DIGITAL COVENS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF THE

INTERSECTION OF PAGANISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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This paper examines how does within the Pagan community uses social media, specifically Facebook groups, as a way of community building, knowledge gathering, and platform for digital ritual. The research was based on a combination of interviews and observational data gathered from various groups. To help analyze the data gathered, theoretical approaches of both mediatization and materiality are employed to understand how digital spaces are being used as a tool for those within the Pagan community within their religious tool-kit, as well as understanding how digital landscapes are being used in order to conduct ritual.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF APPLIED THESIS PROJECT

When I first started looking into Paganism in 2003 there use to be not very many places to find tarot cards or athames in Texas, let alone people who use them. They existed, but even in the largest metropolitan centers like Dallas-Fort Worth, they were small, tucked away in places half-forgotten, wedged between an old tattoo parlor and a cluster of buildings on the other side of a disused set of train tracks that might at one time have been some kind of refinery. I first began exploring Paganism as a potential religious path to follow while growing up in the very conservative Bible Belt state of Texas; at the time I had no resources beyond what was immediately in front of me: practically nothing, since this was before social media and I was too young to be allowed unsupervised access to the internet. My world was limited to what I could grasp at the library or run into in person. Because of my early difficulties, the effect of introducing social media to my available resources was profound: it enabled me to find others with similar thoughts and interests, no mean feat for a little kid living in rural Texas. Before the advent of social media, and with it, online spaces, most of my information came from word-of-mouth, the occasional encounter with fellow Pagans or occultists I met, or through reading books found at the library. Subsequent to its introduction to my life, social media broadened my horizons; as a result, I am very quick to appreciate its effects upon my community. In 2020, the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and closed down for several months. A circumstance such as that might be expected to sever the tenuous connections between people who are otherwise isolated practitioners or even belonging to relatively isolated practices; however, this was no longer the eve of Y2K. Due to my very previous personal previous experience with social media, I have remained aware of social media's influence upon the Pagan community, knowing

that at one time, in-person encounters and physical visits to libraries were almost the entirety of my life as a Pagan encompassed. However, it was during the pandemic that my interest in social medias place within the Pagan community began to grow. This paper will discuss the role of social media in creating a community for Pagans.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the course of this paper. From the time I was constructing a basic idea of what I wished to study, I intended to work with the Pagan community in Phoenix, Arizona. I was already in the process of outreach to the Pagan community in Phoenix to conduct in-person interviews when the pandemic hit. Suddenly locked down at home and isolated from everyone in the outside world, it was obvious that visiting Pagan groups in person would no longer be a viable option. I turned to where people go outside of meeting in person, that is to say, the Internet, and in particular social media sites. The pandemic and the mandatory quarantine turned out to be an unexpectedly rich time to begin this project. Groups and online sites grew, as more and more people reached out to online communities to stay connected to others, and people had time on their hands to participate. While the pandemic was not the focus of this project, it did help to spark my interest in how Pagan users were using the Internet.

<div align="center">What is Paganism?</div>

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary's definition of a Pagan is a "person who holds religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions such as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam." However, this definition in itself could be a lesson on the inadequacy or, at least, human subjectivity of dictionary definitions. This given definition of *Pagan* does not adequately define the group that I worked with, nor would it adequately define Paganism in general. While it is true that the clients I have worked with "hold religious beliefs other than those of the main world

religions such as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam," the reality of the community is more comprehensively nuanced than that. In truth, there is no one correct definition of what a Pagan is; for the purposes of this paper, however, in a broad sense one would frame a Pagan as a person who practices non-Abrahamic religions and believes in the religious and/or spiritual practices of a nature-based worship. The word Pagan itself, etymologically, is derived from the Latin *Paganus*; this word was first used in the late Roman Empire to describe people who did not adhere to Christianity. The word Pagan can and has sometimes been used to describe indigenous religious practices around the world; for example, Hinduism, technically, according to the definition--carried beyond the scope of this paper--has been described as Pagan. Additionally, many indigenous practitioners, such as Korean Mu or Aboriginal Kurdaitcha *do not* seem to consider themselves Pagan, perhaps because they do not define their spiritual tradition in opposition to Christianity as much as reclaiming aspects of their own culture. For our purposes, therefore, we define Pagan as people who belong to a Christianized culture, pursuing non-world religions, and believe in the religious and/or spiritual practices of nature-based worship. It is, all things considered, slippery in a myriad of ways. Perhaps a more closely related definition would be a neopagan which is defined by the Britannica as "any of several spiritual movements that attempts to revive the ancient polytheistic religion of Europe and the Middle East". This is probably more closely related to what I mean when I defined the word pagan however this was not the particular word choice used when discussing things with interviewees. Again, the definitions used in this paper or not all encompassing and can mean different things and what is found within a dictionary. Linguistics, especially when trying to describe anything that would be considered an umbrella term, tend to be hard to pin down.

Within this paper are a multitude of terms used that are within the daily vernacular of a

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person who is Pagan, and to those unfamiliar with them can seem confusing, even interchangeable; for the sake of clarity, I have done my best to standardize the language in this paper, but readers should be aware that, beneath its superficial alignment, nuances exist within this lexical framework, though their specifics are beyond the scope of this paper. For example: someone who considers themselves Pagan may also call themselves a witch, although not all those who consider themselves Pagan also call themselves a witch; those who adhere to Pagan practices do so on their own, or in a group or a coven which consist of several or more members, and none of the above can at any time be assumed to adhere to the same practices, or use the same items in their worship, such as tarot cards, or pentagram necklaces. Some who call themselves Pagan also call themselves Norse practitioners rather than witches or Wiccans, and even within the term "witch" there is multitudinous variation: kitchen witches, crystal witches; the list goes on. The mechanics of it are similar to an individual identifying themselves as Christian, but also as a specific denomination of Christian, such as Southern Baptist or Roman Catholic.

My client with whom I worked as part of this paper identifies themselves as Wiccan, and also a Pagan, so for the purposes of this paper, this may not hold true in respect to my client, one may assume a degree of interchangeability. However, this may not hold true in respect to the individual interviewees, who do not all consider themselves either Wiccan or a witch, though they all consider themselves Pagan. In short: Paganism is an inescapably fluid, immensely broad umbrella term, though I have attempted to lend specificity to definitions where appropriate, and will add clarification where appropriate.

Witch N' the Working

After the COVID-19 shutdown, I headed online for this research. I initially discovered

and reached out to my client, Witch 'N the Working, on YouTube, where they maintain a significant online presence. During my searches, I had been watching some videos on YouTube when an episode from the Witch 'N the Working channel popped up. Curious, I clicked on it and found it incredibly educational and interesting. Going out on a limb, I reached out to the page owner to see if he would be interested at all in any kind of research regarding how Pagans are using social media for the Internet. He responded very quickly and we proceeded from there.

Witch 'N the Working also runs a Facebook page, where my client showcases educational videos housed on YouTube, and conducts discussions of Wiccan practices with many people from all over the world. During our initial discussions to determine how to reach out to potential interviewees, we found it necessary to take note of how other Pagans were making use of the many available social media sites and to narrow down our focus. We determined that we should focus on Facebook; while my client does primarily operate through their YouTube page, we determined that it would be easier to reach out to individuals and observe the conversations taking place on an integrated social media site like Facebook. This has the added bonus of at least a degree of personalized legitimacy: Facebook has profiles and a degree of communal integration whereas YouTube is significantly more geared towards anonymous posting, and commenting is isolated to an individual video's comment section; because of this we determined that participants on YouTube may not be as receptive to outreach.

The Pagan community using the Internet as a resource has not been a new phenomenon for two decades; however, with the pandemic, there seems to be an influx of more and more people conducting rituals through digital spaces (Yellin 2021). My client and I determined that our primary focus would be on how individuals in the Pagan community were utilizing online spaces to build community and connect with online practitioners. Additionally, we focused on

how Pagans who were recently joining these online groups were taking in the influx of knowledge coming from multiple sources online. Other than just interest in how the Pagan community uses social media as a tool aside, this research was brought up to address challenges my client faces in using a social media platform. As a coven leader and a producer of educational videos on YouTube, there is a keen interest in understanding how to better reach out to those within the Pagan community to provide more information and connection. On top of that, as a figure on the Internet, he can show authentic authority in the subjects he creates videos on.

Gaining the help and input of my client, an established figure in the online Pagan community, was vital to my ability to conduct this research effectively, because it gave me access to people who may not otherwise have been willing to speak to me. The Pagan community is and has always been discreet about its beliefs and practices for many reasons. While it is true that Paganism as a religion (rather, more specifically: as a grouping of disparate religious practices) has recently appeared to transition into a liminal space in society, better tolerated, and tolerated in public, than in previous decades, the community at large remains very secretive. One can find tarot cards, an item of divination not necessarily directly associated with Pagan worship, and pentagram necklaces, a representative of some "denominations" of Pagan belief in the same way that, for example, the triple-bar cross with one of them slanted is a symbol for Eastern Orthodoxy in Christianity, in trendy stores instead of tucked away from judgmental eyes (Singh-Kurtz and Kopf 2018). However, even with these types of items becoming more accessible to the general public negative stereotypes and damaging connotations remain.

The Internet allows those who use it to remain as anonymous as they desire in regards to their involvement with groups and their beliefs, and as such has become an unexpectedly ideal medium for the Pagan community to grow. Not nearly every adherent embodies the level of

visibility that a content creator like Witch 'N the Woods has chosen. It is precisely because the

Internet and social media do provide safety in a chosen level of anonymity, giving breathing

room to the generalized secretiveness of the community at large, that both my client and I

believed online-based research of this community would be worth investigating. Conducting my

investigation on the Internet with the help of my client provided a level of insight greater than

that of in-person research because of the protective insulation that anonymity provides.

My client stated, corroborating my own experiences, that the ways in which the Pagan

community can reach out and connect to others now are unlike anything that has ever been

before. Before the Internet, the only reliable way to find others within your community was to

serendipitously bump into others in an area with a community that was willing to reach out to the

public. While not impossible to connect with other members, connections were hindered due to

these groups' more private nature (Reece 2016, 62). However, online, people from all skill levels

can reach out to others who may have years of experience in practice.

At the end of this research, I was able to deliver to my client a more well-rounded

understanding of how those with the Pagan community are using social media. As a contact

creator my client could benefit from implementing certain kinds of understanding when

addressing audiences. This included how to discuss things and possibly reach a broader audience

to his own content as well as establishing a reliable authority on the subjects that he is providing

his knowledge on.

