The role of Archaisms in Post-Historical Consumer Culture

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis provides a critical account of the functions that archaisms (*i.e.* cultural objects, symbols, or ideas that originate from a pre-modern period of history), fulfil in consumption, markets, and consumer culture. Although nostalgic attachments to the past have previously been conceptualised by marketing scholars as a means for consumers to escape the overt commercialism of contemporary social life in favour of a return to a more authentic and communal existence, few have considered how past-centred escapism is itself a strategic accompaniment to political-economic stability in the present. In contrast to the 'utopian optimism' that perpetuates celebratory accounts of the nostalgic in the marketplace, this doctoral thesis explores the consumption of archaisms as tied to a kind of *cruel optimism* where the more consumers attach themselves to a distant pre-capitalist past, the less chance they have at securing a post-capitalist future. Following the argument that societies in the Global North are 'post-historical', in the sense that they are characterised by the unlikelihood of a political-systemic change that would radically challenge capitalism's hegemony, I show how the magical imaginarium of a pre-patriarchal and earth-bound pagan past functions as fantasmatic support for consumers to tolerate – rather than overcome – their rationalised overdetermined present.

The primeval figure of the 'witch' is used as the illustrative context for this thesis. Empirical portions of the thesis draw upon a historiography and digital history of witchcraft throughout modernity and a critical ethnography of witch interest undertaken over a two-year period in Lancashire, Northwest England. Using observational netnography alongside interviews with self-identifying witches and those interested in witch tourism, I explore the meanings that the witch holds for consumers and I integrate these with readings of the structuring influence of market systems. Drawing upon critical theories adapted from philosophers Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, Mark Fisher, and Fredric Jameson, analyses show how market-mediated attachments to a magical past not only lack the nuanced futurity to ameliorate remorseless dissatisfactions with the post-historical present but work to perpetuate the conflation of capitalism with reality itself (*i.e.* capitalist realism). To explain this phenomenon, I introduce new concepts to marketing theory including *marketplace revenant*, *retrocorporation*, and *thinking magically*. Each of these concepts contributes to terminalist (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022) and de-romanticist (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) research agendas.

This thesis is presented in alternative format (by publication) and features two published papers (see Chapters 3 and 4), one work-in-progress manuscript (see Chapter 5) and supporting conference papers (see Appendices 5-10). Each paper presents specific sub-questions which contribute to the overarching question driving the research: *how is the 'witch' made to function in ways that sustain the logic of capitalism?*

Keywords: Archaisms, Capitalist realism, Consumer culture, De-romanticist, Nostalgia, Post-historical

Table of Contents

Chapter 5: From Magical Thinking To 'Thinking Magically': Contemporary Witchcraft & Its Structure Of Disavowal 131

Chapter 6: Discussion & Conclusion 165

7.0 References...176

8.0 Appendices 197

List of Tables

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Declaration

This doctoral thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this institution (Lancaster University) or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes no content that is the outcome of collaboration except where specifically indicated. A full statement of authorship for each of the multi-authored papers including Paper 1 (Chapter 3), Paper 2 (Chapter 4), and the solo-authored Paper 3 (Chapter 5) can be found under "Author Contribution Statement" (p. 10) which includes signed certification by myself and my supervisors as co-authors, in agreement of the proportion for which credit is due for each paper. Research in this thesis has been published in the following academic publications, conference manuscripts, and magazine contributions. The solo-authored manuscript for this thesis, referred to as Paper 3 (see Chapter 5) is being considered for submission to a suitable journal at the time of submitting this thesis.

Academic Papers

James, S, Cronin, J. and Patterson, A. (2024) "If You Like Your History Horrible": The Obscene Supplementarity of Thanatourism, *Annals of Tourism Research,* 106, 103749 (see Chapter 4).

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Conference Poems

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Author Contribution Statement

My supervisors, Professor James Cronin and Professor Anthony Patterson are co-authors on Paper 1 (Chapter 3) and Paper 2 (Chapter 4). In their capacity as supervisors and co-authors, they provided guidance and contributed, to varying degrees, in the writing and development of the papers including revisions and resubmissions of these to respective journals. While Paper 3 (Chapter 5) is a solo-authored piece, it is important to acknowledge that my supervisory team offered practical guidance on multiple drafts of the paper.

Paper 1 (Chapter 3)

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    Sophie James (50%), James Cronin (40%), Anthony Patterson (10%)

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Paper 3 (Chapter 5)

James, S. (2024) From Magical Thinking To 'Thinking Magically': Contemporary Witchcraft & Its Structure Of Disavowal, *working draft*.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Origins

"Modern capitalism hates anachronisms unless they can be monetised" (Lezard, 2023, p. 43).

The origins of this doctoral thesis are rooted in my curiosity toward understanding how aspects of the distant past continue to find relevance in – and become integrated with – contemporary consumer culture. As shown epigraphically by Nicholas Lezard's statement for the *New Statesman*, anachronisms, *i.e.* things that do not belong in the present, tend not to be valued unless they can somehow be made useful to the projects of monetisation and profit-seeking and thus conform to value-generating imperatives of a capitalist political economy. The fuller context for Lezard's observation relates to the 'progressive' demolition of old-world architecture and historic spaces of social preserve in urban centres in favour of new-build luxury hotels and retail amenities. The erasure of any vestige of the distant past for the expansion of commercial environments and lifestyles seems to be endemic amongst those who share in the fantasies of 'market-based progress' (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021) and the ideological inclination to equate the antiquated with obsolescence, traditionalism with backwardness, and the preindustrial with the irrational. Though a significant and still nascent burst of interest in consumer nostalgia, retrobranding, retromarketing, retroscapes, heirlooms, second-hand or vintage consumption, and reboots of brands from decades ago have emerged in recent cultural consumer research (*e.g.* Abdelrahman *et al*., 2020; Brown, 2001, 2006, 2013, 2018, Brown *et al*., 2003; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Goulding, 1999a; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003), I found myself drawn to the *less-explored* and more politicised perseverance of the distant past and particularly of the oldest subset of anachronisms – 'archaisms' – meaning those objects, ideas, aesthetics, or experiences from an ancient, premodern period (Landwehr and Winnerling, 2019). Unlike the modest re-releases and remarketing campaigns of products and brands from merely a few generations ago or 'old objects' (classified as "items that were previously owned or used", see Abdelrahman *et al*., 2020, p. 304), the tokens of a much older, *archaic* world one might assume would be anathema to consumer capitalist political economy and the edacious neophilia it interpellates amongst its subjects, yet archaisms still exist.

Whether participation in wild hunts and rugged subsistence lifestyles at 'mountain men' re-enactments (Belk and Costa, 1998), tribalistic drumming and spiritually-inflected barter systems of the Burning Man festival (Kozinets, 2002a), or romanticising the semi-mythic

Viking figure and its perpetual haunting of Swedish consumer culture (Södergren, 2022), the appeal of ancient traditions and the material affectations of our cultural predecessors are allowed to live on in contemporary consumer culture (Karababa, 2012; Maclaran and Brown, 2005; Zanette *et al*., 2023). This led me to ask: can vestiges of the distant past *ever* be experienced by consumers outside of, or without serving the interests of, the reigning capitalist political economy?

One of the archaisms I found myself recurrently drawn to is the 'witch' – an ancient figure of benighted superstition and magical modes of thinking, who despite being native to a preliberal period that antedates today's advanced capitalist political economy by several millennia, has regularly been a subject of marketisation and commodification throughout (post)modernity. Even though I grew up like others in my generation surrounded by TV screens, the internet, and a myriad of technological accoutrements of a digitalised, secularised, and information super-rich post-war, post-ideological, 'post-historical' consumer culture (Fukuyama, 1992), I have always been captivated by the witch and her relationships with magic, primitivism, and supernaturalism. This was, in part, shaped by a unique amalgamation of family influences including my mum's superstitions and my grandmother's experiences with the supernatural, my schooling which introduced me to mythological ideas, and my personal fan interest in the magical universe of *Harry Potter* by J.K Rowling, which became an unremitting source of joy for my brother Harry and I, and an important influence in shaping my understanding of magic.

I grew up in an era that some consider to be the apex of Western consumerism (Fisher, 2009; Bracewell, 2002). The late 1990s and the turn of the millennium were a time of accelerated 'newness' with a seemingly never-ending drip-feed of fresh styles, fetishised commodities, and hyped affectations injected into the cultural reference points for thoroughly consumerised young females. Yet despite all of the glossy new baubles available to me and my peers, the witch remained as notorious as she had been throughout the Dark Ages or earlier. Even against a backdrop of the sleek "Girl Power" music scene championed by all-girl groups such as *The Spice Girls*, *Destiny's Child*, and *TLC,* and bubble-gum pop princesses like *Britney Spears* and *Christina Aguilera*, the unapologetically heteronormative outbursts of neon pink 'girlyness' splashed across teen magazines, the after-school distractions of MSN messenger and text messaging, the superficial pleasures of 'makeup maximalism' popularised through expansive lip glosses, fake lashes, and frosted eyeshadow selections, and a steady flow of

coming-of-age teen movies filled with pink plaid, flip phones, and rich-girl shopping montages *e.g. Clueless* ("accessorize or die"), the mythos of the witch seemed not only to survive but *thrive*, continuing to captivate young people's imaginations with her ancient supernatural powers in women-centred, fantasy-action media. Rather than go up against the tidal wave of colourful newness and *plastic fantastica* exploding everywhere in the 1990s and early 2000s, it appeared as though the witch had comfortably joined the ranks of the marketplace; garnering popularity through pulpy fantasy paperbacks to TV and major motion pictures including *The Craft* (1996), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996 - 2003), *Charmed* (1998 – 2006), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 - 2003) and, of course, the cinematic *Harry Potter* adaptations (2001 - 2011) and their accompanying transmedia empire of witchcraft and wizardry inspired videogames, boardgames, cosplay conventions, and fan fiction.

The continued popularity of the witch throughout my formative years, although undeniably impactful, was not the only reason I chose to pursue research on this figure. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the witch has experienced something of an accelerated tide of commodification with her frequent presence throughout mass-mediated popular culture products including (but not limited to) movies such as *Witch Hunt* (2020), *The Craft: Legacy* (2020), *Nightbooks* (2021), *The Haunting of Pendle Hill* (2022), and *Hocus Pocus 2* (2022), TV shows such as *Always a Witch* (2019), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), and *The Witcher* (2021), and videogames including *Little Witch Academia: VR Broom Racing* (2020), *Ashina: The Red Witch* (2022) and *Dreams in the Witch House* (2023).

Recent interest in the witch has been further heightened by popular interest in the magical and mystical, refracted through feminist, environmentalist, wellness, and herbologist movements which in turn are linked to consumption-related lifestyles and marketplace cultures. Identity-seeking centred on witchcraft and participatory witch communities has proliferated on the internet with the video-sharing platform TikTok becoming home to the massively popular 'WitchTok' phenomenon. To date, WitchTok content (identifiable via its hashtag #witchtok) featuring tutorials, educational content, live streaming, documentary style videos, and confessionals on performing witchcraft and honing witchy aesthetics for oneself at home (such as 'Glamour Magick') has amassed more than 50 billion views globally (Chabo, 2024). Characterised by visually arresting accounts of "glittery creations and dramatic spells", WitchTok has been described "as much testament to the value of ritual and ceremony

in grounding our lives as to the hectic, disordered times we live in" (Venkataramakrishnan, 2021, n.p.). The proliferation and impact of WitchTok has led to witchcraft in the U.S. becoming classified as a "multi-billion dollar industry" (Lenoir-Jourdan, 2020, n.p.).

Elsewhere on the web, forum-based communities that organise around magic as an "online witch-sphere" (Zanette *et al.*, 2023, p. 177) have also grown in membership numbers, including on social media giant Reddit where the 'r/witchcraft' thread now has 440,000 active members and features in the top 1% of communities on the entire site. In response to this dramatic growth in internet-mediated interest in witchcraft, a reporter for the *Financial Times* observes:

> The mysteries of the metaphysical and the arcana of algorithms make for a powerful mix … It might seem incongruous that the esoteric and the occult are flourishing in the digital age…But a search for ritual and order… has proven a fertile moment for the magical, and it is finding a home on some of the internet's biggest platforms. (Venkataramakrishnan, 2021, n.p.)

