hand the feminist witchcraft discourse changes. Through the possibilities that the social media world offers for feminism and feminist witchcraft, like providing safe spaces for particularly marginalized groups, offering a sense of community and solidarity, and reaching a broader spectrum of people, feminist discourses and get a new shape. Namely, the anchoring of feminism within the digital realm and the discussed dynamics (e.g. marketing strategies) of feminist witchcraft that can be found in this space.

Not only does the online world enhance feminist ideas and movements, but by re-branding them for the sake of advertisement and marketing they also face de--legitimization and expand to fields outside of social change initiatives.

Conclusion

The paper demonstrated how feminist witchcraft arose out of/alongside the second feminist wave in the 1960s and has been continually influenced by broader feminist movements. As demonstrated, witchcraft discourses also influence broader feminist discourses and shift broader political narratives, by centering the female body in the discussion and anchoring the women's movement within a broader historical framework.

Feminist social media witchcraft, as an integral part of the fourth feminist wave that operates online, builds upon the interwoven history of feminism and feminist witchcraft. (Digital) Feminist witches are therefore influenced by feminist movements but also reshape their current discourse, with social media opening up new possibilities and ways of operating (outreach, bonds of solidarity, safe spaces, anonymity, marketing, etc.) within this social change movement. Regarding the realm of social media, I argued that these mediums operate as fruitful soil for feminist witches, especially among the younger generation. The popularity of feminist witchcraft among particularly the younger female generation finds its explanation when adding developments of religious affiliations (showing an increase of interest in the occult within the younger generation), demographics of social media usage (with the age group of 18–35 being on top) and the demonstrated connotations between feminism and neopagan witchcraft.

Due to the nature of social media and its obscure algorithms, the feminist witchcraft bubble is not a contained one. Trending hashtags are distributed also to people who are not part of the community. Digital feminist witchcraft thus potentially shapes feminism as a broader movement, by spreading its ideas globally to an extent and form that without digital mediums would not exist. To put it bluntly: by seeing feminist witches online, the association of feminism and witchcraft is enhanced.

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