<center>Research Questions</center>

Even for a religion as thoroughly established as Christianity, the Internet has been shown

to offer still more connectivity; more minor religions, however, use the Internet to provide a

fundament for the basis of their community in general. Religious groups with a limited number

of adherents or the inability to reach out to others near them have before now sometimes been

hindered by geography, but the Internet enables people from all walks of life and levels of

interest to quickly engage with others of a like mind. Knowing all of this, my client and I devised

specific research questions designed to explore in-depth how Pagans utilize social media.

1. With rituals and practices in digital landscapes, how have Pagan practitioners' traditions and spiritual work changed, if at all?

2. With increased dialogue and sharing of information in digital landscapes, how has this spread of information changed practitioners' beliefs, values, and perspectives of Paganism?

3. How has increased dialogue and sharing of information changed the way worshipers interact with Paganism and its spiritual leaders?

4. Has being in a digital landscape changed how others see authority figures within their religion?

5. How do leaders of social media platforms help facilitate open and safe places for the practitioners to stay connected to this ever-growing community?

Namely: we wanted to discover whether the beliefs, values, rituals, and perspectives of

Paganism had changed due to the influx of this vast amount of community knowledge and

growth. These groups include Pagans from communities which follow many different religious

and spiritual paths under the umbrella of Paganism, including those mentioned above and many

more, meaning that many of these sites are amalgamates of other sects of Paganism, and can

contain contradicting information or knowledge. Part and parcel to this fact and our questions,

we asked ourselves how persons within these groups are verifying any information they are

receiving. Paganism is unique because there is no set religious book to follow, or rules, or

guidelines; it is, once again, a blanket term which encompasses many different forms of belief

and worship seen as equally valid. A benefit and a hindrance of this reality are that rules or views

can and do shift or change depending on the individual speaking.

While many in the Pagan community consider this level of freedom an indelible aspect of

their own practice, it does mean that when information is presented, the ability to fact check, or look to various trusted sources for verification, becomes muddled; it likewise calls into question what kind of authority people can claim in these digital spaces. The ability to remain anonymous means there is always suspicion or doubt as to whether the person presenting information is who they say they are. This diffusion of what constitutes a valid source can lead to an erosion of a belief in authority. Paganism itself is typically anti-authority, which is visible in the fact that in a broad scope lacks a central figure or organization to begin with; my client and I wanted to explore further how these authorities on knowledge as they are presenting it within these communities are being viewed. With these questions in mind, this project was intended to pull information from a number of interviews with people through Facebook groups and ask them how they were using social media as a tool, if at all, for their involvement within the Pagan community. At the end of this project, my client wanted a presentation of my gathered information in order to better understand how to address these concerns within his platform towards the Pagan community and to understand better how his informational site could be used as a tool for those seeking to learn more or grow more within their spirituality.

Theory

This research is located within the intersecting frameworks of the anthropology of religion (Buckser 2014, Stacey 2020) and the anthropology of the Internet (Brock 2020, Miller 2018, Miller et al. 2016). More specifically, the theoretical lenses of mediation and materiality were used. These two theoretical lenses allowed for a more well-rounded understanding of the data analyzed and how it can not only help answer research questions but also allow for a broader knowledge of future research pertaining to this focus. The mediation approach was used to understand better how communities communicate within social media spaces and how the

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social media spaces, specifically Facebook groups, are being used as a tool for religious practice (Campbell 2017; Hoover 2006). The second theoretical approach focused on materiality with a focus on how technology and digital landscapes are being used to connect its users to physical experiences (Evolvi 2021). In particular, this theory was used to review how rituals can be conducted in online spaces, further focusing on how practitioners can translate their practices in online spaces.

While specific research questions were asked during the study, there was no set goal to fix anything or answer particular questions concerning my client's needs. More generally, this was a quest for a better understanding of how those within the Pagan community use a tool like social media to help with their spiritual practices. Using these two theories to analyze the data required for this research can further the understanding of the intersection of religion and the Internet and how others within the Pagan community are using the Internet as a tool to support their spiritual growth.

Significance in Field

The Internet and Paganism are not new phenomena, and as such, there are many writings regarding both of these subjects. These subjects have been covered by various disciplines, some of which will be referenced within the next chapter. However, after going through previous research but also speaking with those within the Pagan community and exploring social media frequented by this community, it is apparent that there is more of a need for narrowing down research on how certain groups are using particular platforms of social media. Just as religion is not a one size fits all phenomenon, our social media platforms also vary in a multitude of ways. Certain types of social media attract specific demographics, and it is with this research paper I explore how pagans use Facebook groups. By taking a narrower viewpoint on Facebook

specifically and Paganism, this paper will explain how Pagans use Facebook groups as a tool within their tool kit to grow within their spirituality, connect with those in the community, and conduct rituals.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is extensive literature both within the anthropology and sociology written on the topic of how and in what ways various religions are utilizing the Internet (Berger 2004; Campbell 2012; Coco 2008; Dawson et al2001; Klassen 2002). Much of my research builds on the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of the Internet – particularly social media – and I have located my work within the intersection of these two research streams.

Past research has investigated ways in which the Internet has been the medium for much religious activity, including growth in Paganism. This growth can be seen in the 2014 survey conducted by Pew Research Center, which found that 0.4% of Americans, roughly one to one and a half million people, identify as Wiccan or Pagan (Pew Research Center 2014). This is a massive increase from the 8,000 Americans identifying as Pagan or Wiccan who responded to Trinity College's 1990 survey.

In this chapter, I will review the various research articles that have been written on the subject of Paganism on the Internet, and will describe the main themes that have come out of that literature as they relate to my research. I knew from the beginning that the available literature addressing both the capacity of the Internet to connect and Paganism was broad and prolific, so it was necessary to narrow down my focus from the outset. Fortunately, thanks to the guidance of my client as well as the research questions that we agreed upon, I was able to focus on searching for literature specifically addressing the subjects of identity, self-expression, anonymity, ritual, meditation, and materiality within not only religious spaces but also within online spaces.

Religious and Internet Anthropology

Before delving into the more specific writings regarding Paganism and social media, it is

necessary to briefly explain how this research contributes to the literature within religious anthropology and Internet anthropology. These subfields will be briefly explored to provide insight into what they are and how this research will fit in and contribute to both. While these fields have many different types of ways in which they can be explored and understood, the articles chosen for these two sections specifically pertain to the research conducted for this study.

Religion has always been a topic of interest to anthropologists with a more general definition of what anthropology of religion is as the study of groups of people and how they develop "…complexes of symbols, rituals, and beliefs that connect their own experience to the essential nature of the universe" (Buckser 2014). Religion can be studied in various ways and understood in various ways. The approach of anthropology studying religion is, of course, rooted in understanding the cultural and personal components that make up why individuals or communities understand and interpret spirituality in specific ways. Within this study, it quickly became apparent that everyone's experience with spirituality and religion is unique.

Timothy Stacey (2020) writes about how to ask questions regarding a person's beliefs without asking religious questions. An important focus, especially within the study, as Paganism was considered a religion by many participants but is not always viewed in that way by others. This was especially important as the focus of this study were less on the religious aspects and more on community building and knowledge exchange.

The literature on the anthropology of the Internet, or digital anthropology, can be defined as "…the consequences of the rise of digital technologies for particular populations, the use of these technologies within the anthropological methodology, or the study of specific digital technologies" (Miller 2018). It is a study surrounding how users interact with and their perceptions of online spaces. A particular interest in this research project is how communication

is exchanged in online communities. In particular, why these communities have chosen to use platforms such as Facebook groups. This is a concept explored by Andre Brock, who studies the question of "why here" regarding why communities decide to participate within certain spaces (2020, 206). Another concept to explore is how relationships are separate and mutual through online and offline relationships. Miller et al. explore these ideas by explaining that online spaces can be viewed differently than offline spaces and that these different types of spaces and platform social media platforms have different types of social interactions that are appropriate (2016, 103).

<div align="center">Connectivity and Construction of Identity Online</div>

The Internet allows for easy access to large groups of people instantly. This ability to connect on such a large scale was a focus of several articles regarding the connectivity within religious communities, and as such contributed much to the focus of my research. Jenson and Thompson (2008) discuss the influence the Internet has had on the Pagan community; neo-Paganism is one of the fastest growing alternative spiritualities, and surveys between 1990 and 2000 show that the number of people who identify within these groups grew faster than any other religious category (2). However, both Jensen and Thompson warn that "Internet access may be a meaningful correlate in a more "causal" sense as well. Wiccans and Neo-Pagans are reputed to be highly "networked." Hence, "high tech" state environments should be conducive to the formation and spread of these new religious identities" (Jenson and Thompson 2008). Their goal was to examine how those within the Pagan community were utilizing social media on the Internet: in a casual sense or as a real resource in order to build community and knowledge. The literature fully supports the viability of the Internet in terms of its connectivity, and while they did suggest, in fairness to the environment in which they ran their study, that simply being online

and highly connected could 'dilute' the effect of those rising numbers.

Additionally, Peter Haas (2012) researches the transition of the authenticity of in-person connection to a virtual one through the Internet as a medium, and has demonstrated how important this resource has been to Christian practice. The printing press enabled Christians to own a copy of the Bible, previously too expensive for many laypeople to afford, giving them access to religious knowledge in a way that adherents had never had before: the first vernacular Bible was printed in 1466, a scant 26 years after the invention of the printing press, ending nearly 1,500 years of Latinate ecclesiastical hegemony in western Europe. Haas discussed how televised services have, like the printing press did about six hundred years ago, allowed for Christians to gain more access to their religious beliefs through its sheer disseminating power: the pulpit in the living room. While Pagans do not have a centralized book made widely available with the advent of the Internet, and while there is no televised programming for Pagans, YouTube and other video mediums on the Internet have stepped in as a way for Pagans to view broadcasted rituals or access informational talks regarding their religious beliefs. The Internet has provided a space for which these groups can come together and conduct rituals, as well as access a plethora of knowledge on a variety of subjects.

The ease of access to these large communities with the use of the Internet has been demonstrated by Dawson and others: "anyone with a small investment in some computer hardware, software, and training can construct a web page, and operate it at little expense. With the right specification of encoded "keywords" that page may become rapidly available to a potential audience of millions through the various "search engines" used to surf the net" (Dawson and et al 2001, 37). Dawson and others also discuss how the Internet provides an unparalleled ability to allow others to stay in touch. On top of this social media allows for quick

connections as well as algorithms which promote relevant content to its users (Bjork-James 2020). The ability to instantly message someone or video call them there is always instant access to others within the community. On top of this, the Internet has merely made it possible--and that *merely* should not be underestimated in its importance--for isolated and dispersed religious communities to reach out over vast geographical distances, something that used to be very expensive and incredibly difficult to maintain with any consistency or comprehensiveness. The Internet and, subsequently, social media provide not only instant access to large groups of people across the world but a unique relationship between leadership and followers. Because of this instant access to people, and the equal terms on which individuals exist on the internet, followers are able to reach out to leadership mostly with ease and engage in more direct conversations than might be provided outside of a "place" like the social media and the Internet. Finally, Dawson and others also discusses the ability of the Internet to address challenges to the community at large, such as legal challenges or negative media reports, due to its ability to share information and enable communal action (2001, 38-39).