The witch's perseverance over the ages suggests an enduring fascination with and sentimental attachment to antiquities, historic, magical values, beliefs, and social systems unencumbered by market-mediated forms of exchange and signification. Many contemporary writers and authors have drawn parallels between this growth of interest in witchcraft activity, increased social and cultural acceptability, demand for, and celebration of indigenous magical practices and supernatural forces.

Witches live amongst us in contemporary society. Many cultural groups identify or share an affinity with the beliefs and lineage of the witch and her enigmatic craft. Witchcraft practitioners "traditionally seek to distinguish themselves from commercialization" (Miller, 2022b, p. 2) superseding scientific rationality with a strong emphasis on feminine principles and "female power" through the ostensible political symbolism of the Goddess over patriarchal principles (Rountree, 1999). It seems paradoxical therefore that progressively the identity of the witch, witchcraft, and belief in magic as things "that wish to remain outside capitalist commodity relations" (Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016, p. 103) are converging with and becoming defined by their material form (Barnette, 2022; Miller, 2022a; Miller, 2022b).

From observing the complex co-existence of the primitivist and superstitious content attached to witchcraft with an increasingly digitalised and neophiliac material culture, I decided to use the witch as my empirical context to study the functions of archaisms for contemporary

consumer culture. In the next section, I outline the specific theoretical thinking and research question that underpins my research.

1.2 Purpose of the Research

Using the witch as my empirical context, this thesis sets out to identify the reasons why archaisms not only find relevance in, but have become fully integrated with, contemporary consumer culture. The purpose of doing so is to understand how those ways of life which predate, and to some extent, contradict capitalism are made to function for the benefit of consumption, markets, and marketing. The overarching question that drives this thesis can be summarised as the following: *how is the 'witch' made to function in ways that sustain the logic of capitalism, and are there any deadlocks?*

To address this overarching question, this thesis is undertaken by publication format with separate manuscripts, each centring on how aspects of a structural disappointment with the capitalist present coincide with some form of return to premodern, precapitalist imaginaries and their material cultures. The benefit of completing a PhD by publication is that each paper enclosed can address specific research problems and theoretical considerations that altogether contribute a nuanced and multilayered response to the thesis' above research question.

Papers in this thesis are organised around the following research aims, to 1.) consider the various structural matrices that shape and influence the seemingly eternal return of pre-capitalist archaisms such as the witch over the course of modernity, and 2.) identify the mechanisms that ensure this eternal recurrence rarely challenges modernity's underlying capitalist hegemony. I am concerned first and foremost with how the primitivist imaginary of witchcraft and the magical thinking that once sustained its premodern notoriety returns, seemingly not as a threat to modernity's dominant (liberal-rationalist) ethos, but as an aesthetic and symbological accompaniment. My thesis primarily focuses on the abstract conditions, especially those that do not lend themselves easily to consumer reflection, that perpetuate the witch's haunting of modern consumer culture.

A key assumption underpinning my thesis is that modernity, since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s has been functioning in a "post-historical period" where liberal democratic capitalist hegemony is believed to represent an 'end' point. With the gradual collapse of widescale ideological alternatives such as Soviet communism, fascist-eugenic

totalitarianism, and the imperial despotisms of old, there is no longer an exportable reality that can exist outside of the dominant capitalist mould. "What we may be witnessing", Fukuyama (1989) wrote following the passing of the Cold War between ideologies, is not only "the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such… the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (p. 4).

Fukuyama argues that regardless of ongoing violence and strife, modernity today exists as a period wherein all meaning, and goals have become aligned with and derivative of a deracinating, individualising, and detraditionalising democratic meritocracy, the private means of production, and the universal secular desire for material comforts, with most developed territories and peoples integrated into and reliant upon, global markets and trade. Capitalist thought-systems and intellectual doctrines have become so naturalised that there is no more ideological contest. As Derrida (2006) summarises, "'the end of history'" is one "where pluralistic democracies and capitalist economies reign supreme" (p. viii). Fukuyama's thesis does not mean that historical events and conflicts will *not* continue to occur. Since undertaking my PhD studies, we have experienced the populist aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, various instances of demagoguery, the January 6th Insurrection at the Capitol in the US, the "Yellow Vest" movement in France, the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Israel–Hamas conflict in Palestine to name a few. Rather, Fukuyama would argue that these and ongoing historic 'shocks' rarely fundamentally challenge the global economic order of consumption, markets, and capital ownership. Any antagonism must, realistically, still play out within (and rely upon) the matrices of private interest, capital accumulation, competitive markets, entrepreneurship, voluntary exchange, wage labour, commodification, and the profitable trade of commodities. Even in regional cases where the democratic shell of neoliberal-capitalism is disassembled completely – as with the Taliban's resurgence – this is tolerated by world powers under antagonists' explicit agreement not to interfere in the politics of the Global North, constituting a tacit reaffirmation of their lasting attachments to capital. To paraphrase Yuval Noah Harari, The Taliban, "for all [their] hatred of American culture, American religion, and American politics… [remain] very fond of American dollars" (2014, p. 191-192).

Resultingly, in a world so fundamentally and predictably reduced to a cult of private wealth ownership, helplessly reliant upon the competitive means of production, and easily

17

herded along by self-centred material interests, many individuals are faced with "the regulated boredom of a perpetual reproduction of modernity on a world scale. The problematic of post-history is not the end of the world but the end of meaning" (Niethammer and Van Laak, 1994, p. 3). What Fukuyama conceives of as the "end of history", can also be read as the end of the future – or rather, the end of other *possible* futures other than one that conforms with the neoliberal-capitalist order of things.

Connecting with the above assumptions, the critically engaged nature of this thesis aligns with what has interchangeably been called terminal marketing (TM) (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022) or de-romanticist consumer research (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022). At the heart of this research agenda is a cynical axiology sensitised to Fukuyama's arguments that responds polemically to a perceived "utopian optimism" in marketing and consumer research (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022). This "utopian optimism" that terminalists and de-romanticists rail against is, effectively, an institutional rose-tinted apologism that even self-purported "critical" marketing scholars cling to when accounting for all matters of consumer affairs, markets, and consumer culture. Utopian optimism maintains the inviolable primacy of the market in all conceivable research problems and solutions, forever rejecting any basis for an alternative (*i.e.* post-capitalist) social landscape, and thus remains unapologetically rooted in the neoliberal-capitalist dogma that "individuals, acting in their own private self-interest is the most efficient, just and legitimate basis for social and economic organization" (Fitchett *et al*., 2014, p. 502). The fantasy of marketing's utopian optimism is that through faith in individualist meritocratic market orientation alone, lies the capabilities to produce meaning, overcome existential threats, and transform earthly arrangements for the better, i.e. *the fantasy of market-based progress* (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). The dogmatic focus on the individual lives and potentialities of consumers rather than structural issues means that private rather than public interests have become primary units of analysis, just as personal consumption (individual choices, perspectives, preferences, and identities) rather than *public consciousness* have been elevated to greater importance.

The result of marketing's utopian optimism is that the individual pursuit of experience becomes the central and only concern, ensuring that "it logically and necessarily follows that the actions of individuals rather than collective actions should become emphasized" (Fitchett, *et al*., 2014, p. 502). Utopian optimism is self-limiting because it reduces all problems and their solutions to the resolve of the individual consumer, ossifying self-interest as an unassailable

good, and thus weakening the diversity of theoretical, political, and moral insights that can be gained from interrogating other aspects of marketised society.

"TM," as Ahlberg and his colleagues (2022) suggest, "has risen to throw a pessimistic view of marketized society into the discourse [...] that rejects the idea of consumer-led solutions or the awareness-raising activities of more conventional critical scholarship in marketing" (p 669-670). While conventional critical scholarship had assumed that individual subjects through their potential for agency and radical non-conformism might eventually muster forms of reflexive defiance or be 'nudged' to find ways out of all problems imposed by market-located structures and systems, TM adopts more sobering view on the limits of individual autonomy.

Following in the footsteps of TM's departure from the utopian faith in consumers as "problem-solving 'protagonists', saving themselves and their world through better market choices" (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022, p. 673), the enclosed thesis is *not* about seeking out individuals' goal-directed explanations for their interest in the witch, rather its mission is to explore instead the witch's role in consumer culture more broadly and structurally. In doing so, I am less concerned with what individual consumers "get" from the witch as bound up in illusions of self and agency as I am more interested in the *ideological role* that the witch is made to serve in entrenching market and consumption-based worldviews. This means that, rather than rely solely upon the conscious rationalisations of individualised consumers, my thesis draws from philosophical and historical material to unpack the place of archaisms in *public* consciousness and their relationship with political economy. As the preceding chapters will show, the purpose of this thesis is to identify and explore how archaisms emerge through abstract external structural forces and *internal* unconscious forces that operate beyond conscious awareness or personally edifying goals, instead being strategically *at play* and put *into play* by consumer culture.

In the subsequent sections I will provide a background to this thesis's key concepts including capitalism and capitalist realism, nostalgia and retrospection under capitalism, magic and magical thinking, closing out with marketplace cultures.

1.3 Background to Key Research Concepts

Over the ensuing three subsections I outline the core theoretical underpinnings for my research. Firstly, I discuss the principles of a capitalist political economy and the realism that underpins it, followed by theories on how what is referred to as 'capitalist realism' engenders nostalgia for the past. Secondly, I outline how magic has been theorised within consumer research focusing specifically on accounts of 'magical thinking'. Thirdly, I account for the concept of marketplace cultures, sketching out the main characteristics of these groups forged around a marketised entity, including their underlying tensions.

1.3.1 Capitalism

Capitalism is, at its core, "any social formation in which processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic and dominant in providing and shaping the material, social and intellectual bases for social life" (Harvey, 2014, p. 7). As the operating system for political economy[1] in most societies today, capitalism normalises work and consumption as the major integrating forces for human civilisation, regularises individual self-reliance above collective welfare, naturalises personal liberty above communal security, and, as Fitchett *et al*. (2014, p. 497) suggest, safeguards the belief that "the market offers a legitimate (if not the most legitimate) context through which individuals should seek to explore, identify and experience the world around them".

Capitalism is linked intrinsically to modernity, the obverse of antiquity. Modernity is characterised by the channelling of social organisation into secular and teleological activities determined by rational outcomes, in contrast to antiquity which had been characterised by a deontological and unapologetically anti-utilitarian ethos centred on the development and enhancement of the subject performing a duty, practice, or exercise. The social organisation of antiquity led to the authoring of stirring poems and theological philosophy, the development of great painters, sculptors and warriors, and the commitment of huge expense to *objets d'art* reminiscent of a Sophilos Vase and the Alfred Jewel or architecture like the Pantheon in Rome

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[1] Political economy is a term I use throughout this thesis instead of 'economy'. Whereas economy, derived from the Greek *oikonomia* ('household management') has historical ties to the management of wants, demands, and supply needs of households, political economy "locates economics within larger relations of power, recognising that economic processes cannot be coherently abstracted from the rest of social life, particularly the state" (Shannon, 2019, p. 92). I recognise that capitalism functions through and impacts upon social life in its entirety as constituted, disseminated, and reproduced by state, legislative, and market actors.

and The Colossus of Rhodes: intricate, deluxe, magnificently aesthetic, and representative of the highest levels of human ingenuity and craftsmanship within a particular vocation, but imploring the immediate questions *why* and *to what end?* In contrast to "the beautiful but useless things" produced under antiquity, Fukuyama (1992, p. 309) suggests, the emphasis for subjects of modernity is to produce "things that are useful but ugly: machine tools, freeways, Toyota Camrys, and prefabricated houses". Through an overriding emphasis on utility, life under modernity has become defined by usefulness, both in terms of how subjects see themselves – *is my role in society a useful one?* – and how they see the material world – *what could I use to make my life easier*?

