

Accounting for the Lack of Lack: Fetishistic Disavowal within Networks of Desire

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Drawing upon a netnography of the eddies of magical thinking, cynical pragmatism, and suspended disbelief that characterise participation in ‘WitchTok’, we critically revisit and ontologically expand the extant conceptualisation of “networks of desire” (NoDs) (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman, 2017). Whilst Kozinets and colleagues follow a Deleuzian assumption that desire is a ‘real’, positive, and productive flow subject to market capture (see also Jones and Hietanen, 2023), it is important not to lose touch with countervailing ontologies that conceive of desire negatively as lack. Following a Lacanian – and contemporaneously, Žižekian – take on desire (see also Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003), the idea of lack reflects the psychoanalytic recognition that ‘reality’ is predicated on social fictions that necessitate radical reliance upon symbols, fantasies, and identities as “substitute gratifications” that comfort subjects from the lack of any substantive truths (Gabriel, 2015: 25). Where NoDs are currently mapped in relation to how technology in networked digital economies channel, discipline, and direct desiring flows, the viability of NoDs as a critical concept might be enhanced by integrating (and reconciling with) the Lacanian-Žižekian premise that desire itself is structured and perpetuated by unconscious fantasies that shield subjects from the traumatic absence of any underlying absolute truths (Žižek, 1989).

Desire, if organised around lack, is forever insatiable and manipulable in its expressions because a desiring subject can never genuinely be fulfilled. Nevertheless, Deleuzian and Lacanian-Žižekian approaches to desire need not conflict; rather, our working paper explores how imperfectly conspired pairings can enhance thinking around concepts like NoDs. By making room for ‘lack’, we suggest that within NoDs, desire does not function through participants’ ignorance of the social and market conditions of power that organises their desires but instead, through their wilful adoption of “cynical distance” (Žižek, 1989: 33).

Using WitchTok (a portmanteau of ‘witches’ and ‘TikTok’, designating a fricassee of video-streaming, magical thinking, aesthetics, and algorithmic intervention on the TikTok social media platform) as our empirical context, we theorise the cynical distance achieved by participants within NoDs through variegated practices of “fetishistic disavowal” – a simultaneous recognition and denial of what is injurious. We capture how practitioners and consumers of WitchTok fetishise magical ideals while simultaneously accepting they are not real – without compromising their enjoyment and desirous play. As Vighi (2010: 30) astutely notes, “commodities, in their mad dance, ‘do the believing’ for us”.

We follow a variant of netnographic design entitled “critical netnography” that locates online discourses within underlying (sometimes unconscious) processes of the subject and the unacknowledged but ubiquitous, rhizomatic presence of semicapitalism and its power asymmetries (Bertilsson, 2014). Following critical netnography’s ultra-realist emphasis on the paradoxes and fuzziness of ideological functioning, we dig beneath the textual and visual content of 15 of the most popular WitchToker profiles and their followers’ posts to conceptualise the market-mediated desire for magical enrichment as recognisably implausible yet consumed ostensibly in good faith. Our ongoing analyses reveal the importance of participants’ complicity to fetishise in enabling NoDs to successfully channel raw, passionate energies into semicapitalist interests.

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