One of the biggest areas of interest within this research project was to discover how communities were constructed, as well as learn how members of Facebook groups conducted themselves in communication. Ruah-Midbar wrote about this particular topic in his 2014 article, delving into the many different ways in which text, in this example online text, can be converted into something sacred. This idea of text and communication becoming sacred was described as:

> The affinity between religious attributes and the development of means of communication was at the forefront of Walter Ong's research (e.g., 1982). He showed how different means of communication are focused on the stimulation of different sensoria, thus creating different cultural and religious characteristics. In this manner, Ong reviews the history of humanity, while identifying the correlative development of means of communication and religious environments. Thus, for instance, oral cultures attributed magical power to the spoken word and ascribed special importance to memory. With the

development of chirography, much importance was given to writing and written sacred texts. (2014, 21)

Again, as more and more writings appear on the Internet and are used within the social media spheres, the question for researchers becomes how the communications of this information can be used in the community and viewed as sacred.

Self-Expression Online

This section discusses the literature regarding how those in the Pagan community are interacting on social media and their ability to self-express, or to be more precise, social media's ability to enable those within the community to express their spiritual and religious beliefs safely. The literature supports the following idea: self-expression can come about in many different forms and fashions, and while self-expression is intrinsic to how one approaches their spiritual and religious beliefs, there is also self-expression of how one presents some selves within certain spheres.

Joanna Sleigh, in a general investigation of those topics, discusses how the sheer amount of available information enables users to question an established and heretofore unquestionable norm: "In an era marked by information saturation and social media, it is only natural that religious self-expression and representation online has become an accepted aspect of religious practice and identity" (2017, 253). When individuals join groups and participate in those communities, they are expressing their beliefs and identity within that space. However, while reviewing the literature, I questioned whether, according to the known research, social media truly had been accepted as an integral aspect of religious practice and identity. If it was, to what degree was it accepted? I was particularly interested in the ways Pagans are exploring and understanding their spiritual and religious beliefs, whether they are using social media as a tool for that purpose, and determining whether social media has become a part of religion for

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Paganism. As more people continue to join these online communities, they all bring their own type of self-expression to these groups and to their approach regarding religious and spiritual practices. This type of self-expression is formed not only within these communities but also from outside influences as well.

Mass media has also affected how Paganism is viewed and used as an identity as Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy noted: "Large numbers of young people, particularly young women, but also some young men, began to explore Witchcraft while popular books on Witchcraft were simultaneously becoming widely available and positive images of Witchcraft began to appear in the mass media" (Berger & Ezzy 2009, 503). The Internet and mass media are closely linked to one another, so following the steady growth of interest in Paganism in the 1990's after the Satanic Panic of the 1980's, it is no surprise to see that mass media has grown more positive in its views and presentations of witchcraft. There has likewise been a steady growth of interest in the Pagan community, particularly in online spaces where more and more people are reaching out. Religious identity and personal identity are closely linked, and the portrayal of Paganism through mass media presents, to those who have never been exposed to it before, a religious concept more in line with how they personally identify.

Berger and Ezzy (2009), as mentioned above, state that witchcraft has shifted away from a more negative characterization towards a more positive one when depicted by mass media. The depiction of witchcraft by mass media as a religion is not always accurate--nor are depictions of the rituals themselves at all accurate. This can be perceived in how the tarot card Death is unfairly seen as unfavorable when it typically means a radical change or the ending to a chapter in one's life. In contrast, a card to be wary of is the 3 of Swords which often represents betrayal, heartbreak, or emotional turmoil. The portrayal of witchcraft within the mass media has lately

created an image with a more desirable appeal to wider audiences (2009, 503- 504). Self-expression and identity as expressed through religion is a very personal and individual choice, and the Internet or social media sphere has the ability to cater much more easily to niche ideologies and aesthetics.

A last concept Berger and Ezzy mention within their article is that within mass media, the portrayal of witches tends to be drawn from stereotypes and more classical images of what a witch is or looks like. For example: the typical, stereotypical idea of a witch is of a woman with a crooked nose and a pointy hat worshiping the Devil (2009, 505). This is worthy of consideration: many participants within their study brought up the sudden influx of "baby witches" and the new aesthetic push of being a witch, now a very easily accessed "look" at trendy stores. While neither mass media nor commodified aesthetics are the focus of this study, there is a high likelihood that due to the representations of witchcraft within media today these portrayals have had an influence on attracting people to Paganism.

Anonymity on the Internet

The anonymity afforded by the Internet was a major benefit to my ability to conduct this project effectively. Religion as self-expression by remaining anonymous can be a form of identity, but there is a nuanced difference between that and the simple effect of anonymity online, and its benefit to otherwise marginalized people. The effects of online accessibility are baked into the clay of every part of my research, and anonymity is a key aspect of the same. Angela Coco addresses whether Paganism is the type of religion that would be suited for both online and off-line interactions, and concludes that it is well suited for online and offline communities (2008, 511).

Coco makes a point of discussing the ability of an individual to create and possess

different personas or identities online, for the simple fact that virtual space allows for a type of anonymity that is not typically found in real-world interactions. Fake accounts can be made and a whole different person can be created with just a few clicks and a whiff of imagination. Thanks to being able to wear these online masks, Coco states, individuals are allowed the ability to appropriate different roles as demanded within the social settings of these online communities. On top of the sheer ability to remain anonymous, anonymity also allows individuals to feel that the spaces occupied online are safe; a constructed identity can be used as a shield to protect one's real identity (2008, 512). Questions of personas and adjusted identities online are not our main focus but participants were asked how they gained knowledge from individuals in these groups. It can be difficult to identify who is able to speak with authority, especially if they are giving advice or sharing knowledge because the anonymity of the Internet makes it possible to wear any mask a person wants. Still, it is undeniably a benefit that the Internet provides a level of anonymity that people cannot acquire with in-person interactions. While Paganism has grown in its level of acceptance there are still many who wish to keep their religious and spiritual beliefs separate from more off-line personal interactions.

In an additional article, Davidson and Farquhar said, "the presence of multiple groups creates strain on the individual caught in the middle as he or she tries to satisfy competing social pressures" (2014, 4) As I have said, Pagans are typically reticent and it is that way because Paganism has long been perceived negatively by society at large. The reality many Pagans live is that were their beliefs known to real-world communities in which they live, populated by people whose views may be biased, they may face real-world consequences (Reece 2016, 62). Therefore, some Pagans live their religious lives online, where they can remain safely anonymous, appearing otherwise perfectly "normal" in society's eyes.

In line with this question of identity and relationship to authority, Heidi Campbell discusses how the Internet allows identity to be constructed and performed. This structure allows for users to create a distinct narrative for themselves. Because the network identity can be created, it allows for the user to have a less structured and traditional approach to their religion. This is a particular interest in regards to this study, as Pagans are not required to follow a rigid religious structure in the sense there are no overarching guidelines or structure for the entire community when it comes to beliefs (Campbell 2012, 71 -73). Although within individual communities there may be stricter hierarchical roles, such as in covens, to practice as such is neither required nor necessarily sought after, although it maybe preferred. The relevance to this study would be in the implication that because Pagans are in an environment of complete personal autonomy with respect to their beliefs, anonymity is intrinsic to their own construct of their own religion as they understand it.

Ritual in Virtual Spaces

One of the foremost questions asked throughout this study was how Paganism, which in a broad spectrum is a nature-based and energy-based religion, therefore intrinsically tangible and present, is able to translate itself into a virtual space. Additionally, how are rituals such as tarot card readings, candle magic, etc. able to be done online, if at all? When looking through previous literature I was surprised to find that there was very little discussion on this specific subject. While many of the articles did address how identity is shaped through these online forms, there seems to be little focus on how a nature-based religion is able to be translated into an online setting. Only a few articles addressing this specific topic ruminate upon the question, but do not go into much detail about the strange paradox of a virtual community centered around a nature-based religion like Paganism.

With her theory of 'Networked Religion', Heidi Campbell (2012) critically notes that scholars have observed a movement towards a "bricolage religion" --such that this perception is not rooted in particular normative ideas about what makes up a religion, because even Christianity as we know it in the 21st century is far from "pure" --and that that has always been an impulse, and that the internet merely makes the impulse mainstream. Paganism as a whole typically does lean towards an admixture of different kinds of rituals and traditions drawn from many different religious backgrounds, though of course there are many that may stick to a particular path, such as Norse, Wiccan, etc. Many of the eclectic witches, however, do tend to pull from different places (Wigington 2018).

If text can be converted into something sacred, then that also brings in the question of if ritual, though a space like social media, can be sacred. Ruah-Midbar (2014) recognized the idea of the virtual admixture challenging established orthodoxy:

> Almost two decades ago, when the virtual realm was still mostly textual, Stephen O'Leary (1996) recognized that religious activists in cyberspace had been rebelling against religious orthodoxy by inventing new rituals. These rituals used new technologies in order to reaffirm the power of language as performative expression. Surely it is no surprise that new values and aesthetics embodied in the cybernetic realm powerfully challenge the existing order in our worlds, including religious institutions and conventions regarding the spiritual world. (Ruah-Midbar 2014, 632)

This asks whether ritual itself was to be converted into something new, and if so, whether the language used to describe these rituals and practices has changed in order to be better embodied within these digital spaces. This was a question which I delved into deeply when conducting interviews with participants: this use of language in whether or not digital ritual was something that could exist within the community as a "new" part of religious practice. Within these groups it became important to try and understand how ritual is being changed to accommodate being used within these new types of spaces.

Continuing on ritual transitioning into online spaces and becoming spiritual Julia Fine (2020) wrote an article specifically looking into how Pagans were using Twitter and Facebook groups as a place to rally large networks of pagan in order to 'bind' then president, Donald Trump and other conservative persons and organizations from doing harm to others. Using the hashtag '#MagicResistance' pagans were able to find others within the community and organize mass ritualized spell works. This brings about an interesting idea on how ritual can be to conduct online for it shows an example of pagans all over the world converging at the same time to conduct various rituals in response to the call for resistance against Trump and other conservative groups. These rituals did not necessarily take place in an online space in the sense that there weren't necessarily video calls and that the unification of all conducting a ritual with the same intent at the same time does show a form of how ritual can be utilized within an online space as a way of unifying and focusing certain communities to come together at the same time.