Throughout one's life, a subject of modern affluent societies will 'use' several million artefacts – from phones, cars and microwave ovens to carrier bags, makeup brushes and paper towels to readymade meals, cutlery and mouthwash. Fukuyama (1992) suggests that while this cult of usefulness has enriched the comforts of the greater many, "[i]t would no longer be possible to create the great art that was meant to capture the highest aspirations of an era, like Homer's *Iliad*, the Madonnas of da Vinci or Michelangelo, or the giant Buddha of Kamakura" (p. 311). For whilst the utmost mobilisation of human energies for pursuing beauty for beauty's sake had been embraced throughout what is often considered the benighted past, in contrast an 'enlightened' modern era is one that coldly marshals only the necessary means towards clearly stipulated ends deemed useful by those with quantifiable needs.

Several competing political economies came and went over modernity in attempts to accommodate the period's *cult of usefulness*, but capitalism remained the most consistent and hegemonic. Globalising wall-to-wall capitalism – with its universalising celebration of market competitiveness and meritocratic tendencies – emerged out of the displacement of feudalism and local subsistence farming by mercantilism and international commodity trading in the 13th century, accelerated by rapid industrialisation and consumerism in the 19th and 20th centuries, and entrenched by the collapse of all the rival political economies of modernity by the turn of the 21st century. Jacques Derrida (2006) one of the key voices in critical accounts of political economy, argues that following the dissolution of the Soviet communist project in late 1991, the triumph of global capitalism as the new world order marked the end of any possibility for a transformation of society.

The critique of capitalism, its features, and its consequences is a major concern for cultural theory, political philosophy, and increasingly critical marketing scholarship (*e.g.*

21

Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Cronin *et al*., 2024; Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Hietanen *et al*., 2022; Hoang *et al*., 2023; Lambert, 2019; Rome and Lambert, 2020; Zwick, 2013). Common amongst many of these critical threads is the recognition that capitalism utilises a perverse psychological hold over its subjects to project itself as the pinnacle of civilisational socio-political organisation.

To explore this further I turn to the late British cultural diagnostician, Mark Fisher, and his concept of "capitalist realism" which plays a central role in my thesis.

1.3.1.1 Capitalist Realism

Rather than existing at the level of some abstract or disembodied system of policies, capitalism functions ideologically, often tacitly and without people's conscious awareness. Ideology can be defined "not only as a social background of assumptions and pressures, but also [the] different ways in which people justify behaving in accordance with that background" (Bailes, 2019, p. 19). Because it is a social construct rather than a material fact of life, capitalism – like all ideologies – must naturalise itself as an objective 'law' of human existence through effacing its own historicity and treating the contingency of its social arrangements as immutable. The result is people tend to see the fantasies that capitalism curates for itself – including the primacy of individualism, meritocracy, and market fundamentalism – as non-ideological facts of life: as basic laws of nature and brute survival.

"Capitalist realism" describes the conflation of capitalism with reality itself: the blind conviction that there is no realistic alternative to capitalism as the basis for any acceptable standard of life let alone social and political-economic organisation. Capitalist realism implants the unshakeable belief that the basis for desirable widescale human cooperation must realistically be reliant on capitalist dynamics: individualism and meritocracy. At the heart of this equivocation of capitalism with reality is the maxim, often attributed to Žižek (2005) (originally coined by Jameson, 2003[2]), that "it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism"[3]. Because of the ideological

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[2] "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson, 2003, p. 76).

[3] In documentary, Žižek! (2005), Žižek shares: "Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is, that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism."

effectiveness of capitalism in securing for itself a sense of absolute truth value, capitalism is seen as *the only* 'reality' we can live within (Fisher, 2009). This Fisher argues, has led to a crisis of imagination, leaving us with a deficit in intellectual and political originality and little consensus about how to engender a less disappointing future. There are several important features of capitalist realism.

First, capitalist realism installs upon its subjects a taken-for-granted "business ontology," which naturalises the belief "that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business" (Fisher, 2009, p. 17). This feature is most evident in the popular assumption that if one were to improve a government department, a hospital, a school, or any kind of institution, then it makes perfectly natural sense to put persons with "business experience" in charge: the result is the "branding" of everything and everyone, and the holding of civil servants, teachers, doctors, and so on to the accountability of "managers". In the case of Donald J. Trump, Michael Bloomberg, Silvio Berlusconi, and Rishi Sunk for example, those with a significant background in business become perceived as the most suitable for political office. Through this naturalisation of business ontology, as Winlow *et al*. (2015) suggest, "[t]he world was remade for conniving, opportunistic individuals as it was unmade for anyone who lacked the confidence, wherewithal, adaptability and entrepreneurial reflexes needed to jump on the chances that fly past very quickly in our accelerated culture" (p. 66).

Second, capitalist realism is characterised by "reflexive impotence", a concept that alludes to the feeling that "[subjects of capitalism] know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it" (Fisher, 2009, p. 21). Internalising the belief that no matter how bad things get we as individuals have no power to change it leads to a painful shared nihilism that we desperately try to anesthetise through gluttonous consumerist distractions, or as Žižek (2019) points out:

> "Today's nihilism—the reign of cynical opportunism accompanied by permanent anxiety—legitimizes itself as the liberation from the old constraints… the scope of freedoms is strictly prescribed by the coordinates of the existing system, and also by the way consumerist freedom effectively functions: the possibility to choose and consume imperceptivity turns into a superego obligation to choose" (p. 4–5).

Third and relatedly, capitalist realism is characterised by "depressive hedonia" or a kind of depressive hold that hedonic consumerism, in the absence of anything greater, has over us: "Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition I'm referring to

23

is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure" (Fisher, 2009, p. 22). According to Mark Fisher, nothing will be enough to satisfy this feeling that "'something is missing'" (*ibid*. p. 21) meaning we will be infinitely (dead)locked into a continuous search to fill a void through consumptive forms under capitalism. Pleasure is always transient, superficial, and harmful – a 'quick fix' that requires us to get another 'fix' *ad infinitum*. Fisher likens this feeling to the (potentially) addictive behaviours of consuming 'junk' food, gambling, purging, or substance abuse where such behaviours may provide us with a temporary high, escape, or fleeting feelings or relief, but will ultimately always leave us feeling depressed, unfulfilled, and needing more. The constant pursuit of superficial, fantastical (at best) or self-destructive, harmful (at worst) patterns of pleasure which still, feel *devoid of any meaning* has led to what Jameson (1991, p. 6) refers to as a defining cultural condition under capitalism, as "a new depthlessness… a consequent weakening of historicity".

The ensuing section explores *one* way that consumers search for meaning and inspiration living in the ahistoricity of the late capitalist moment. Under the assumption that the future has been "cancelled", consumers only have the *past* to fill the void in the present, for example through the consumption of marketised 'retrospective' offerings.

1.3.1.2 Nostalgia & Retrospection

Nostalgia "refers to a longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with days of yore" (Holbrook, 1993, p. 245). Consumer researchers have long been interested in the concept of nostalgia relating to consumers' nostalgic attachments to the past accessible through 'retro' market offerings such as kitschy objects, aesthetics, movies, fashion, and advertising as a way to fill a void in the present (*e.g.* Brown, 2001, 2006, 2013, 2018; Brown *et al*., 2003; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Kozinets, 2008; Thompson, 2004). Ahlberg *et al*. (2021, p. 160) clarify the relationship between retro and nostalgia: "nostalgia and retro are all but intertwined conceptually with nostalgia as the affective mood that seeks comfort from the past and retro as commodified simulations of yore that nostalgic longings are prone to attach to". Retro, according to Stephen Brown, "doesn't repeat the past, it redeems it. And, in so doing, it provides a fleeting revelation of tomorrow's possibilities, of things to come, of paradise regained and rejuvenated" (2001, p. 312). In this regard, both nostalgia and retro afford consumers the opportunity to indulge in romanticised,

fantastical, fictionalised versions of the past (Brown, 2018; Brunk *et al.*, 2018; Cervellon and Brown, 2018).

Counter to the innocuous and playful associations that Brown makes with consumers' nostalgia, Ahlberg *et al.* (2021) - taking inspiration from Fisher (2009, 2014) and Derrida (2006) - adopt a much more pessimistic stance on nostalgia, arguing that consumers' longing for the past reflects an exhaustion of 'the new' in the present, an inability to conceive of a better (or even substantially different) future to the present, and thus remains an epistemic indicator of capitalist realism. For Ahlberg and his co-authors, a critical reading of nostalgia suggests it is the product of "a more sinister atmosphere seemingly devoid of futures worth anticipating" (2021, p. 159) marked by "a contemporary lack of utopian thinking" (p. 168). Ahlberg and colleagues suggest that nostalgia is significantly more dystopian in character than Brown and his intellectual progenies imagined it to be. Instead, they argue that subjects of today's capitalist realist *forever-present* are drawn unconsciously to the real or imagined past because of total imaginative destitution: their failure to imagine anything more captivating, life-affirming, or galvanising than what has already passed into history.

This view is seated in much earlier reflections from critical philosophy (*e.g.* Marcuse, 2002 [1964]; Jameson, 1969) that interrogate modernity's repressive mode of nostalgia. Cultural theorist Frederic Jameson describes nostalgia as "an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (1983, p. 117). Nostalgia may therefore, be indicative of the *desperateness* we feel in the absence of alternatives to our hegemonic capitalist monoculture and therefore consumer trends based upon interest in the past should be read as "spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation" (Jameson, 1983, p. xi). According to Jameson, society's obsession with the past is symptomatic of a "lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present" (Jameson, 1971, p. 82) and speaks to "a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself" (Jameson, 1983, p. 117). We are living in a consumer society that has become "*retro-bondage[d]*" Ahlberg *et al.* (2021, p. 167) argue, one dominated by imitation, parody, and revivalism, marked by an endless churn of resurrection, reiteration, reimagining, reboots, re-releases, retrobrands, and re-permutation of things from the past existing in contrast to anything liberatory, affirmative, utopic - or anything *genuinely* able to remedy feelings of anhedonia in the present. As Fisher (2014) writes, 21st century society functions as a depressive symptom of an atrophied social imagination marked by a collective *inability* to generate anything 'new' – so much so that today

would *not* feel like 'the future' to someone who has travelled to the present day from the past. In short, we are suffering from a serious "lack of futurism" (Goulding, 2024, p. 5).

In parallel with the arguments of Fisher (2009, 2014), Derrida (2006), and Ahlberg *et al.* (2021) (and Jameson before them), Södergren (2022) suggests that nostalgia is analogous to a kind of "haunted imagination", as a fascination with imagery and tropes from the past that can *unsettle* consumers, revealing only *what is no longer*, living under today's global capitalist hegemony. The haunted imagination conveys the idea that things return from the past – as ghosts, specters, revenants – to haunt us about the things that are absent in today's capitalist cultural hegemony. Södergren (2022, p. 460) explains the haunted imagination as "the process by which nostalgia is affectively transformed into collective guilt, where the weight of the past appears as a haunting specter". 'Collective guilt' refers to a range of negative emotions such as "guilt or anxiety of a life unfulfilled" (p. 461). In this context, the Viking myth is borne out of ideas from the past that do not ideologically align with how things are in the *present*, leaving consumers with the task of trying to resolve and make sense of this tension. These contrasting accounts in the marketing and consumer literature reveal that "nostalgia can only be properly conceptualized as a contradictory phenomenon […] it is not a singular or fixed condition (Pickering and Keightley, 2006, p. 936, 937). My research will account for the ways that such pastness is *relied upon* by market actors to prolong such cycles, reboots, and so on - of an unreachable past.

A pervasive form of pastness relied upon in consumer culture, includes the magical, mystical and belief *in* magic, oftentimes referred to as 'magical thinking'. In the next section, the concept of magic is explained briefly followed by accounts of magical thinking and its intersections with consumption and markets.

1.3.2 Magic & Magical Thinking

As we explore the role of archaisms in consumer culture, it is crucial to examine magic as a key element of pre-capitalist belief systems. Besides longing for the past, consumers also seek out magic to find relief under capitalist realism (Rinallo *et al.*, 2013; Sobchack, 2014). Magic is a key element of *pre*-capitalist belief systems, representing a way of thinking and interacting with the world that stands in stark contrast to the rationalist, materialist paradigms of modern capitalism. As a vestige of lifestyles and traditions existing long before modernity, magic represents an exotic vanishing world but also the prospect that there is *more* to this life than

26

anything our modern industrial world, allows us to see. Although no one unifying definition exists, magic at its core is a system of beliefs and actions that embrace symbols, materials, and ritualistic practices that emphasise the supernatural and defy scientific understandings of the laws of causality (Davies, 2012).

An important aspect of magic is "magical thinking" which is defined as "creating or invoking extraordinary connections—symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world—in order to understand, predict, or influence events" (St. James *et al.*, 2011, p. 632). Magical thinking is often used synonymously with irrational thought, superstition, and peculiarity of beliefs (Kramer and Block, 2011). In the case of superstitions, "consumers may base their choices on magical thinking, even while recognizing and acknowledging that this is irrational" (Hamerman, 2009, p. 31; also Kramer and Block, 2009; Risen and Gilovich, 2009). Explanations as to *why* superstitious beliefs are clung to even when people recognise that they are not true are offered by Risen (2006, p. 193), who uses the term *superstitious acquiescence*, to explain that consumers do not just pretend to believe in magic (when deep down they do not) – but rather they hold a *partial* belief in superstition (part of them believes in some mystical force, part of them does not). Risen uses "acquiesce" in this instance to mean that consumers often "recognize that their belief is irrational, but [nonetheless] choose to acquiesce to a powerful intuition" (*ibid*. p. 183). This is also articulated by the idea that "even highly rational people will concede that they sometimes act on beliefs that they know are untrue" (*ibid*. p. 191). If consumers do 'partially' believe in some external supernatural, mystical power this leads to the question of, how and why do consumers instantaneously "know that something is irrational *and* believe that it is true" (*ibid*. p. 194) (emphasis added).

This wilful commitment to magical thinking – even if one knows better – is underpinned by what St. James *et al.* (2011) refers to as "chimerical agency" which refers to the thinking that even if people do *not* believe in a mystical power that can supersede rational understandings of cause and effect, they acquiesce to it, nonetheless. Consequently, magical thinking can function as an empowering mechanism for consumers, one that "provide[s] meaning and sustain[s] hope in the context of stressful situations" (St James *et al.*, 2021, p. 647).

The underlying belief of magical thinking is that one can connect non-magical items (such as a voodoo doll, a crystal, an amulet, a number) with magical concepts and ideas.

27

Magical thinking involves two principles, the first being the law of contagion where physical contact between two things (objects and/or people) leads to the transfer of magical energy; and the second being the law of similarity where things that are considered similar are believed to share the same properties (one can produce any desired outcome or effect simply by mimicking this, also understood as 'imitation'). The law of similarity can manifest through the idea that appearance or perception alone is *equal* to reality (*i.e.* 'fake it until you become it', or 'I attract the energy I put out into the universe'). Regarding the law of contagion, one may believe that owning an artefact belonging to a prominent historical figure will allow the current owner to "bask in the glory of the past in the hope that some of it will magically rub off-a form of positive contamination" (Belk, 1988, p. 149). The law of similarity meanwhile, signifies that consumers rely on the logic that one can create *any* desired outcome simply by imitating what this outcome may look or feel like. For example, a 'voodoo doll' is modelled on a living real person, therefore anything (such as pain) that is inflicted on the doll, will result in corresponding effects for the person the doll is modelled on (St. James *et al.*, 2011).

Relatedly, Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) propose the concept of "concretized magical thinking" to refer specifically to material objects that become symbolically invested with magic, explaining: "Magic, and the magical thinking that produces it, is often tangibilized… magic is abstract and thus may be more easily recalled and employed if represented in a more concrete manner" (p. 279). The authors argue that magic is more easily understood in the context of tangible goods as being magical – rather than thinking about magic as a mystical, unseen higher-power. By their own admission, magic is reduced by Fernandez and Lastovicka to the terms of object possessions as the source of magic: "consumers seek and receive perceived magical empowerment from possessions and how power, like meaning, can flow from one entity to another" (p. 295).

In closing, the persistence of magical thinking in consumer culture can also be understood through Derrida's concept of *limitrophy* referring to a blurring of boundaries between reality and representation in a bid "to complicate, thicken, delinearize, fold, and divide the line" (Derrida and Wills, 2002, p. 398). Limitrophy allows us to challenge the perceived limits of what 'is' (*i.e.* our ontological reality), to question "what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds* the *limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it" (p. 398). Magical thinking, especially as it occurs in "concretized" and commodity-related ways, reflects this *limitrophic* quality because it allows consumers to tread

the boundary between premodern, precapitalist, 'irrational' behaviours and what are perceived as modern, useful, rational market logics. The commodification of magical thinking generates an oscillation between reality and fantasy, that paradoxically reinforces capitalist realism even as it *seems* to offer an escape from it. By understanding magical thinking through this lens, we can better grasp how archaisms as traditionally anathema to consumer capitalist political economy, are somewhat contained and neutralised within consumer culture.

In the subsequent section I discuss how groups of consumers form social connections based on their beliefs (such as belief in magic) and attachments to marketplace goods, brands, and symbols, creating representations of 'marketplace cultures'.

1.3.3 Marketplace Cultures

Marketplace cultures offer a unifying term to consolidate the wide and variegated nomenclature used when classifying communal approaches to consumption such as fandoms, brand communities, brand tribes, cultures of consumption, consumption-oriented microcultures, communities of interest, microcultures, to mention a few (Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Arnould *et al.*, 2006; Coffin and Banister, 2021; Cronin *et al.*, 2014; Skandalis *et al.*, 2020). In an increasingly globalised, liberalised, and secularised consumer culture, people's bases for commonality, community, and exchange are most likely to be rooted in shared interests, passions, and consumption patterns that are mediated by the market *rather than* by religion, locality, occupation, ethnicity, or other archaic based social bonds. The reality that most groups today are linked by market-related phenomena, means it is difficult to develop universalising and essentialist categorisations of marketplace cultures which remain "fuzzy; more societal sparkle than socio-economic certainty… shifting aggregations of emotionally bonded people, open systems to which a person belongs and yet doesn't quite belong" (Cova and Cova, 2001, p. 70). Despite this 'fuzziness', several principles of these aggregations can be identified.

The first feature of marketplace cultures is specialisation, meaning that members will self-select on the basis of shared commitment to specific products, brands, or consumption activities (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Specialised interest in some consumption-related object or experience is the only prerequisite for forming a culture with its own totems, rituals, practices, values, and symbols. The second principle of marketplace cultures is their liberation from geographic boundaries (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413; also Thompson and Troester, 2002). Importantly, while it *is* possible for a

marketplace culture to achieve ubiquity, homogeneity is not guaranteed as members from around the world bring their own diverse approaches to the consumption interest (Cova *et al.*, 2007). The third principle of marketplace cultures is ephemerality, meaning membership is not permanent and conditional only on how long interest in the consumption activity is upheld. Members can shift between marketplace cultures with some fluidity, continually (re)constructing their interests and allegiances (Carù and Cova, 2015, p. 280; Coffin and Banister, 2021; Coffin *et al.*, 2023; Cova and Cova, 2001; Cova *et al.*, 2007; Cova *et al.*, 2023). As Cova *et al.* (2007) suggest, "the individual can live out a temporary role or identity in one site, before relocating to another to assume a different role or identity" (p. 114). The consequence of these "rapid processes of bricolage", is that "tribes emerge, morph, and disappear again as the combinations of people and resources alter" (Canniford, 2011, p. 595).

There are also various functions of marketplace cultures that can be identified, including identity-seeking, play, and meaning-making as leading to a genuine sense of belonging (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Saren *et al.*, 2019; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or as able to produce socially-constructed "captivating enchantment" (Belk and Costa, 1998, p. 234; also Kozinets, 2001). Although exceptions do exist (Cova *et al.*, 2007; Thompson, 2007), this view on marketplace cultures, communities, and so forth has been problematised as lacking consideration of macro-structural influences (O'Sullivan and Shankar, 2019; Wickstrom *et al.*, 2021), and for neglecting some of the more intricate, "emotional mechanics that underpin the consumption community construct" (Cronin and Cocker, 2019, p. 295). O'Sullivan and Shankar (2019) argue for a critical re-examination of the synergetic marketer-consumer relationships within marketplace cultures deemed the epitome of commericalised 'play' – namely to deconstruct how "expression, resistance, escape, rebellion, catharsis and *necessity* are increasingly under the marketer's control" (p. 524), of which, only "reinforces the value of [capitalism's] twisted catchall ideology".

O'Sullivan (2019) argues that marketplace cultures are less about spontaneous, magical 'play', rather they are strategies that play *into* marketplace actors' communal marketing strategies. Wickstrom and colleagues also argue that given marketplace communities are "ephemeral", any sense of communality is fleeting. Also, where multiple sub-groups, in-groups, varying sub-segments exist within the wider community, this oftentimes leads to tension, fragmentation, exclusion, and liminality within the group which can damage any real sense of belonging or the potential for genuine communitas. To sum up, these scholars argue

that market mediated forms of belonging have no liberatory potential for consumers because their formation only leads to further *reliance on* marketplace products, services, experiences, and fantasies.

Having outlined the core theoretical underpinnings for my research my, the next section of this thesis discusses my methodological and contextual foundations, beginning with an overview of my research's empirical context, witches.

1.4 Methodological & Contextual Foundations

The empirical portion of this doctoral thesis is based on a critical ethnography of witchcraft in Lancashire, Northwest England. Critical ethnography was selected to help me address my research, as "[c]ritical ethnographers describe, analyse, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain", and as a method that "requires that commonsense assumptions be questioned" (Thomas, 1993, p. 2-3). Critical ethnographers strive to rethink how our reality is shaped, constrained, determined, and facilitated by structural, abstract constructs and what may be 'unnatural' about this particular construction.

Critical ethnography was carried out over an approximately 1.5-year period, commencing once I had received ethics approval from the FASS-LUMS Ethics Committee granted in November 2022 (see Appendix 1). My ethnographic inquiry was led by in-depth interviews, participant observation, netnography, and historical methods. For a detailed account of the data collection procedures and the underpinning philosophical decision-making for this doctoral thesis, please refer to Chapter 2 (Research Methodology).

As a brief background to my empirical context, witches can offer novel insights into how and why archaisms find themselves seamlessly interwoven with contemporary consumer culture. Although the witch predates Western civilisation and is not a singularly Western conception by any means, many of the prevailing narratives that inform the witch's iconicity in the Global North stem from her Anglo-European Christian lineage – a lineage which has over the centuries, encultured a vision of the witch as:

> the hostile and feared 'other' on the edge of human society, placing herself 'in between' the world of people and the world of demons […] always identified with a deep fear of a disturbance, of a danger to the order of society and to the well-being of those who

understood themselves as well settled within the borders of the patriarchal order (Madej-Stang, 2015, p. 299).

The witch has for at least one millennium been understood as "somebody who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Carradice, 2024, p. x) and has often been associated closely with magic and demonology (worship of the devil) and dark, maleficent spells (Hutton, 2004). Accordingly, the premodern figure of the witch was at the centre of a brutal crusade against women throughout Europe and her colonies commencing in the 15th century and continuing for 300 years hereafter by the Church and state powers. Although historically, men have identified – and continue to identify – as witches and have suffered accusations or persecution for suspected witchcraft, the Christian Anglo-European lineage instantiates the inseparability of the witch and *womanhood* (Sollée, 2017). Abuse, mortification, torture, and execution befell countless women suspected of witchcraft throughout history, though some feminist critics such as Lyndal Roper (2004) and Diane Purkiss (1997) suggest the witch represents the apex of feminine counterculture and has functioned – not exclusively as a symbol of female persecution – but also as an elective and subversive identity.

Throughout the centuries, many self-professed witches have invoked activities such as healing, herbology, and/or midwifery and material objects such as those attached to their domiciliary duties (*e.g.* brooms, cooking cauldrons, and domestic cats), as symbols of their magic, and "in this way witches themselves carried out cultural work, creating the narrative of the witch anew, making sense of emotions and cultural process" (Roper, 2004, p. 20). For example, self-identifying witches have throughout modern and premodern history used ingredients such as plants, herbs, spices, and other natural objects for their rituals and witchcraft practices, creating a recognisable material culture for themselves. Witches also draw from the natural world by performing rituals in wild natural environments (such as woodlands, forests, beaches,) and may tailor their activities in accordance with moon cycles or lunations.