Theoretical Approach

In order to better analyze and understand the information gathered and presented, the theoretical approaches of mediation and materiality were used to understand better the relationship between religion and its use online. Using these theoretical lenses to comprehend the content within this research project has helped create a well-rounded understanding of how media is used to shape social and cultural interactions.

The lens of mediation is used to understand the meaning created in these communities and the communications with one another within the social media spaces. Exploring how media has changed and is now used as a tool for religious practice (Campbell 2017, 18). Hoover (2006) described mediation as understanding how people use media for communicating, explaining, and representing different ideological beliefs and ideas (35). This framework is used to understand

how those within the Pagan community use Facebook groups to learn and better understand their religious beliefs and share those ideas with others.

Mediation is argued to be intensified in online spaces as the Internet offers avenues in which there is rapid global communication (Evolvi 2021) and how digital media has helped create different kinds of communications within religious groups. An example is how digital media allows for more individual agency within the practice of religion. The concept brought up here is how identity can be used within the social media spaces. Using mediation, individuals' and groups' voices and exchange of knowledge can be examined in a way that was impossible outside these digital spaces. While in-person meet-ups among Pagan communities are still conducted, the Internet allows for exchanging communications between individuals on a much larger scale than ever before.

The second lens used to view this research is materiality. While one may think of candles or other more mystical items used within by Pagans to connect with their spirituality, through the lens of materiality, we can explore how technological devices such as computers or cell phones are material objects used to experience and participate in religion. While Pagans are using the Internet to practice their religion, that does not mean the digital landscape they are working with is not connected to physical experiences (Evolvi 2021).

In turn, social media sites allow practitioners to connect with their spiritual ideals and interact with other practitioners within the community.

The lens of materiality for online ritual is brought up and further explored throughout the interviews and observations. Some interviewees stated that social media sites are a place of energy projection. Moreover, the materiality of these online spaces is, in particular, a vital viewpoint, primarily when focusing on how rituals are conducted. As with all religions, certain

objects are imbued with particular kinds of meaning, with specific importance to the religious community. Paganism is no exception to this. Paganism is typically a religion that uses several physical tools to help conduct rituals and connect practitioners to their religious beliefs. As discussed in later chapters, interviewees talked about using something physical with them and interactions through the Internet to feel connected to certain types of rituals.

These two theories seemed to be the best approaches when understanding the intersection between social media and religious practices within the pagan communities. Considering that this project centers around Pagans using media or social networks as a method of communication and community building; this framework is used to better understand how specific communication patterns are being created, as well as how shifts away from traditional authority potentially change with the usage of new media (Clark 2011, 169-170).

Contributions to Existing Literature

As seen throughout this chapter, there is excellent literature regarding social media and religion. Within the subfields of religious and Internet anthropology, this research sits at an intersection between those fields of study. Within the study of the Internet, this paper contributes to how individuals are building relationships in online spaces and how those online spaces (Miller et al. 2016), as well as the communities, are contributing to participants' offline lives and spiritual practices. This, along with more understanding of why certain individuals, in this case, the Pagan community, have chosen to join others within online communities and the ways in which those online spaces are navigated (Brock 2020).

As will be seen throughout the rest of this paper, many topics are touched upon within this study. These pieces of understanding within certain religious and Internet anthropology realms contribute to further understanding of the Pagan community within these fields. As the

Pagan community tends to lean towards more tangible rituals and a connection with nature and the many levels of religious sects, this study helps to provide more information on how community members interact with each other in the ever-evolving landscape of technology. As for this thesis and its contribution to the existing literature, its place will be another source within the continued and advancing understanding of social media's place within religious or spiritual communities' life. It will not only add to how individuals within Pagan Facebook groups are using social media but also a narrower focus on how the community is being built, rituals are being viewed and conducted, and the murky waters of both authority and identity within these groups. This paper will contribute to further research on how religious communities are building up through social media.

CHAPTER 3

PROJECT DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODS

After the initial literature review, a total of thirteen individuals were interviewed from five different Pagan groups. In this chapter, I discuss how I constructed my research framework and conducted the research itself.

Recruitment Strategy

When determining the qualifications for participants through recruitment on the Internet I knew that those who would be participating could potentially be from many different global locations, demographics, and spiritual paths. When research has been conducted, there has been a focus on obtaining a demographic information to ascertain whether it is a representative or non-random sample of those who participate. However, I chose to not take any kind of demographics to ascertain if it was a representative sample of those who participated within the interviews, or even those that I observed during observations. The reason for this stems from the fact that Pagans typically are more reclusive when it comes to being out about their spirituality, and I did not want to make any of the interviewees uncomfortable by asking specific questions pertaining to how they identify or their location. On top of that because the Internet is a place where anybody can become anyone and the use of personas is fairly common, I felt that trying to pull samples without knowing for sure if the people that I was even talking to or observing were actually who they said they were could have led to false assumptions and false data.

The groups in which I conducted my search for interviews were spaces for Norse Pagans, Wiccan, and eclectic Pagans. Undoubtedly, because I was pulling from groups focused on these specific practices, only these types of witches and practitioners responded to my call for interviews. Future research on similar subjects regarding Paganism and social media would most

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likely benefit from pulling from a broader array of Pagan denominations. Doing so would open up avenues for further and comprehensive research. For instance, much discourse within the public groups focused on questioning whether a practice was open or closed. A closed practice could be described as a religious or spiritual practice where individuals can only participate if they were explicitly born into or initiated into that community. This includes using certain items, terms, and other aspects within those religious communities. An example of this can be when some indigenous groups ask those who are non-native not to smudge with white sage because of the cultural importance of white sage. On the other end, an open practice is the opposite of this, where anyone can join without any need for initiation or being born within the community.

The qualifications for participation in this project were that individuals need to be above the age of 18. Individuals also had to be speakers of English and identify as Pagans. The clarification of individuals needing to be Pagans was needed as I was in particular looking for participants who were using social media as some sort of toolkit regarding their spiritual path. While, of course, the use of social media was the research question, it was not a requirement for participation; however, recruitment flyers were posted within private 5 Facebook groups, and as such, it was guaranteed that all participants were able to use some form of social media in relation to their spirituality. The initial response to call for volunteers was enthusiastic but getting people to interview was more challenging. There was cause for concern with respect to our ability to control for the anonymity factor of the Internet, as the flyer stated that all participants had to be 18 and older and therefore the ability to check ages was diminished; there were also many participants who did not want to conduct their interviews with video chat; because of the private nature of Paganism, and people's general distrust of talking to strangers on the Internet, this was not unexpected. Other than age there were no limitations on who could

volunteer for the study.

After getting permission from the admins to post within private groups, as part of my recruitment campaign, I encouraged all who consider themselves to be Pagan to apply. There were no limitations on location, gender, or ethnicity. While reaching out to participants through these Facebook groups, I was initially concerned that there would be push back from group members towards a researcher asking questions. Because all the groups that I pulled interviews from were private and the direct implication is that the people in those groups might like to remain private, there was a concern there would be opposition to my reaching out, once again underlying the importance of my client in facilitating these interviews, because of the lingering stigma against practicing Paganism. We found it necessary to be careful of insincere or actively hostile respondents; while these private groups do try to weed out trolls or troublemaking individuals, there is no doubt that there are still those conducting witch hunts online (Moran 2013) for those in the community. And while there is a degree of anonymity on the Internet with respect to a person's identity, many people on Facebook utilize their personal accounts with their real names and real information to interact with these groups.

Fortunately, there were only two instances where there was pushback from group members on my reaching out. This pushback almost always revolved around suspicion that I would take information used in interviews and either 'out' those individuals for their beliefs or use it against them in some other way. However, in each of those instances the admins of these groups stepped in and mitigated concerns. Many members I interviewed discussed the use of power by admins who hold authority within these groups. They were expected to keep a close eye on members' participation and discussions, as well as weed out any troublemakers that may come through trying to cause "drama."

Field Sites

The study was conducted through both private and public Facebook groups, as the communities needed for the study exist on social media virtual realms. These groups were searched for and found using the search terms Pagan, witchcraft, witch, magic, etc. and other terms typically used within the community to indicate the type of group. The public Facebook groups were used for observations as it reduced logistical difficulties in observation; there was no requirement for approval from the admin or the members of those groups to interact in the space and observe communications and behaviors going on within the group's forms, and it was ethically sound. The ethicality of doing any ethnography on the Internet and particularly on Facebook is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Suffice to say that many ethical considerations needed to be considered when gathering research data from public Facebook groups. Public Facebook groups are very similar to public places where anyone can go and interact and it's for that reason that my observations were done in the spaces as they did not require me to gather formal documentation of informed consent beyond individuals' choosing to participate in the public space. However, with that being said, unlike a public space where I can observe somebody but not know anything about them other than what I see in front of me a public space on Facebook means that a name is attached to whoever is posting or commenting. For that reason, I did not take down any notes identifying the persons making the post: I did not write down what their icons looked like or take pictures of their profiles. I also did not take any direct quotes from the spaces, as it is possible to reverse-search for the quote itself and find the person who made it. I avoided this so as not to bring any harm to any of the individuals who were being observed. It was with my utmost diligence that I tried to take in as many ethical

considerations and precautions as possible while making observations in these public online

forms.

Within the private Facebook groups, the administrators' approval was obtained to make

sure they were comfortable with me posting a recruitment flyer. After approval was given from

the group moderators, I posted the recruitment flyer myself, save for one group where the

moderator stated they would post the flyer, asking for individuals to conduct one-on-one

interviews with me either through the Facebook messenger app or Zoom. Because the

recruitment flyer was published in these groups, participants from all over the world responded.

The majority of the participants were from the United States, but several identified their location

as the United Kingdom.

Observations

Observation was used as an ethnographic method to watch the daily activities within 7

public Pagan groups on Facebook. I chose a variety of different groups in order to observe a

wide span of communications and interactions. Some of these groups focus more specifically on

the Wiccan branch of Paganism, some of them were more eclectic, and one was a meme group. I

made sure to pick groups that all had at least 5000 members and that had daily posts. This

method was used to better understand the different types of information being exchanged,

questions being asked, beliefs, opinions, and the behaviors that members had with one another

and with the admin of those groups. This method was used to collect data on how group

members may use social media as a way of potentially building community. Observations were

performed in these non-private Facebook groups for over 20 hours. In this way, I observed how

persons within these public forums spoke with one another and interacted. Since I did not want

to take down any personal information on the persons who I was observing, I instead wrote field

notes, observing the conversations and the amount of people who participated in them. If there was a frequent poster in a group, I identified them with a pseudonym. My main interest, however, lay in what conversations of topics were discussed and how others within the groups responded to those topics. I then took the common core of those topics and made a comprehensive list identifying how often certain types of topics were brought up as well as identifying the kinds of responses that were given to said discussion.