Today, witches in the Global North do not face the same kind of persecution or marginalisation as their ancestral counterparts, instead becoming a visible and important part of contemporary consumer culture. Moreover, unlike other ancient mystical figures – whether vampires, minotaurs, mermaids, cyclopes, selkies, and banshees – many communities and individuals today, identify as witches and/or hold beliefs stemming from the feminist lineage of the witch. Presently, the exact number of practicing witches is difficult to determine nationally or globally as like any consumer identity project, one's beliefs are not necessarily

going to be outwardly communicated to others. *Some* data exists based on censuses in the context of individuals' belief in witchcraft as a religion[4]. More recently, in the US, it is predicted that Americans who identify as "other religions" (*i.e.* those outside of recognised and organised faiths such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism) will triple to over 61 million by 2050 "due largely to switching into other religions (including witchcraft-related faiths such as Wicca, Paganism, and Shamanism)" (Pew Research Center, 2015, n. p). According to a Statista (2021) survey, 21% of Americans stated that they "believed in spells or witchcraft" (n. p) while in the UK, data from the 2021 census reveals that 87,000 people in the Southwest of the UK alone identify as pagan or Wiccan, whilst the number of people practicing Shamanism (spiritual magic) has grown from 650 (in 2011) to 8,000 in 2021 (Booth *et al.*, 2022).

Contemporary understandings of witchcraft's role in our society today, have been characterised more critically as a system of beliefs that "facilitates its own ideology of consumption by attempting to manipulate people's decisions about their spiritual practices for the purpose of selling commodities such as books of spells and bottles of lotion" (Ezzy, 2001, p. 42). Although the witch identity can hold real spiritual and political meaning for many women, often grounded in feminist inspired empowerment and rhetoric around liberation from patriarchal domination (Sollée, 2017), scholars studying witchcraft have pointed out that witchcraft groups (constituting a *marketplace culture* of loosely organised participants) "are not feminist, do not question contemporary attitudes towards sexuality and the body, do not raise concerns about the environment, and support consumerism" (Ezzy, 2006, p. 22-23; also Barnette, 2022; Miller, 2002a, 2002b). This contrasts with observations that historic imaginaries of the witch are centred on protecting nature and grounding their activities in close connection to ecology and nature worship (White, 2016).

Social media has become an epicentre of contemporary witch-related identity-seeking and making, providing a staging ground for neophytes to learn more about magic, navigate the history and material culture of witchcraft, consume witchcraft content, and interact with like-minded others in multi-channel groups and covens (Houlbrook and Phillips, 2023; Frampton and Grandison, 2023). As part of today's burgeoning "online witch-sphere" (Zanette *et al.*,

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[4] A "National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States" has been drawn from previously (see Berger *et al.*, 2003) however this data is limited to the U.S. and is now over two decades old.

2023, p. 177), witches connect through online publics such as WitchTok (a neologism for 'witches' and 'TikTok'). With its short-form video content receiving over 50 billion views to date, WitchTok operates as an aesthetically vibrant, ostensibly rebellious, network - fragmented across various micro-cultural clusters, each with their own totems, levels of commitment, and foci. Collectively, content creators and content consumers constitute the joint practitioners, or cultural participants of the Witchtok movement (Barnette, 2022; de Bruin-Molé, 2023; Renser and Tiidenberg, 2020). Unlike prior internet-based witchcraft forums and message boards, WitchTok is unique because it has widened the appeal of the material "witchy aesthetic" (Miller, 2022a), overlapping consumption trends relating to spiritualism, wellness, fashion, feminism, with witches becoming more reliant on social media for entrepreneurial pursuits *e.g* to offer services such as spiritual coaching, become WitchTok influencers, celebrity witches, open their own Etsy stores and online witchcraft schools and training, among other activities.

1.5 Contributions of The Thesis

This thesis follows the format of PhD by publication. Chapter 1 has outlined the research origins, objectives, key concepts, and methodological and contextual foundations of the thesis. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth overview of the research methodology underlying the thesis. Chapters 3-5 enclose Paper 1 (conceptual), Paper 2 (empirical), and Paper 3 (empirical) in fulfilment of this PhD by alternative format. Prefaces at the beginning of Chapters 3-5 introduce each paper, outlining how they originated and how they come together to support the *overarching* thesis. The three Research Chapters of this thesis are driven by the overall orienting question outlined earlier in Section 1.2 (*How is the 'witch' made to function in ways that sustain the logic of capitalism and are there any deadlocks?*) and come with their own sub-questions and specific foci. Each manuscript functions according to specific research objectives which emerge from the central aims of the study.

The theoretical contributions put forth by each of my papers are loosely outlined in their respective preface sections (Chapters 3-5) and are synthesised in the conclusion of this thesis (see Chapter 6). Conference papers that supported the development of published manuscripts and those in-progress (*i.e.* Paper 3, see Chapter 5) are included in the appendices of this document.

Dovetaling with the nascent agenda of de-romanticist (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) or terminalist (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022) marketing scholarship, my three papers provide a critical account of the functioning and ideological role that consumers' nostalgic attachments to the past, plays. Although critical marketing scholars and consumer researchers have debated whether consumers can ever make a clean "escape from dominant social structures, including market logics" (Kozinets, 2002a p. 35), my thesis proposes that the very notion of 'escape' functions as an ideological fantasy that is firmly integrated with and integral to how capitalist realism structures reality. Led by the assumption that society today is affectively influenced by a post-historical "cancellation" of the future (see Fisher, 2009; Fisher, 2014), I show how consumer interest in the archaic trope of the witch does not deliver any genuine escapism from the capitalist here-and-now but is reflective of a nostalgic cycle of disappointment and imaginative destitution that negates the possibility of a post-capitalist future.

Paper 1 presented in Chapter 3 of this thesis traces the market's remediation of interest in the pre-capitalist witch over three historic phases of modernity spanning an approximately 500-year period. Using the archaic trope of the witch, this paper introduces to critical marketing scholarship the concept of 'marketplace revenant', which my co-authors and I conceptualise as a disappeared *Other* who is retroactively assimilated into consumer culture. In this paper we introduce a theoretical extension to Mark Fisher's (2009) concept of precorporation (a forward-looking form of co-optation) suggesting that co-optation can also be backward looking. Using the term 'retrocorporation' we account for capitalism's *retroactive* appropriation of the distant past as part of its project to assimilate all forms of resistance into its cultural milieu.

Paper 2 presented in Chapter 4 continues Paper 1's interest in how witch history is co-opted and integrated with the marketplace. Drawing upon 'witch tourism' in Lancashire as an example of *thanatourism*, this manuscript reconsiders the function that dark historic sites are made to fulfil for contemporary consumer culture. Rather than trace capitalist assimilation of the witch historically (as with Paper 1), this second manuscript identifies how capitalism makes use of the witch in the post-historical present to *uphold* the market-dominant present. In doing so, this paper responds to calls made by critical streams of tourism research (*e.g.* Dunkley, 2015; Fitchett *et al*., 2021) to better situate thanatourists' fascination with the dark past within contemporary perspectives of political economy. Using the Žižekian-Derridean concept of "supplementary", we interpret findings from my ethnographic study as evidence of *thanatourism* supplementing rather than contradicting the liberal, peaceful ethos of the present

symbolic order (Žižek, 2006). By acting as a "supplement" rather than as a viable "replacement" to the economic-political conditions of the present, dark history sites tied to witches and the brutalities they suffered propagate the experiential, consumption-oriented ethos of capitalist realism that they are seeking relief from.

Lastly, Paper 3 reconsiders how contemporary witchcraft is rooted in a type of "fetishistic disavowal" (Žižek, 1997). Specifically, I examine how modern witches are often fully aware of the inefficacy and limits of magic (*i.e.* that magic cannot solve their problems), yet they remain committed to their witchy beliefs *as if* they did not know better. The act of belief itself, rather than the specifics of magic, appears to provide a shield from the post-historical boredom and means to to *disavow* current realities that are too traumatic to come to terms with. Contributions to marketing and consumer scholarship centre upon my research's departure from current understandings of "magical thinking" (St. James *et al*., 2011; Arnould *et al*., 1999; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; Hamerman, 2009). I introduce the term "thinking magically" to account for the *cynical distance* from material truths that magic affords to the beholder. I discuss how thinking magically, while personally empowering, is culturally and collectively *regressive* as it keeps individuals apolitically locked into – and acceptive of – the secular capitalist realist forever-present. This contrasts with conceptualisations of magical thinking as genuinely transformative and beneficial.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

This chapter accounts for the research design and methodological procedures undertaken to fulfil the empirical portion of this doctoral research. The interpretivist research philosophy and critical axiology underpinning the research are first discussed. The specifics of critical ethnography are then outlined, followed by an overview of the sampling strategy and data collection procedures. Lastly, analytic and interpretive procedures are summarised including a note on the ethical conventions and considerations for this thesis.

2.1 Research Philosophy: Interpretivism

Because the focus of this thesis centres on intersubjective constructs and abstract sometimes structural issues that do not exist in nature or outside of the minds of humans – such as "archaisms", "magic", "political economy", and the culturally complex identity position of the "witch" – a philosophical perspective was needed to facilitate and guide the open interpretation of ideas rather than the closed determination of facts. Accordingly, this thesis can be situated within the interpretivist paradigm which has served as the basic philosophical operating system for much of marketing and consumer research's qualitative, naturalistic inquiry over the past forty or so years (Belk, 1988; Belk *et al*., 1988; Belk, 1995; Goulding, 1999b; Hirschman, 1992; Hill, 1991; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Levy, 1981; O'Guinn and Belk, 1989; Thompson *et al*., 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). What has since at least the early 1990s been referred to as the "post-positivist philosophy" of consumer research (Venkatesh, 1992), the broad church of interpretivism places emphasis on trying to understand those things which we cannot necessarily touch or feel and can only be discerned through discourse, imagination, and subjective interpretation. Interpretive methods used for studying consumer behaviour adhere to several principles that Goulding (1999b) suggests including "an acknowledgement of the consumer in relation to their own culturally constructed world", the need to recognise the significance of the "language, symbols and gestures in relation to life experience", and appreciation that notions of "time and space" are fluid – they "are not universal rigid concepts" (p. 870).

Interpretivism functions as obverse to the traditional positivist philosophies of science such as logical empiricism which seeks objectivity, distance, and dispassionate measures. For positivist researchers, the research process involves "strictly formalised procedures for

establishing and testing hypotheses… a focus on observables, a rejection of the metaphysical and the collection of data where outcomes are a direct product of a quantified process" (Goulding, 1999b, p. 861). As a result, positivist research tends to rely on the quantitative measurement of clear unambiguous constructs with as little biasing impact from the researcher and research subjects themselves, what Szmigin and Foxall (2000, p. 188) call the "traditional scientific posture of personal distance and a priori theoretical structure". In contrast, interpretivist researchers *themselves* adopt the role of the "measuring instrument" (Hirschman, 1986, p. 238) meaning their personally experienced knowledge, attitudes, and judgements, become qualitatively important factors in engaging with an empirical context.

It follows that interpretivism and positivism also maintain different goals and ontological assumptions. Whereas positivists assume that a single tangible reality exists and that amounts to what can be measured and validated, interpretivists assume that *multiple* constructed, subjective realities exist in individual and collective consciousness. Hudson and Ozanne (1988) suggest that "interpretivists believe that no amount of inquiry will converge on one single reality because multiple realities exist, and these realities are changing" (p. 509). Contra to the oftentimes uncompromising emphases on objectivist and empirical measures and verifications that positivism uses to produce mechanistic representations of consumers, interpretivism overall marks a shift toward trying to understand consumer culture in all of its messiness, irrationality, and social construction regardless of how intangible and immeasurable some of its fictive aspects may be (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000).

While a positivist researcher deals with preconceived hypothetical deduction involving the testing of variable relationships amongst pre-established phenomena (at a distance) to reach confirmatory conclusions, an interpretivist researcher is concerned with open-ended *exploratory* induction involving speculation about emergent phenomena (often up close and personal with consumers' culturally constructed realities) with a view to establish plausible interpretations. The goal of positivism is explanation under general laws, whilst interpretivism is based on understanding, and may understand through the concept of '*Verstehen*' (stepping into the worldview of the other) (see Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Lastly, I recognise that structural abstract constructs important to my thesis – such as capitalism and history – are broader than any material or social context and thus require sensitivity to what Askegaard and Linnet (2011) call the *context-of-context*, which I explain below.

38

2.1.1 The 'Context-of-Context'

Recognising the broader structural conditions *of* any given context means an interpretivist researcher must "expand [one's] contextualization of lived consumer experiences with another contextualization… the one of systemic and structuring influences of market and social systems" (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, p. 381). Being sensitive to the "context-of-context" involves moving interpretivist data collection *beyond* the consumer's experiential universe to account also for broader macro-social phenomena that any given individual may not recognise, detect, or be able to talk about, but nonetheless shapes their lives, such as economic, historical, political, generational, ecological, and socio-material conditions.

The epistemological mission of the context-of-context perspective is to militate against an "agency-based view on the consumer leading to a relative neglect of the structural foundations" and "to progress beyond [a] onesided attention to the self-realizing individual" (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, p. 386). As social and cultural beings who do not live in a vacuum, consumers navigate their lives in search of meanings that can be shared and distributed throughout a broad culture of consumption which they have not, as Askegaard and Linnet (2011) remind us, "written themselves" (p. 400).

Traditionally, much of interpretivist consumer research has theorised consumer subjects as liberated, agentic, and empowered figures free to curate identities, communities, pleasures, and dreams to their heart's content and unfettered by any kind of hold over them by class, economic issues, institutionalised marketplace mythologies, ideologies or so on. Askegaard and Linnet (2011) urge for interpretivist consumer researchers to epistemologically depart from these kinds of inflated or *hyper-muscular* accounts of consumer agency and boundless self-determination, and to be more cognisant of the macro-socially, cultural, political and institutional factors that shape, constrain, determine, and facilitate human behaviour. Askegaard and Linnet suggest that:

> "It *is* a legitimate analytical strategy to represent consumer as being motivated by their 'identity project'; but if the analysis aims for an elucidation of 'consumer culture', it should acknowledge the cultural, historical and societal conditions that make this identity and the means of attaining it attractive and legitimate in the first place" (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, p. 396).

The context-of-context perspective considers how consumers' lived experiences are embedded within the complex rhythms of macro-environmental environments that, like micro-social

constructs (such as identities, values, symbols, attachments), are difficult to ascertain or measure in any objective positivist sense. The context-of-context perspective does not disregard the consumer's personal worldview, but rather situates this within political, economic, cultural, and social forces – those things which mostly escape the conscious awareness of individuals – including 'hidden' ideological processes of power, historical conditioning, and political mechanisms are not so easily understood or discursively expressed (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). By moving the interpretivist consumer researcher's lens beyond just what can be captured through firsthand observations and spoken about in interviews, a context-of-context approach requires a "set of valuable conceptual tools for perspicacious and critical analysis of the cultural and socio-political complexity of marketplace activity" (Moisander *et al*., 2009, p. 333).

A context-of-context epistemology is compatible with critical and terminalist marketing agendas to problematise conceptualisations of the consumer as the yardstick of all meaning and reason *i.e.* "the idea of the singular ego-interpreter" (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022, p. 674). There is recognition that individual consumers' decision-making is influenced *unconsciously* by the unseeable, indescribable, unknowable. As Ahlberg and colleagues clarify: the "consumer may make meanings to rationalize a choice in an interview, but this *does not* mean that *meaning* was the driving motivation" (p. 675). While papers in this thesis do draw upon data from in-depth interviews as a means of gleaning insights into consumers' personal experiences of witches and witchcraft, sensitivity to the influence of broader sources of knowledge such as historical records, the media, and political commentary are captured also to help unpack the *unconscious* and structuring forces that shape individuals' experiences, views, and so on.

Besides relying on self-reported data from consumers, I attune my analysis to history and political economy by engaging in a critique of capitalism centred on the marketisation, rationalisation, and commodification of 'everything' including those things outside the commodity sphere (*i.e.* the past).

2.2 Critical Axiology

Axiology – understood as "a branch of philosophy that studies judgements about value" (Saunders *et al*., 2009, p. 116) – reflects the values of the researcher, including what the researcher considers to be ethical, valuable for study, how this can influence empirical

outcomes and what is to be done with them. Plainly, one's axiological position determines what is valued within and through research and what is assumed to be desirable or 'good' for some stakeholder. In my case, by undertaking a consumer research study that is sensitised to the influence of the context-of-context (politics, culture, institutions) and theoretically attuned to the social, material, and ideological relationships between consumption and political economy, my axiology is best described as *critical*. Tadajewski and Brownlie (2008) in an attempt to outline what a critical axiology means for those researching marketing and consumption, argue:

> "critical marketing asserts the prevalence of power relations structuring reality, knowledge and human interests that determine how we view the role of marketing in society and whether or not it is possible to envision an alternative structure of market relations" (p. 10).

A critical axiology in consumer research can be understood as a perspective that values the generation of knowledge not for the purposes of benefitting marketing professionals but for the improvement of human knowledge, ultimately with the view to improve humanity. Fournier and Grey (2000) identify the main contours of a critical axiology as related to 1.) non-performative intent; 2.) ontological denaturalisation; and 3.) reflexivity.

First, in terms of non-performative intent, the critical scholar values theory, methods, and findings that are insightful, revelatory, and polemic with no attendant intention to improve marketing practice. "A performative intent," Fournier and Grey (2000, p. 17) suggest, "means the intent to develop and celebrate knowledge that contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input; it involves inscribing knowledge within means–ends calculation". To reject performative intent is to shed any means-end instrumentalism which subordinates knowledge to incremental benefits for marketing practice and engage instead in the business of exposure and critique. Here, I refer to Holbrook (1985), who argued that the essential difference between marketing research and consumer research is that the former should – whereas the latter *should not* – be guided by any intention to contribute to the effectiveness of marketing practice. Critical consumer research is *not* performative in the sense that it is not intended to perform 'usefully' for the benefit of marketing management (or the agents of capital more generally) rather it is concerned quite plainly with *what is being done* in the name of marketing, markets, and capitalism. This is not to say that critical consumer research is without any practical value for informing ways of thinking in the real world. Fournier and Grey are clear that "[C]ritical work is not performative [in terms of contributing to commercial effectiveness], even though it may well have some intention to achieve (e.g. to achieve a better

41

world or to end exploitation, etc.)" (2000, p. 17). Indeed, there are numerous authors taking inspiration from, working with, and adapting critical perspectives with the intention to effect prosocial change through their research such as sections of the Transformative Consumer Research movement and what has speculatively been called 'Critical Transformative Marketing Research' (see Tadajewski et al., 2014). The point is simply that critical researchers should maintain distance from seeking shallow, callow and commercial applicability of their work for beneficiaries (such as marketing managers) "whose sole interest it remains to uphold the façade of a world being capably steered toward a brighter tomorrow" (M'Rabty, 2024, p. 1). The critical researcher must exercise suspicion toward those authorised and legitimised agents of power, particularly those with explicitly commercial interests, who benefit from the neoliberal capitalist status quo and would seek to preserve it. "The brighter future" that those who benefit from capitalism including marketing managers, is for M'Rabty, merely an optimistic illusion for mollifying the majority of those not in power and thus "if we at all claim to be interested in utopian visions of alterity or anti-capitalist action (which should go hand in hand), then we must disentangle the inaccurate and synonymous links between optimism and utopia" (2024, p. 1).

Second, in terms of ontological denaturalisation, the critical scholar seeks, as Fournier and Grey (2000, p. 18) claim, "to uncover the alternative [explanations] that have been effaced by management knowledge and practice... [critical axiology] is concerned with the proposition that things may not be as they appear". Accordingly, this thesis seeks to dig beneath the facade of a benevolent consumer culture to identify the fault lines of its underpinning political economy. I value and set out to provide alternative explanations for why consumers engage the way they do with the material world.

Third, a critical axiology goes together with reflexivity; of not just seeking "to reflexively accentuate secreted experiences of, 'emotional intensity, hopelessness, liminality, voicelessness'" (Downey, 2019, p. 2657), but of also being reflective of "the sociohistorical specificity of knowledge and to shed light on how particular knowledges reproduce structural relations of inequality and oppression" (Muncie, 2006, p. 51). Reflexivity is an ongoing process – best thought of as a 'spiral', where the researcher will "interrogate" the social, cultural locations, dynamics, positionalities and how these "influence and inspire researcher journeys" (Mao *et al.*, 2016, p. 1). As a 'spiral', Mao clarifies, "researchers repeatedly reconsider personal experiences and remain open to engaging with emergences and understandings of self and the

world as they select methods, collect data, and analyse findings" (2016, p. 2). To uphold critical reflexivity requires the researcher to challenge assumptions made in relevant literature and analyse ideological structures the context of the study is surrounding by, juxtaposing this with consumers' construction of reality (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008, p. 7).

2.3 Research Design: Critical Ethnography

Ethnography has been widely used in interpretive consumer research (Arnould, 1998; Arnould *et al.*, 2021; Downey, 2019; Downey and Sherry, 2023). Ethnography has previously been undertaken to explore the lives and contexts of social subjects with careful reference to their identities, meaning-making, and symbolic pursuits as tributary of the marketplace culture to which they 'belong' (Belk and Costa, 1998; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Cronin *et al.*, 2014; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Seregina and Weijo, 2017). Ethnography, as Arnould (1998, p. 86) explains, "attempts to explicate structured patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than merely cognitive, behavioural or affective". Ethnography, as a general package of activity undertaken to achieve immersion amongst a cultural phenomenon, can include multiple data collection methods that are sensitised to the discourses and interactions of (and between) people, relying mostly but not exclusively on participant observation and interviews. The specific variant of ethnographic practice I follow for my research is *critical* ethnography which enables me to integrate macro-perspectives aligned with my axiological assumptions.

Although critical ethnography has multiple histories, the form I use emerged in late 1980s Britain – "coined sometime after 1985 as an extension from 'critical pedagogy'" (Carspecken, 2005, p. 20), out of what was deemed "a crisis in social science", and culturally, during a period marked by widespread anti-war political protest, civil rights, and social justice movements, student activism and progressive social reform (see Noblit, 2003, p. 184). Aligned with what today's critical consumer researchers call the context-of-context perspective (see section 2.1.1 The 'Context-of-Context', earlier in this Chapter), early critical ethnographers comprised of sociologists and anthropologists sought "a balance between the phenomenological concern with human agency and the Marxian conception of social structure" (Anderson, 1989, p. 255). Traditionally rooted in Marxist critical theory, critical ethnography is oftentimes drawn upon to investigate not just the nitty gritty of day-to-day behaviours of a

particular people, but to how these behaviours are shaped and constrained under the yoke of "ruling groups and ruling ideologies" (Foley and Valenzuela, 2005, p. 217).

Thomas (1993, p. 4) offers a clean distinction between conventional and critical ethnography: "Critical ethnography is not just criticism […] Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose". The idea of political purpose should *not* be confused with the idea of undertaking active political engagement such as 'policy-orientated research', 'engaged' research, or 'action research'. Rather to have a political purpose in one's ethnography is to grapple with and reflexively bring taken-for-granted assumptions – particularly those encultured by the reigning political ideology and culture – to the surface. Critical ethnographers have investigated contemporary issues of injustice, unfairness, agency, power relations, and the unconscious effects of ideological structures (*e.g.* Madison, 2020; Noblit, 2003; Peñaloza, 1994). By recognising their own and their subjects' existence within immaterial, invisible and indescribable political matrices, critical ethnographers attempt to overcome the limits of assuming that a 'description' of culture alone can generate rich theoretical contributions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Critical ethnography is not thought of as something with a specific set of procedures, instead it represents a need to "participate in a larger 'critical' dialogue rather than follow any particular set of methods or research techniques" (Quantz, 1992, p. 449). Critical ethnography is concerned with how social life is "discursively situated and constructed within contexts and relations of power" (Noblit, 2003, p. 184) and is drawn particularly to those aspects of culture which exist within unbalanced relations of power (Quantz, 1992). Although critical ethnographers are going to be limited by some degree of pressure to "be political in an academically acceptable manner", increasingly critical ethnographic methodologies have become the basis for impactfully uncovering injustice, irresponsibility, and inconsistencies in technocratic, governmental, medical, commercial, and state actors (Foley and Valenzuela, 2005, p. 222).