Semi-Structured Interviews

After permission was granted by the administrators of the 5 private Facebook groups that I contacted, I set up times with members from each of these groups for interviews. In total, there were 13 interviews conducted. As stated above about demographical identifying, due to the fact that I did not want to intimidate any potential interviewees from participating I did not take any kind of personal information. The only information that I verified during these interviews was if they were over the age of 18 but I did not ask specific ages. However, based on my interpretation of interviewees the predominant gender appeared to be females with most overall participants most seeming to range in age from 25 to 50 years old. Interviews focused on what types of social media sites participants were using, how many of those sites were used specifically in order to follow Pagan-related content, user's experience within the community of those groups, and thoughts on rituals being used within these virtual spaces. One thing specifically that I did ask was how active these members were within any of the social media groups I followed, not just the ones on Facebook. Answers were mixed, and interviewees typically averaged being involved between 3-6 Pagan-based Facebook groups. As for activity levels, while many did state that they were primarily inactive within the majority of those Facebook groups, they did tend to be active within at least one or two. Several other participants did say that while they were not very active

on Facebook, they were active on other social media platforms. Interestingly almost all of the participants have been practicing a form of Paganism for several years. Moreover, even the few participants who stated that they still really needed Paganism did state that they had been involved in the social media aspect during the beginning phases of interest.

While there were set interview questions used in every interview, these interviews were mainly flexible to allow participants to discuss topics of interest in more depth. All of these interviews took place using video or audio chat through Facebook Messenger, Zoom, or on the rare occasion over the phone when technical issues occurred with both of those other options. Some participants preferred video chat in order to see my face, while others preferred audio-only. These audio and video chat conferences were conducted through both Zoom and Facebook Messenger. However, there were times when participants did not want to use Zoom or Facebook. Phone calls had to be made when Internet connections during the time of the scheduled interview for the other party were not viable. The interviews typically took between 20 and 40 minutes. Participants were read a series of questions regarding their beliefs and how they interact with Facebook groups and online Pagan communities. As stated above I did have a list of questions to go over during the interviews however it quickly became apparent from the very first interview that there would be better dialogue with interviewees if I allowed participants to go in depth on topics that they were especially passionate about or interested in. I felt that having a slightly looser interview structure would allow for the participants to feel more comfortable and more easily able to express themselves.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the ethical decision to eschew information that could identify participants personally and keep questions as noninvasive as possible, many ethical considerations were

taken into account to help dissipate fear or harm participants. That said, gathering data over the Internet proved quite the ethical challenge. When initially preparing to conduct a study the literature regarding the ethical considerations of using social media or online spaces helped immensely, and how observation and the interviews were done going forward. Following the research done by Townsend and Wallace, observations done in the public Facebook groups were considered sensitive information as those individuals who participated within those groups could be harmed if information of their involvement with these groups were to get out (2016, 11). While all observations were done in public social media spaces for participant observation, great care had to be taken not directly to quote anyone. Unlike observations done in public or in a public forum where words are being said to others, those kinds of direct quotes can be quickly reverse-searched and the people saying those things found. Observations were only done within public forums, but still, with the ability for these people to be searched and found, I summarized what people were saying within the observations. Some considerations had to be made within the private Facebook groups. No observations were taken in these groups as it would require informed consent from all the participants being observed. Considering the extremely large size of these groups, gaining consent from all participants was not realistic; additionally, those who join private Facebook groups do so in order to have a degree of privacy. Trying to gain consent to observe participants may have made members in the group uncomfortable and feel as if they were being spied upon.

Group members who did end up participating in the interviews were to remain anonymous, but this did lead to some concern about the authenticity of one's identity. All those who participated in the interviews were provided with an informed consent form which they were required to acknowledge (Boyd and Crawford 2012, 672-673). All consent forms were sent

to participants at least 48 hours before the interview. Before anything was asked, all participants were required to answer if they had read the consent form and if, upon stating they had, were then asked if they had any questions or concerns regarding that form.

While some of the participant stated that they did not mind if their actual names were used during the study for the sake of safety, I have elected to keep everyone anonymous. Unlike a public interview where I can sit across from somebody and see them, and understand certain things and cues, doing interviews conducted over an audio feed does not verify certain items such as age or gender. On top of this, it is not uncommon for people to create identities and social media spears and use them to protect themselves or create new personas.

Analysis

My two primary sources of data were semi-structured interviews and direct observations. When conducting my observations, I chose to be non-reactive and allow participants to talk and discuss as they see fit without any input from me. I did not want to cause a shift in the conversation if participants realized that a researcher was observing them. While I do discuss the ethical side of this, I want to address now that, of course, some would argue the ethicality of conducting this kind of observation. However, I made sure that I only observed persons making public posts in public groups. All of my notes during my observations or hand written and I did not take down any identifying information, nor did I take screenshots or direct quotes from any individuals who made a post or commented. During these observations, I noted what type of topics were being brought up, especially if they were recurrent topics and general responses to those posts. Throughout the hours of these observations, I noticed key themes within these posts. Specific topics were brought up several times, although they were phrased differently.

Regarding the interviews, coding took place by hand. All of the interviews were recorded

with permission from the participants and notes were taken during the interview. After the

interviews were recorded, I went through and transcribed them in order to make it easier to read

over each interview and note certain narratives and keywords for each question. The notes

consisted of keywords or phrases that I found to be a special interest or that I felt I had heard in

previous interviews. As I compiled a list of codes from the interviews, I was able to relate terms

to one another and to the research topic making sure to code and interpret these speech patterns

carefully. While some of the interviews did deviate a bit from the research questions, most of

them stayed within the research questions and so comparison and contrast were made in the

interviewees' responses. Keyword searching was conducted in order to find what types of

verbiage was commonly being used and then compare any overarching themes and patterns

within interviews.

Limitations

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this research is that all participants were found

and recruited over the Internet. This means that there is a significant exclusion of those who

might not use the Internet, which by necessity and extension excludes the input of such

individuals' responses to the same types of questions. While this may not seem like a limitation,

as finding out how Pagans are using social media was of course the center of this research, I felt

that to not take into account those who might not use social media was potentially missing a

large portion of Pagans and valuable insight. While Internet access is much more available now

than it ever has been before, there is still a many people worldwide who do not have access to the

Internet. Due to this constraint, those who do not have access to the Internet and are not a part of

social media spheres were not able to be interviewed for this project. This also pertains to those

who have access to the Internet but do not have any social media accounts. Those interviewed

did appear to live within the United States or the UK, where the percentile of persons without Internet access is much lower; 7% in the US and 6% in the UK, respectively (Perrin and Atske, 2021; Kleinman, 2021).

One last limitation that I would like to mention is that Facebook was the only social media platform used during this research. Not all social media sites are built the same, and with this, the types of communities that gravitate toward one more than the other have the potential to be radically different. Even within the interviews, many of the participants spoke of the various social media sites they would utilize for different purposes. While Facebook is a vast social media platform that did lend itself favorably in the recruitment of those to participate in the study, there is no doubt that further data collection from other social media sites would be highly beneficial and give more insight into how communities are built within these online settings.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

My findings were largely derived from interviews conducted online. While of course direct observation was significant, the specific questions that I asked of interviewees addressing the discussion of authority, ritual, and knowledge taking place through social media were invaluable, and yielded the greatest insight into the community. That being said, however, the observations were vital in allowing for a more educated approach in bringing up topics during the course of the interviews that were commonly brought up within the public groups.

The vast majority of participants who took part in the interviews were extremely enthusiastic in answering questions and elaborating on different themes. Nearly all of them stated that they used Facebook groups to connect with others within the community, and to learn about various aspects of the religion. The participants further stated that Facebook was a good resource for helping to build a larger community and help build community in the offline world, though none believed that Facebook would be the new way covens were formed. Those who participated within the study all came from the United States and the UK, though there was expressed interest by persons from other countries. This was not intentional; it is merely representative of the individuals who could participate. Many of the participants chose to conduct audio only interviews, which limited my ability to observe any more specific demographic aspects. Further, members of Facebook groups and many of the interview participants requested to remain anonymous; in-depth demographic information was not subsequently volunteered during these audio-only interviews. Although specific ages were not given, it was confirmed that all participants within the study were 18 or older. No direct information was given by volunteers as to their gender, and I can make no assumptions in that respect. Lastly, while all of the

participants were involved with several groups online, only five individuals identified as belonging to in-person groups. The in-person groups they belonged to were covens.

Community through the Internet

The subject brought up the most often in the course of my interviews was that of the sense of community the participants felt that they gained by being a part of these Facebook groups. Community was a common thread running through every single interview, and participants were unanimous in their conviction that having social media groups which they could reach out to or gather information from was of benefit. All participants reported involvement in at least four more Facebook groups. However, within this multitude of groups, some individuals were more active participants than others: some merely were present, not commenting, while others commented or made posts of their own. Several also stated that they were more passive in their overall involvement; instead of commenting or posting, they "lurked," being present without interacting. Regardless of how active the individual was, even if they were not active at all, the ability to engage with others of a like mind was universally considered a positive derivative of one's participation. As one interviewee stated, "being a solitary practitioner it's nice being able to be involved in groups where discussion is being had without having to actively contribute". For many interviewed, their passive presence in these groups was a reason unto itself.

Many of the interviewees, and through observation group members, identified themselves as solitary practitioners; the ability to be a part of the Pagan community without having to actively put themselves in the middle of discussions allowed for a degree of comfort. Some of those interviewed stated that they had conditions, such as anxiety, or simply did not feel comfortable being in large groups. Having the option to be a part of a community without having

to be "physically" a part of a community eased their worries.

Within private groups, discussion is typically geared towards a certain type of spiritual path, not the all-encompassing branches the Pagan religious community. While of course there was discussion with respect to certain ideas, for the most part, the communities remained very cohesive, with little confrontation observed. Meanwhile, in the observed public Facebook groups, there was a larger amount of contentious discourse among participants. This could be because of their public nature, which allows for more individuals to join. Perhaps it was simply because some of the groups I joined had a more "mixed bag" of spiritual paths, and since there is no cohesive text in Paganism, all questions are possible. However, there was more animosity within certain types of posts and in the comments to those posts.