My adoption of critical ethnography maintains the core principles of traditional ethnography as a form of multi-sited, multiple-method qualitative inquiry, which above all, involves a "deliberate and systematic approach" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 4) to immersing oneself within a micro-community to "illuminate research questions". However, I follow the critical agenda of being sensitive to structural issues and their influence over lived experience. To inform my critical ethnography, I adopted several procedures fulfilling a

qualitative "intensive method", including in-depth interviews, netnography, participant observation, and historical methods. My critical ethnographic approach was loosely informed by Van Maanen's (2011) idea of writing "critical tales" *i.e.* leaning into an ethnographic position that differs from atypical "parochial, romantic, and limited version[s]" adopted in small-scale accounts of consumer research, which may suffer from "limited vision – its blindness to the political economy in which all groups must swim to survive" (p. 127-128). My research also aligns with the spirit of an *ethnohistorical* method (Carmack, 1972) which includes data collection for achieving a close proximal understanding of the cultural reality of the present, while *also* seeking to contextualise this based on events from the past.

2.3.1 Brief Note on Ethnographic Context

The in-person aspects of my critical ethnography were carried out in and limited to Lancashire in the Northwest of England, a region with a significant 'witch tourism' economy that is attached to a deeper historical and political-economic context. The infamous 1612 'Pendle Witch' trials (also referred to as the 'Lancashire Witch' trials) – notorious for being "the most famous witch trials in English history" (Swain, 1994, p. 65) – took place in the borough of Pendle and the city of Lancaster, setting an important precedent for much of the witch-related hospitality, retail, and tourism facilities in the region today. Ethnography was conducted at sites relevant to witches and witchcraft in and between these regions.

In addition to the physical spaces of Lancashire, I explored the non-geographically bound online witch economy, encompassing social media websites and forums such as TikTok and Reddit. Ethnographic immersion using the principles of participant observation commenced in February 2022, whilst interviews, netnography, and other fieldwork commenced and were carried out intermittently from December 2022, concluding in May 2024 (in-depth interviews concluding in January 2024, with netnographic data collection concluding in May 2024). The details of each data collection type and their own respective sampling strategies and boundaries are outlined in the next section.

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

2.4.1 In-Depth Interviews

As part of the data collection strategy for my ethnography, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (facilitated through open-ended questions) with consumers interested in aspects of witches and witchcraft. The in-depth interview technique has long functioned as a popular mode of data collection in consumer research, even having been deployed recently by consumer researchers undertaking their own separate study of contemporary witchcraft (Zanette *et al*., 2023). The goal of an in-depth interviewer is to understand a participant's individual, personal understanding of their own culture, its concepts, values, how they classify their own experiences, and so on, and then asking themselves: "*How can I translate the cultural knowledge of my informants into a cultural description my colleagues will understand*"? (Spradley, 2016, p. 30).

My sample of intervieees evolved over time. Initially, my call for participants (see Appendix 4 for Recruitment Poster), included those who are aged 18+, and either *identify* as a witch or engage in witchcraft practices (which may include spell-casting, potion-making, divination, astrology, astronomy, herbology, wellness, or other rituals grounded in the spiritual, magical, and mystical). However, I recognised early on in my doctoral journey that completing a study on 'witches' whilst living in the Lancashire region required some consideration of witch-related tourism due to the influx of consumer interest in the area based on the city's historic witch trials and many of the witch-related retail amenities that have sprung up in reference to the trials. Initially, as part of my overarching thesis studying witches and consumer culture, I recruited individuals who self-identify as witches, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods facilitated by distributing recruitment posters at the university and local shops and cafes in Lancaster city centre. To encompass a broader pool of participants the snowball sample was expanded with more flexible criteria to include adults who have travelled to a witch tourism site in Lancashire and were open to share their experiences of this.

Recruitment strategies to aid the collection of my ethnographic interview data included: 1.) making use of my personal and professional networks and word of mouth; 2.) snowball sampling which is particularly useful "when trying to obtain information on and access to 'hidden populations'" (Noy, 2008, p. 330) such as alternative, anonymous participants of a cultural group *i.e.* in the case of my research, witches who have not yet 'come out' as self-identifying witches; 3.) a Recruitment Poster (see Appendix 4), strategically placing these in the local region of Lancaster close to witch-based historic sites, shops, and spaces; and 4.) placing a recruitment style 'post' (in the form of a short video/slide deck) on TikTok to

correspond with the offline poster but with relevant hashtags such as #witchtok, #witch, #witchcraft, #witchy #witchesoftikiktok, to attract relevant participants.

In-depth interviewing commenced in December, 2022 with the final interview held in January, 2024. Interviews were held at a suitable location or facilitated by digital technology (Zoom or MS Teams) with each exchange lasting between 35 minutes and 2.5 hours in length. My interviewing style was conversational in accordance with in-depth interviewing, commencing with 'grand tour' questions followed by more specific questions (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Interview questions were organised around themes relating to participants' identity, beliefs, cultural knowledge, influences, engagement with the marketplace, historical understanding of witchcraft, and conflicting views. Additionally, 'probing' is an effective strategy for re-asserting control over the interview *without* suppressing the agency of the participant, especially given that in-depth interviews are "never *simply* conversations, because the ethnographer has a research agenda and must retain some control over the proceedings" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 123). My preference was to carry out interviews in local coffee shops in the Lancashire region such as in the town centre or a coffee shop on the university campus to set a relaxed and informal tone.

The interview sample comprised of 34 participants in total (see **Table 1.**), with all interviewing completed by January 2024. Research participants represented a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds with a portion classifiable as belonging to an ethnic minority group (Asian, Asian British, and Mixed ethnic groups). Participant employment statuses exhibited variability ranging from unemployed, part-time, self-employed, to full-time employment. Witches taking part in the study identified varyingly with some fluidly referring to themselves as a 'witch' (voicing no specific classification), meanwhile others referred to themselves explicitly as 'Pagan', 'Wiccan', 'Druid', 'Kitchen Witch', 'Hedge Witch', 'Chaos Witch', 'Spiritualist Witch', and 'Solitary Witch'.

Table 1.: Full Interview Data Set: Participant Information.

No	Pseudo.	F/M	Age	Occupation	Location
Self-Identifying Witches					
1	Blair	F	40	Data librarian	UK
2	Willow	F	40	Social worker & artist	UK
3	Sabrina	F	40+	Civil servant	UK
4	Evelyn	F	59	Social enterprise manager	Jersey, CI

5	Serena	F	32	Heritage officer & folklorist	UK
6	Emerson	M	38	Museum guide & actor	UK
7	Luna	F	50	Senior academic	UK
8	Brayden	M	54	Bus driver	UK
9	Colleen	F	52	Unemployed	UK
10	Artemis	M	70+	Retired (mediator criminal justice)	UK
11	Estel	M	59	Lecturer & academic tutor	UK
12	Cassandra	F	26	WitchTok entrepreneur	USA
13	Ava	F	36	WitchTok entrepreneur	USA
14	Jade	F	47	WitchTok entrepreneur & artist	UK
15	Rhea	F	36	WitchTok entrepreneur & head of UK charity division	UK/Greece
16	Fergus	T*	26	Performance artist	UK
17	Lola	F	18	WitchToker & student	UK
18	Crystal	F	23	WitchToker & researcher	UK
19	Endora	F	49	Writer	USA
20	Eden	F	44	Spiritual coach & entrepreneur	UK
21	Alder	M	52	Outdoor learning teacher	UK
22	Hermione	F	28	Spiritual entrepreneur & beautician	UK
23	Mystique	F	30	WitchTok entrepreneur	USA

Non witches who have engaged with witch tourism

24	Apollo	M	28	Marketing manager	UK/Greece
25	Rose	F	40+	Senior teaching fellow	UK
26	Elyana	F	40	Lecturer & anglophile	UK/Brazil
27	Chloe	F	30	Communications executive	UK
28	Saengdao	F	30	General teaching assistant	UK
29	Adriana	F	41	Teaching fellow	UK/Argentina
30	Matthew	M	27	General teaching assistant	UK
31	Jason	M	43	Content manager	UK
32	Belle	F	30	Teaching associate	UK
33	Shilpa	F	27	Aerospace engineer	UK/India
34	Amira	F	36	Journalist & researcher	UK/India

Identifies as them/they

2.4.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation is a qualitative method that requires the researcher to engage with "the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture" (DeWalt and

DeWalt, 2011, p. 1). Observational modes of inquiry researching consumption habits have been advocated by others in combination with visual ethnographies such as photography (Downey, 2019; Downey and Sherry, 2024; Peñaloza and Cayla, 2006). Participant-observer methods require the researcher's full immersion to understand the consumption activities, affects, values, traditions, ritual enactments, and so forth pertaining to the context under study and thus typically involve accessing and visiting relevant sites, shops, spaces, analysing how others behave and interact, taking part in excursions and so on (Goulding *et al.*, 2009; Arnould and Price, 1993; Hirschman, 1985). As supported by Downey (2019), good reflexive ethnographic practice should involve a "blending of researched and researcher voices" (p. 2653) and "journeying with consumers' whose lived experiences tend to elude capture in terms of their hidden and sensitive nature" (p. 2655).

Once I received approval from my institutional research ethics board to formally begin data collection, my observations were conducted at relevant historical and commercial sites and spaces in the Lancashire region relevant to my empirical background of witches and witchcraft. Places and spaces chosen for observational fieldwork were selected based on their relevancy (*i.e.* ability to generate rich insight to illuminate my research questions), and accessibility. As recommended by Downey (2019, p. 2668) when visiting relevant locations, I regularly penned detailed, reflective field notes which required an "employment of all senses and cultivated language to express experiences of other people and their lived experiences". I took notes reflecting on components of the site experience, descriptions and accounts of tour guides, sources of conflict, sequential descriptions, commercial features, strategies, approaches, recurring themes, behaviours, as well as photo accounts of material culture where appropriate and permissible. Recognising also that sites "can expose the researcher to unsolicited emotions" (Downey, 2019, p. 2668), I tried to maintain a level of reflexivity towards any feelings arrested by my participation observation. For example, observations made at Lancaster exhibitions centred on the real-life incarceration, suffering, and execution of the Pendle Witches featured abundant accounts of male-on-female violence, misogyny and femicide. Rather than set aside my feelings, these became important affective context for my notes and early sense-making. This combination of detailed field notes, photography, and reflexivity are valuable because they "have the power to evoke the times and places of fieldwork, acting as *aide-mémoire* enabling ethnographers to reconstruct field experience" (Peñaloza and Cayla, 2006, p. 280). Participant-observer field notes were useful for the initial discovery of themes with one's immersion and accompanying notes helping to "trace the

evolution of these themes", across my immersive activities (Arnould and Price, 1993, p. 32-33). All participant observation fieldwork was limited to the Northwest of England where I reside (see **Table 2.**).