The Changing Landscape of Ritual

Whether ritual could be conducted through an online space garnered the most varied responses by all participants. Participants' opinions on whether a ritual can be conducted through social media landed everywhere on the scale between absolutely not possible to the belief that conducting a ritual through social media is absolutely no different than a ritual done in person. As a result, experiences varied: respondents who stated that they were part of a coven reported conducting casting circles, a ritual at which some of the participants called in through Zoom to assist. They stated that the individuals' intent, their energy, was still there, and therefore conducting a ritual through a computer screen was still a valid means. Others flatly disagreed, stating that conducting a ritual in an online space, even if the intent is there, just is not quite the same. Reading tarot involves keying into body language; while the intent may be there, if the reading is done online these cues cannot be seen.

The response to the legitimacy of digital ritual is as individual as Pagan expression itself.

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As with many things within Paganism, intent as well as one's understanding of a certain object or practice varies from individual to individual. There are no set rules governing the conduct of ritual, merely individual perspective, and an individualized understanding of ritual did appear to be quite prevalent among participants, though there are some generalizations to be made. Regarding how ritual can be translated into a digital space one interviewee described it as "if you think about astral projection, somebody that travels, they meditate, and travel through the astral plane…You can do, you know, it's a form connection to your higher power. How is, how somebody not able to attend a ritual through the phone, messenger, zoom or whatever not able to create their own secret space and be part of that as well. Because to me I mean, there's things in science that we, you know, back in the day that they didn't want to, that they considered witchcraft, when in reality, it was science. It's to me, with technology, you can, you can attend and do more and learn more."

Participants who focused heavily on intent and energy leaned towards the idea that ritual conducted through an online space was valid and could be done, or else more in the middle; they did agree that as long as there was a clear purpose for the ritual then the likelihood of it working well as possible. Meanwhile, individuals that were more focused on the energies of certain items or being surrounded by nature in order that rituals could be channeled properly tended to lean towards the idea that rituals conducted online were less likely to work. These respondents held the view that certain rituals that involve having to work with others could not be done through something like a computer screen as the ability to have intent towards that person or be able to read them for certain types of practices would not be possible.

Knowledge Exchange in Large Communities

Knowledge can be gained from a variety of sources; however, the Internet and in

particular social media allow for exchange of knowledge in a way that has never been possible before. People from all over the world, from all kinds of backgrounds, are able to go online and share their personal thoughts, exchanging knowledge. That knowledge is immediately accessible to someone else, all the way around the world, who has never had that person's experiences; immediate access and the abstract tangibility of that immediacy is unique to the Internet. When participants were asked how and whether or not social media had changed either their beliefs or values regarding Pagan practices, the discussion turned to the increased access to vast amounts of information being provided, and the conversation tended to circle back to community building and information exchange. Information exchange within the Pagan community on these Facebook groups seems not only a source of knowledge for many but also a way to grow as an individual within the community. From one interviewee's perspective, "There's people on a lot of different things, you know like paganism isn't, isn't one discreet, so the past, it's, it's like a tree, there's all different kinds of branches, you know so everybody's kind of doing a little of their own thing, which can be very useful and can also cause a lot of tension".

Social media groups have made it possible to instantly access those within the community, far beyond the limitations of their physical location. Before the Internet, Pagan groups primarily communicated through published material, or through groups that stayed in contact with each other, or through individual personal contacts. Therefore, the ability to access large and diverse communities instantly cannot be overestimated in its level of importance to the Pagan community. Likewise, the volume and wealth of information made available to the Pagan community through social media has made an immense impact. Having large communities who are able to converse through social media sites like Facebook means that an individual can simply go online, ask a question, and have multiple responses from individuals with all kinds of

backgrounds and experiences. Many of the participants stated that this exchange of information was one of the things they enjoyed about being able to be part of these Facebook group; the exchange of information through comments and post allowed for major growth within the community's understanding of certain practices and rituals.

A majority of the participants within the study stated that they were solitary practitioners. Many said they had never joined into a coven or participated in any large, in-person gatherings. This indicates that many of them started their learning process with access to Facebook groups; social media sites allowed them to build a sense of community without going through the formal process of trying to find and join a coven. This is an important notion: before the Internet or social media groups became widely available, information had to come from word of mouth or gleaned from published works. Not everyone is so lucky to have such access; even books on Pagan topics are not always widely available to individuals, especially in smaller, more isolated communities. However, the Internet has become a commonplace tool within the Western world, and there are now libraries worth of information available at a person's fingertips.

Authority and Identity in Online Spaces

All of those interviewed stated that when they were presented with new information or knowledge of a ritual, or merely basic facts about certain tools used within practices, they always made sure to refer back to books that they felt were reliable sources of information as well as their own experience and relationship with their beliefs. This led me to question my interviewees: what do they consider authoritative? Authority tends to be a difficult area to pin down in the Pagan community. Typically, those who are considered authorities, those with knowledge of some type of practice, have extensive experience or positions of power with covens. However, this is not always the case, as participants stated that even those who would

typically be considered authority figures with special knowledge were fact checked, as it were, by the interviewees. Many interviewees stated that there was always a sense of skepticism when taking in any kind of information being presented to them through a social media group. Many Pagans are highly individualistic. Some individuals may feel that certain tools or practices work well for certain spiritual works; others may not feel the same. Those interviewed stated that they typically went with their gut feeling. If the interviewee did not feel right about it, they typically disregarded or referred back to their life experiences or trusted books which they felt presented information in a way that was more in line with their beliefs.

It is worth noting that this skepticism is justified. Online, one never really knows who is speaking. One cannot know if the person who is giving information, legitimizing themselves by saying that they have X number of years of experience in the area, is being truthful. To sum up there seems to be little regard given towards authority figures as such within these social media groups. Several of those interviewed stated that even if an individual could be vetted as an authority in their practice, many interviewees felt comfortable disregarding advice or opinions given by these persons if they thought it went against their own beliefs or understandings. As stated before, many of the interviewees are solitary practitioners, and while a person may choose such a system for any number of reasons, some of the interviewees stated that they enjoyed being able to tailor their own spiritual practices on their own preference, without any input from others. The only entity agreed by most to have actual authority in the traditional sense within these Facebook groups were the administrators of the page. While not necessarily authorities of knowledge or of certain rites, they are the authorities over the particular spaces in which conversations are being held and the community relies on them to monitor comments and posts in order to protect the interests of the group. The admin's authority is expressed in their ability to

mute or push out individuals who come into the group to cause confrontation or trouble.

Deliverables

This research project was unique in the sense that there were no specific problems that the client wanted to have addressed. Instead, the client supported this project more out of a mutual sense of curiosity. This allowed for great freedom regarding how research questions were created and the approaches taken to gather data. However, with that being said, the lack of a particular goal or questions that needed to be addressed did make it difficult when it came time to give the client their deliverables. Throughout this project, the research was self-directed and there was little input during the data gathering process from the client. While there was a significant amount of enthusiasm and interest at the beginning towards the end of the project, my client's attention was pulled in other directions, which made the presentation of the data gathered vaguely acknowledged. Still, I presented my client with a brief written report detailing some of the information gathered pertaining to the specific research questions I sent to him at the beginning of this project. While I did not try and address specifics on how he should conduct his own social media pages, I did try and give recommendations on the attitudes toward social media. I detailed some of what I had learned from both observations and the interviews on how those within the Pagan community were using Facebook groups. My client does not have an incredibly active Facebook page I gave recommendations on things that they could do to possibly add more traffic and allow for a more comfortable atmosphere for those within the community to come together on that page and discuss.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There were several themes that became apparent throughout the discussions surrounding how Pagans are using social media. Within this chapter, I will break down these discussions into themes as well as leave some recommendations for potential future research. As with all research, even as one finds answers to the questions posed, new questions always arise.

Community

Community was a recurrent topic within all the interviews that were conducted. This is of no surprise considering that these Facebook groups do act as areas in which people can go in order to meet others and build rapport much like any community that can be found in the real world. Klassen stated that "What are the most important roles of the Internet for Solitaries is as a place to find, share or describe spells. Whether it be on discussion list, such as cybercoven, or larger websites, spells are traveling through cyber space available to whoever might want them and click of a mouse button." (Klassen 2002, 56) The ability for these individuals to reach out to a community without formally joining a community in the form of a coven, the more traditional method, has allowed for greater access to knowledge and information exchange. As one interviewee explained it, "I think that we are living in the digital world now. And so, you know, the, for me, at least, the nature side is a very personal side. But you need that community setting too. And I feel like you know, in yesteryear, you would have just had, you know, the community, you would've had a group of women that you've talked to be like, hey, I need this or what do you know about this and Facebook really helps provide that community."

All of the groups that I pulled interviewees from were private groups, which meant an individual would have to read specific rules and agree to follow those rules whenever being

allowed the ability to join. I was surprised to note how many participants stated that there were not many trolls or much drama within these groups. While they did say that not all groups were spaces completely free of issues, the admins of the groups were actively engaged and either had to step in, mute an individual, or moderate what was going on. Many of the forums were very positive and very open-minded for the most part. In a broad sense, knowing that there is a sense of safety when bringing up certain topics allows for more cohesiveness within the group and makes having more open conversations possible. It allows individuals to feel more like a sense of community because they are banded together. With all this being said, again, this study has taken place with interviewees recruited through Facebook groups, very specific Facebook groups. A useful expansion on this research would be to utilize other social media sites, and observe how these sites handle confrontation or trolls. In particular, those social media sites that do not have admins available to moderate. While these groups did indeed have more positive reviews from interviewees, that does not mean that other groups do not have more confrontation. I observed more confrontation during my participant observations in the public groups, because the moderation team was less able to enact quality control of who was posting. Confrontation was far more common within these public groups, giving a sense of discourse that one did not typically find within private groups. In more public groups, there was much more talk about who had what kind of authority over what type of rituals, and who was allowed to engage in what practices.

Within many Pagan spheres, there has been much more discussion surrounding cultural appropriation and what is considered an open or closed practice. To clarify, an open practice is where anyone can participate in said spirituality or ritual. In contrast, a closed practice is a practice confined to specific ethnic groups or cultures, and only those individuals are granted

access to participate in that practice. Some of the interviewees did mention this discourse and discussion that has been going on regarding cultural appropriation and these open practices; however, this remained a bit on the periphery of their experiences. The groups that the interviews were pulled from were from a Norse Pagan group and eclectic witches. Within my search for groups, I noticed that many niche groups had popped up that are private on Facebook that exist specifically to discuss cultural appropriation in Pagan practices, or discussions on what is or is not appropriate for specific individuals to practice.

Within these groups, while interacting with them, and practicing rituals, there exists a sense of community. Many of the interviewees talked about this sense of community and the connection that was found through using these groups. Community was a term in constant use by those being interviewed and in discussions; the definition of 'community' to each individual using it, though, may be no more than a group of people who share a similar characteristic, or it may be a highly organized and integrated group of people pursuing a shared goal (O'Mara-Eves, et al 2013, 2).

Those within these groups often build a sense of community with others via messaging or just by participating through comments. There is a sense of community derived by those who are not necessarily active in their engagement with a group. Many stated that if they felt like they were in a safe place with like-minded individuals, they felt it gave them a sense of engagement and empowerment. There were many different forms of engagement utilizing the community engagement theory, from direct conversations and questions being posted on the group's main page to the offhanded meme meant to be taken in fun. Many of the individuals interviewed mentioned that through these Facebook groups, they not only got to meet other people who they felt were like-minded but often would then go and meet those individuals in the real world. They

stated that they were able to build strong networks through these groups. Several of these individuals also mentioned other social media sites such as Reddit, TikTok, or Instagram. They felt they could also talk to other participants through posts and participate in exchanging ideas.

More specifically: Pagans use social media to create community, and through it they convey how they interpret the religion and how they conduct practices. Essentially, they construct the means by which they are empowered to perform rituals, and in that same construct they discuss these rituals; one does not come before the other. Individuals use sophisticated tools such as social media to integrate into these Pagan communities' environments. Varying understandings of an activity are made of a set of actions that aim to complete a specific goal or purpose. These actions are evident within the domain in which they are being used (Hashim & Jones 2007, 11).

<center>Ritual</center>

To say online practice has diminished the role of physical actions in Paganism would be fundamentally incorrect, but there has been an observed increased interest in non-physical aspects of ritual in Pagan spaces. It might be an interesting question for future researchers to ask: given the rise of interest in Paganism, are new practitioners primarily involved in non-physical rituals, and why. Ritual remains an important aspect of Paganism; in-person rituals are not less important, but online rituals are gaining legitimacy.

One of the reasons that research into ritual practice within the Pagan community and their use of social media or any kind of online space is unique is because, typically, Paganism is often associated with nature-based rituals. These nature-based practices can include actions including, but not limited to, going outside and being in natural spaces or to using things in nature within on their own rituals. There is a physical tangibility that typically comes along with ritual, but this is

not the full extent of the types of rituals conducted by Pagans. Indeed, there were a number of posts made within groups as well as comments made by interviewees about the difficulties or of conducting certain rituals in something like an online space. As interviewee #13 described "I think trying to do it remotely is very very difficult… it is certainly something you can do but it's not something I see many people do well. So, where I do see it be a success is when somebody will offer and then they will have a private session or they will ask to be sent something physical or tactile for them to focus on to provide a direct connection. But doing it blind through text on screen is- it's a tier above anything I would be able to do myself would be the easiest way to describe that." There is also a heavy emphasis on practices of ritual involving energy or intent directed towards certain goals playing a large part in these types of practices.

It is perhaps because of this ability to push intended energy that there are those within the community who feel that doing rituals online is not such a great leap from a normal practice done at home. Ten of the participants stated during their interviews that they did feel that rituals and practices had changed now that they are being conducted in online spaces. While there were varying opinions from respondents with respect to how, or whether, rituals could be used within these online spaces, almost all participants felt that rituals conducted via online were becoming a part of the common style of worship within the community. Many of the "new" rituals that were being conducted within these virtual spaces were observed during the participant observation phase of research. Additionally, many of the Facebook groups merely posted informational guides on how to conduct rituals at home. There were also many advertisements from individuals within these public groups offering services such as tarot card readings, astrology readings, as well as banishing negative or promoting prosperity rituals. Some of these services were done for

free, on a first come first serve basis, although there were also those that offered the services for a fee.

I stated above the intent or energy put within rituals or within a sacred space where a ritual will occur is of great importance within certain Pagan practices. This of course brought up the question of whether something like a Facebook group or a social media site could in fact become a place that is sacred, where a ritual could be conducted. "Through this sharing of ritual information, the Internet becomes, for these Witches, more than a tool; it functions as a sacred space, envisioned as a web of energy which extends beyond the computer and the computer-mediated "virtual" reality to connect the "virtual" and the "physical" into a network of energy from which Witches claim to draw spiritual power." (Klassen 2002, 53). Several of the participants within the study mentioned that rituals conducted online were just as valid as those done in covens or with an in-person group. Many of them talked about how intent is the most important aspect of a ritual, and intent, whether it be to the person standing 10 feet from them or across the world connected through a computer screen, does not change. There is also a discussion of energy flow and several participants stated that energy flow that was similar to intent could connect to others. Several also stated that while energy distribution is still valid, it is more difficult to connect to others through a screen and by distance.

Many stated that they were happy to reach out with questions to others who might have more insight into particular rituals or thoughts. This is why some users see legitimacy in doing a tarot card or candle reading over virtual space.

Stephen O'Leary (1996) discussed how new technologies had allowed new rituals and powers within religions. One of the key interests that my client brought up at the beginning of the study was his thoughts on whether ceremonies could be conducted in a virtual space. When

asking interviewees about their thoughts on performing rituals using an online platform like Facebook, the answers were mixed. Of the 13 interviewed, 5 of the individuals believed that rituals could not be conducted online, and that while exchanging information in the community building was fine, rituals, according to some, existed outside of that space. From their perspective, those that did offer religious services or practices on online forms were to be viewed with skepticism. However, 5 of the 13 interviewed stated that doing a ritual through virtual space was perfectly valid. As one interviewee stated, ritual is about expressing energy and directing that energy in certain ways. Whether the distance is somebody sitting across the table or through a private phone call through Facebook, it is possible to conduct rituals with others as long as the intent of energy is there.

Further still, the remaining 3 of the interviews were on a middle ground. While there was a belief that certain things could be done virtually through online spaces, such as tarot card readings, certain types of rituals could not be done. Another interviewee discussed how they had individuals call and video chat during a ritual that required a circle casting in their own coven. The mixed responses from these participants showed the complexity of individual perception of ritual, as well as how these individuals view their own religious and spiritual beliefs. It seemed that many of the participants did state that any ritual that required something like burning of a candle or using Tarot cards seemed to be acceptable for being used over digital space. However, those grounded in more nature-based practices were on the negative side of whether these rituals could be conducted through a virtual space. One individual brought up the practice by some on social media sites to reuse emoticons to cast spells; they did not view this as a valid form of ritual. This again echoes O'Leary's discussion of how cybernetic realms have allowed for the development of different types of rituals. Interestingly, many of the interviewees questioned this

new type of response to religious practices. From these few interviews, thoughts on new kinds of rituals for using the virtual space itself as opposed to utilizing the Internet for its connective potential are still in their infancy, and there are still many differing opinions on whether or not it is a valid form of practice.

Ruah-Midbar asks, "In the shift of ritual acts from the physical to the virtual realm, a significant change takes place, as discussed above, which requires users to take a stance. This is not a change that users of virtual divination can "miss," for it is felt intuitively, with no need for a sophisticated philosophical discussion. In this context it is interesting to note how virtual substitutes, such as lighting a candle, may have ritual efficacy in the eyes of their users" (2014, 634).

Some of the interviewees talk about how it is an intuitive feeling when it comes to any spiritual ritual and that whether this is done through a virtual space or in the presence of others does not really matter. Within online communities, what seems to have strengthened in importance is the intent of the ritual, standing in lieu of a physical aspect; intent, in general, has always been very important to conducting Pagan rituals, something that many Pagans will say about first when talking about conducting rituals or spells of the like. Intent is essential within the sphere of performing these rituals. However, those on the other side stated that while the intention is vital to conducting the ritual, the fact that it is difficult to read the person receiving a ritual will highly affect said ritual's effectiveness; there is still in-person connectivity to the community aspect that plays a part. One of the critical aspects that my client and I discussed was that intention is crucial, and when conducting any kind of ritual with oneself or others, it is important to focus. It possibly can be difficult for someone to do a proper reading for a person across the Internet, especially if there are no physical cues and everything is coming through tech

space. They ask: how can a person's intent be directed and given a proper reading? This is

something that does not have a clear answer, and from the data it boils down to the individual's

intuition and feelings when conducting any performative ritual through an online space, or if

they choose not to at all. If intent is the most significant factor in whether a spell is successful or

not, the question becomes, again, a matter of personal conviction. Intent is the key, of course. If a

person does not believe it will work through the Internet, then it probably will not, but if the

practitioner believes it will, then it likely will. Whether Pagans will be conducting rituals or

spells through online spaces is going to come down to personal preference.

Knowledge

As noted by Campbell, the ability to have a "pick and mix" style towards religion and

religious expression is somewhat easy, as things like the Internet allow for more accessible and

visible means of accessing religious texts, cultures, and the community. While not all Pagan

practices reflect this habit of picking and choosing from different traditions, there are quite a few

individuals, especially within the group that I interviewed, who consider themselves eclectic

witches. An eclectic witch is one whose beliefs and practices are typically pulled from multiple

sources. Having access to the Internet and the knowledge base and community allows for more

sources that individuals can understand and choose from regarding their own religious practices.

Based on what I learned through my interviews, the Pagan communities do feel as though the

Internet has affected peoples' approach to their views on religion or the community. This is

something that all of the interviewees felt about having large communities and being in

prominent groups, or groups with many active members, that included people from all walks of

life. All styles of spiritual expression have shifted; how people view religion has changed, and

that influences individuals who are newly coming into the faith. As interviewee # 6 discussed

"Social media has allowed people to take a glimpse of what we are like and what we do in our religion." At the same time, perhaps because this has been explored more, more groups are able to follow a given path. Or, more simply: by widening and diversifying its footprint, Pagan practices gain more attention, while still being coincidently affected by the circumstances under which it changes.

An example of this can be those who follow the Norse-based Pagan religion—staying within the pantheon of those gods and trying to do more research to help individuals respect a path they might have worshiped. On one hand, the Internet does allow for an ability to have that 'pick n mix' religious choice, as Campbell states, at the same time, it also allows for more education on more strict paths for individuals that are wanting to follow some of the more traditional views. One can pick one thing, after all. Furthermore, all of the interviewees that I spoke to, save for one, had to gather their information from book sources or online sources to understand what kind of path they wanted to follow. There was only one individual of the interviewees I spoke with who came from a family of Pagans. Most individuals who are practicing Pagans do find it necessary to do their own research in order to know what kind of things to do, and have to learn who to reach out to within the community. An interesting note, however: while only one individual stated that they came from a family that practiced Paganism, some of the other interviewees talked about how while their family was not Pagan, they did have certain rituals that they found to be Pagan influenced. Indeed, I was raised in a very Christian family; however, there were certain traditions that my family celebrated that now as an adult I realize they had an almost Pagan feel to them, like the motif of eggs and a rabbit at Easter. This is likely not surprising considering how many folk religions and influences Christianity has adopted from in general. This is the topic that several of the interview ease brought up regarding

how they initially became interested in Paganism. Through rituals within their own Christian households that they came to find were adapted from Pagan rituals it led to an interest to look more into the origins of certain beliefs.

The key questions that participants were asked during the interviews were, when knowledge was presented by other users online, how did people receive that information and trust the source of that information. Almost all of the interviewees stated that they did some form of fact-checking regarding any kind of advice or knowledge exchange. One interviewee described it "I feel like everything should be taken with a grain of salt. But I think it just comes down to everyone spirituality is different. And they all have different beliefs. And so I believe, like, all information is good no matter what it is, but you just need to kind of decide for yourself how you're going to use it." As mentioned above, the ways in which these persons went about backchecking was by either going through hard copy books on the subject matter, or by asking others within the community that they knew personally. In other words: checking with sources that they felt were reliable. As one interviewee stated, checking through books is not always a valid way of seeing if the information is correct, as all Pagan books are from individuals who are interpreting things based on their personal knowledge and experience. This means there is a high possibility that even the information in the hardcopy books is not going to be accurate.

Paganism, as mentioned before, has no centralized spiritual text. There is no centralized figurehead within the community for which persons can check the information out or vet if certain interpretations are valid. Paganism as a religion is in many ways a kind of religion that can be adjusted to the needs of the individual. One of the things that many of the interviewees stated they enjoyed from the religion itself is the fact that, in a way, it could be "tailor-made" for them to use and interpret how they wish. Of course, this does mean that when information is

being exchanged online, interpretations can become muddled on whether certain rituals are accurate or appropriate. Just as rituals being used online is up to the interpretation of the user's knowledge itself, interpretation is up to the individual as to whether they feel that it is valid. As for the authenticity or authority of online users who state that information, a degree of skepticism must remain present. As interviewees stated, anyone who has used the Internet knows that it is absurdly easy to remain completely anonymous or build personas on social media. While an individual may state that they have been a coven leader for the last 20 years, that might be difficult to verify. Being able to remain anonymous online is one of the benefits for individuals who are Pagan and who do not wish for people within their personal life to know about their interests or practices. As stated before, while those who practice Paganism are becoming more accepted, there are still many negative connotations associated with the practice, and misinformation in general regarding Paganism is still an issue. Still, this does raise the question: if a Pagan is actively participating in groups surrounding their religious beliefs but trying to keep that separate from their personal life, at what point do these two halves meet? And: what kind of strain does this put-on individual trying to keep those aspects of their lives separate?

As Haas (2012) discussed, many Christians were able to expand their faith due to being able to have a Bible at home and "attend" televised services. In a similar fashion, the Internet has provided a resource for those in the Pagan community to grow within their faiths. While there are no centralized writings, like a Bible, on the various Pagan rituals and religions, there is a source in the guise of social media that allows for a rapport on the different practices. This type of resource was unheard of years ago before accessing the Internet. One of the things that social media sites have allowed for is immediate access to a vast majority of knowledge. People from all walks of life and experiences have the ability to discuss topics of interest with each other, in

real time. Before social media, information either had to be passed down from word of mouth or found through various books. However, this was immediately difficult: there may not have been others within the local vicinity to talk with, or people might not have had access to those certain books, or the available books were not in line with some of these spiritual beliefs that persons were interested in. Just as Haas was discussing in their article about how Christians were able to take a Bible home and interpret it for themselves, and view televised services, Pagans nowadays can go online and find a wealth of information regarding various rituals. Just like the televised Christian services, Pagans have the ability to video chat into a service or workshop. As one interviewee mentioned, spiritual ceremonies were held within their coven, especially during the pandemic, where they would cast a circle and conduct rituals. Some of those members did this by using Zoom and video streaming into this ritual.

Authority and Identity

Social media presents an interesting conundrum when it comes to the authenticity of one's identity as well as how well one can trust the authority of a person they have met through the Internet. In particular this is something especially of interest within the Pagan community. Unlike some of the other larger main religions which have religious structures in place of automatic authority, such as priests at a Christian church or a rabbi at a Jewish synagogue, Pagans do not necessarily have a formal structure. While within covens there is a structure of hierarchy as there typically is a high priest or priestess who leads the coven this formal lack of structure is more a reflection of the lack of a centralized religious text. There's also less emphasis on hierarchy for those who identify as solitary practitioners. Sleigh (2017) discusses how online representation is a standard part of religious practice and identity today. Indeed, that still seems to be the case as all participants talk about being involved with various social media

sites or, at the very least, multiple groups on Facebook. The Internet has become an everyday staple in many people's lives, especially in the Western world, so it is not surprising that religion, which is also a large part of most people's lives, has become integrated with social media. Many of the interviewed participants discussed how convenient it was to hop online and ask questions of people within their groups or at the very least read and see what people are saying. While not all the participants were active within these groups, all of them showed a strong affinity in the things that were being discussed and various topics brought forth by other members.

In regards to authority figures within the Pagan community, one need not necessarily be a high priest or priestess, or formal leader, running a large coven in order to be able to speak on certain subjects with a sense of authority. Indeed, many solitary practitioners do not go in person to a priest or priestess in order to gather information on how to conduct certain rituals. All of those interviewed discussed how much of their knowledge on subjects came from reading books or just talking to others within the community. Those that they were speaking to were not typically high priests or priestesses, just fellow Pagans who also had gathered information from personal experience, family, or from books. The end result is that each person's approach and understanding of certain rituals, beliefs, or practices can be drastically different from any other person's approach and understanding. This also means that authority figures within the Pagan community can be a nuanced subject to approach. That also includes even those within the Pagan community online who are priests or priestesses, simply because their interpretations of certain ideals or beliefs may differ from another's.

Considering that Witch N' the Working is a channel on YouTube and presence on other social media spaces, understanding how authority figures are viewed and used within the social

media spaces was of particular interest to my client. After all, just like others who post information in these online forms, my client is also putting out information which some may regard with skepticism on whether he has the authority to be someone of reliability concerning the information they are putting out. While within a social media space like Facebook, group authority lies with the admin to have the ability to mute, block, or step into a conversation to moderate it. But there is also the authority of people stating they have a certain amount of experience areas and whether that information they are providing with the community and engaging with the community is authentic. Many of the interviews and observations made throughout this research show that many of the individuals within the spheres take it upon themselves to do their research regarding anything they view with skepticism. As my client has been a practitioner for many years and a current leader, there is a unique position to say that they have authority in the sense of long-term knowledge. A recommendation I may provide to them is to be very clear and upfront in public posting, which they typically are regarding how they have obtained specific knowledge through certain types of literature and person experience. The same expectation is a reasonable basis for acceptance within the community.

This issue with authority or even someone in a group stating that they have knowledge regarding certain subjects is further complicated because identity throughout the Internet is not always guaranteed. Social media allows for the ability to create profiles where any information can be placed, whether that information is correct or not. There can be many reasons why someone may wish to fabricate or exaggerate certain things about their identity within social media spaces, but this does mean that when people come onto these groups and make claims of authority, it is difficult to verify this. On top of this, while the Pagan community can be very inviting, there is a vein of secrecy that comes with practicing Paganism that still exists today.

"Secrecy is central to the practice of these different groups. Most members, for obvious reasons, keep their participation hidden: conventional civilians rarely take the assertion of witchhood with nonchalance" (Luhrmann 1989, 137). With a history of persecution and fear, it is no wonder that one of the reasons for concealment even within these spaces is a worry that some may have about people finding out about their Pagan beliefs and practices. Again, regardless of the reasons, the fact that identity can be faked so easily in social media spheres leads to questioning those who come onto the spaces and make any claims. However, during the interviews, it was made very clear that fact-checking and vetting those who came into these spaces was a common occurrence that most practitioners conducted. As interviewee # 6 stated "The internet is great but fact check it." Participants gave a wide range of different resources that they used in order to check sources ranging from trusted books, fellow Pagans, or other Internet sites that they felt were legitimate. During observations on public groups, when any ritual or information was provided while no one came out stating that what the person had posted was false, there was quite a bit of discussion in the comment section. These comments often revolved around whether it made sense to use certain objects or ritual items for whatever the post's intent or spell was. During observations, no one directly confronted another person regarding their identity or their authenticity when it came to who they were; however, as stated before, any kind of post was subject to possible debate.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

My training as an anthropologist contributed significantly to how I approached these research topics and many considerations that needed to be taken to talk to those within this community. Conducting this as an ethnography allowed me to truly delve into how those within the Pagan community were using social media to construct their world and add more meaning and value to their lives. Thanks to my training as an applied anthropologist, I used a variety of techniques and methods to investigate the answers to the questions collaborated on by my client. The direct perspectives of the people being researched needed to be brought into this study. It is clear the Pagan community has a lot to say, and through this paper, I have only scratched the surface on some of those things. The Internet is a marvel and has integrated itself thoroughly into many people's lives and within many companies and organizations. This presents a unique opportunity for an applied anthropologist to bridge the gap between these organizations and companies and the communities that they are trying to reach.

At the end of the study, I walked away feeling as though I had a better understanding for myself and for my client on how Pagans are using social media in order to build community, conduct ritual, and exchange knowledge. As stated before, many factors led me to want to conduct this type of research. While the Pagan community still is viewed with a sense of hesitation and skepticism by many, as a fellow Pagan, it warmed my heart to see so many people's enthusiasm in volunteering for a project like this. Interviewing and talking to those in these online communities was wonderfully educating and reminded me why the Pagan community can breed such a positive environment.

Many questions asked during this research have no clear answers. It is in my experience

that when it comes to religion and spirituality the truth lies with the individual. Being able to glimpse the inner workings of how some of those individuals view community, ritual and authority were incredibly eye-opening. Engaging with these communities with an anthropological lens has allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the cultures that emerge in Pagan communities on their own and those within online spaces, how those two cultural spaces can combine and create something unique. Understanding how religious groups are using spaces on the Internet is a subject that will probably continue to be a topic of interest for anthropologists and other scholars of religion. It will also be a topic of interest to leaders within religious communities who now have a tool that can reach out to large masses of people instantly. While there may be some who do not believe that communities can truly be built online, through observations and interviews as well as reviews of previous literature works, I think it is safe to say that communities have the ability to be built in many different ways and fashions and it is no different than those that are built on social media sites. As a Pagan myself it is encouraging to see how members from the community are now able to grow and engage with each other in ways that previously were not possible before the Internet and before the use of social media. One of the last questions that I asked participants was if they felt that Pagans will continue to grow and change as social media does as well. It was practically unanimous that all participants felt that as social media continues to change and grow so too does the Pagan community grow. The benefits of social media within the community at large cannot be understated and while there are no replacements for in person practices social media will continue to be an important role within the community at large.

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