Table 2.: Participant Observation Sites & Spaces

Site Name	Description	Location
Lancaster Castle	Medieval Castle	Lancaster, Lancashire
Lancashire Witch Exhibition, *Witches* Tower, Lancaster Castle	Exhibition	Lancaster, Lancashire
The Judges' Lodgings Museum	Grade I Listed Building, Museum	Lancaster, Lancashire
The Golden Lion	Public House	Lancaster, Lancashire
Sage & Thyme	Witch-owned Shop	Lancaster, Lancashire
Gallows Hill	Outdoor Landscape	Lancaster, Lancashire
Pendle Hill	Outdoor Landscape	Pendle, Lancashire
The Pendle Heritage Center	Heritage Centre	Barrowford, Burnley
Witches' Galore	Shop	Newchurch-in-Pendle
Alice Nutter Statue	Commemorative Statue	Roughlee, Nelson

2.4.3 Observational Netnography

My critical ethnography featured an online component. The decision to seek out information online stems from the large presence of internet-mediated covens and social media centred witch groups. A *New York Times* article emphasises the important of internet-mediated behaviour and market transactions to contemporary witchcraft, reporting on how "modern witches no longer lurk in dark alleys or operate out of the back rooms of stores, you can instead buy their services online for a pretty penny or two" (Brown, 2023, n.p.). To respond to the online aspects of witchcraft, I adopted the principles of Kozinets' (2020) netnography, understood as a form of ethno(graphy)-of-the-inter(net) – a qualitative naturalistic mode of understanding digitally mediated human communication and social interaction. Netnography is understood as a form of "market-oriented ethnography", that has been "adapted to the study of online communities" (Kozinets, 2002b, p. 61), whilst online communities refer to specifically, "contexts in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempts to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands" (p. 61). Netnography is a flexible method affording researchers the freedom to "apply, adapt, and combine the [netnographic] data collection operations" (*ibid.*). Netnography has been utilised

by other researchers exploring digitally-mediated witchcraft communities (*e.g.* Miller, 2022b; Winqvist, 2023; Zanette *et al.*, 2023) as well as other digitally-mediated consumption communities (*e.g.* Canavan, 2021; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Hoang *et al.*, 2023).

I followed the principles of observational netnography meaning "the researcher does not reveal him or herself to the online community and its members… the researcher remains present yet distant from the community and its interactions" (Kozinets, 2007, p. 133-134; also Brown *et al.*, 2003). My netnographic research was conducted in a manner that was entirely *unobtrusive*, non-invasive, and covert. Observational netnography requires that "researchers do not reveal their research activity to online participants nor participate in online exchanges" – the value of this being, that "participants interact in the relatively uninhibited manner characteristic of online communities" (Canavan, 2021, p. 257). In testament to the efficacy of this method of non-participant observation in garnering important insights in online environments, Kozinets (2020) notes: "I have always been a big proponent of unobtrusive online observation, and often use it myself" (p. 195).

I covertly investigated activity, interactions, posts, reviews, comments on relevant, rich, publicly accessible sites, meaning all data on these sites are "open to any browser" and "open to the public – anyone can view it without registering, but registration is required if a user wishes to post" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 76). Given that what constitutes a site as 'public' means it is "indexed by and accessible using common search engines such as Google" (p. 197), this means that it was not an ethical requirement to notify any social media users posting or commenting on selected sites about my presence, because the data on these websites is considered 'public'. As Kozinets (2020) further clarifies: "Public sites should be considered to have public data, and private sites offer private data", while private sites are only "searchable using their own proprietary search engines" (p. 197). Although I did have a TikTok account for the purpose of posting my internet version of the Recruitment Poster (to recruit witches for in-depth interviews) I did *not* need to be 'logged in' to this account on TikTok to be able to *view* public WitchTok data when I was conducting my netnographic study. As TikTok's (2024) Privacy Policy[5] states, regarding the nature of users who post content on the TikTok social media platform: "if you have a public account and have not restricted the visibility of your posts individually, your Profile Information and User Content can be viewed or shared by anyone on or off the Platform, whether or not they have a TikTok account".

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[5] https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/eea/privacy-policy/en

TikTok, Reddit, and TripAdvisor were selected for observational netnography. The observational ethnography on these sites was conducted from approximately December, 2022 concluding in May, 2024. All netnographic data was collected using purposive sampling, meaning I purposely selected content guided by Kozinets's (2020) *netnographic investigative data operations*, which includes five stages of: simplify, search, scout, select, and save. These stages of investigative data operations are discussed in the next section. The "select" stage has its own *five-point criteria* to guide the researcher regarding what data should be "selected" for analysis (and saving), also discussed in the next section.

The first stage of Kozinets's (2020) *netnographic investigative data operations* is to *simplify* which requires the researcher to break down the research question into more detectable keywords, hashtags, trends, or other terms to begin the process of data searching (Kozinets, 2020, p. 214-215). Kozinets (2020) advises that the process of converting abstract, complex research questions into concrete searchable terms and keywords requires a certain degree of trial and error. Accordingly, I used an evolving set of keywords and Boolean search terms on the social media home page search engines. Following Kozinets (2020) I also tried "misspellings" and "alternate spellings" of searchable terms to see if this yielded different results.

Following this process I *searched* (the second stage) through the data generated. While Kozinets (2020, p. 221) recommends extending search vocabulary and making use of a social media website's "advanced search operations" – TikTok *did not* feature any filtering or advanced search tools at the time the study was conducted, whilst Reddit and Trip Advisor did (*i.e.* organising data generated according to "most relevant" or "newest first").

The third stage of Kozinets's (2020) netnographic investigative data operations is the process of *scouting* which entails the activity of: "Click, follow, enter, read, watch, listen, and reconnoiter the sites, threads, images, podcasts, videos, and other content" (p. 215). In some cases, initial results led to the discovery and inspiration for new search terms (adding to those identified at the *simplify* stage). I scouted and viewed public comments on TikTok, TripAdvisor, and Reddit, and videos on TikTok in their entirety, making notes on a continual basis throughout the netnographic data collection period. Practically, this involved making a note of (in the case of TikTok) for example, the video or post title, its URL, and notes about the content on a word document.

The fourth stage, *select* requires the researcher to be judicious about which data should be saved for analysis (Kozinets, 2020). Data was selected according to its: relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness – overall, to ensure "careful decision-making and scrutinizing" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 227). *Relevance* refers to the alignment of the data with the study's research question. Kozinets warns that 'keyword' alignment alone is not sufficient enough to decipher whether content will be relevant to the study – rather, the data source should "nuance or inform" the research question. *Activity* refers to "the recency and regularity of the flow of information" (*ibid.* p. 228) indicating that data should be *recent*, reflective of trending, timely, and/or influential events and external conditions that have shaped consumers' views, and opinions. Whilst Kozinets provides no time frame for what constitutes as "timely", I viewed content posted across each social media site (TikTok, TripAdvisor, and Reddit) within the past five years. *Interactivity* indicates that social media data - whether discussion boards, comments, videos, other forms of content - should stimulate "dynamic social media conversations", detectable by "two-or-more-way communication… interaction, language, cultural exchange, emotion" (*ibid.* p. 228). According to Kozinets (2020) this can be identified by the number of comments and sub-dialogs occurring between members of a social media community originating from a single piece of data. *Diversity* for Kozinets (2020) means that data selected should not be "dominated by a single voice, such as the owner and moderator of a message board or site" (p. 229). *Richness* (also referred to as 'deep data'), lastly infers that the researcher should be able to distinguish between "[s]hort textual statements" versus "[d]etailed stories and descriptions" - the latter according to Kozinets, being the "best kinds" of data to inform a study. Richness can be identified by a data piece's references to the socio-cultural, physical environments, identities, opinions, perspectives "expressed in a more evocative and eloquent way than usual" (*ibid.* p. 229).

Returning to Kozinets's (2020) investigative data operations, the fifth and final stage - *save* - involves keeping a record of the final investigative dataset onto word documents using a combination of "capture, cut and paste" (p. 214) ready to be interpreted for consolidative data analysis. For Kozinets, the save stage is when the social media site's information is "transformed into the data that becomes the most important part of your research project" (p. 237). I went between capture (screenshotting data) and control-C, control-V (copy and pasting) data from each social media site onto word documents (one word document file for each social media site), saving these into a folder under "Netnographic Data".

The proceeding paragraphs discuss each social media channel chosen for netnographic analysis including TikTok, Reddit, and TripAdvisor.

2.4.3.1 TikTok: 'WitchTok'

The first public site, TikTok (tiktok.com), is a short-form video-sharing social media site, previously identified as a major forum for witchcraft-related postings (Barnette, 2022; Houlbrook and Philips, 2023; Johnson, 2023; Miller, 2022a; Obadia, 2023; Zanette *et al*. 2023). TikTok invites users to co-create and experiment with comedy, dancing, lip-syncing, filters, tutorials, trends, challenges, stories, art, viral content, collaboration, education, shopping, and more. TikTok is publicly accessible from a Google search engine whilst its content is also made to be "explicitly produced for public consumption" (Warren, 2020, p. 291). I took inspiration from Miller's (2022a) netnographic approach when conducting my analysis of the 'WitchTok' community on the platform. This involved the non-obtrusive observation of a carefully selected range of videos.

In accordance with Kozinets's (2020) *investigative data operations* (as discussed previously), I used several hashtag identifiers to locate videos for analysis, including (but not limited to): "#witchtok", "#witchcraft", and "#witchesoftiktok". These hashtags were independently entered into the TikTok search bar alongside keywords to 'break down' the research question into simpler keywords *e.g.* "#witchtok AND consumption", or "#witchtok AND capitalism", or "#witchtok AND community". I began scouting (stage two) through videos in a naturalistic manner meaning I viewed videos *in order* of how the TikTok algorithm generated these from the keywords – which typically (although not always) involved displaying videos on the screen, prioritising those that have garnered the most *interaction* (measured by views, likes, comments, and saves) from other community members. I viewed in excess of 250 videos – with each video ranging from approximately fifteen seconds to 3 minutes. Data also included the video's "video descriptions" and comments left on the video in question. I made notes about the videos and comments, focusing on topics that are relevant to this thesis. Topics of interest included (but were not limited to) the materialisation of witchcraft, cultural views of witches, popular witchcraft practices across videos, references to historical witch content, interactions and beliefs regarding consumption, marketing, witch tourism, and any notable points of conflict in the community.

2.4.3.2 Reddit: 'r/witchcraft'

The second site I selected for my netnographic analysis was Reddit (reddit.com), considered one of the internet's most popular *forum-based* networking sites designed with "old-school" features when compared to other social media platforms (Kozinets (2020, p. 76). In contrast to TikTok, Reddit operates according to a much simpler format centred on basic text-based message or discussion boards – called 'subreddits' – each organised by theme, topic, or interest and marketed by the platform as a "network of communities where people can dive into their interests, hobbies and passions. There's a community for whatever you're interested in" (Reddit, 2024, n.p.). Classifiable as a "public site" (Kozinets, 2020), according to Reddit's *own* Public Content Policy: "Most of Reddit's platform is public and accessible to everyone, even without an account… We believe in the open internet and in keeping Reddit publicly accessible to foster human learning and research, and to ensure Reddit is a place where all people can find community, belonging, and empowerment" (Reddit, 2024).

Each "community" (i.e. subreddit) features interactive comment threads where members can freely respond to one another's posts and vote 'up' or 'down' (reflective of like or dislike) those comments they agree or disagree with. I identified the 'r/witchcraft' subreddit (*www.reddit.com/r/witchcraft*) as a major source of witchcraft-related discourse between consumers interested in witchcraft and the witch's identity, practices, history, rituals, and so forth. The community has nearly *half a million* members (455k+) at the time of writing, thus featuring in the top 1% of Reddit communities. R/witchcraft's status as one of Reddit's most active communities is attributable to its consistent and high frequency of postings, interactions, and membership growth. To locate relevant data, once more I followed Kozinet's (2020) *investigative data operations*, commencing my netnographic analysis by entering an evolving set of keywords into the r/witchcraft subreddit search bar (*i.e.* ''consumption', 'materialism', 'commercial', 'ethics', 'WitchTok', 'capitalism', 'magic', 'science'). These keywords generated several posts of interest. I engaged in a process of *scouting* (and the subsequent stages recommended by Kozinets), reading each post and their comments. Rich posts and responses were read carefully. I selected posts and comments that fulfilled Kozinet's (2020) criterion of relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness, as discussed previously. Although other communities aligning with my empirical context exist on Reddit (*e.g.* r/WitchesVsPatriarchy) I restricted my netnographic analysis to the r/witchcraft subreddit only as I considered its content more suitable for my study – *and*, as recommended by Kozinets further, for data manageability purposes. Because the significant amount of content available

within the r/witchcraft community *more* than satisfied an expansive and more dynamic range of discussion points – other communities were not sought out.

2.4.3.3 TripAdvisor: 'Lancashire Witch Tourism'

Lastly, because my critical ethnography was undertaken in Lancashire – a known tourism hotspot for witch enthusiasts – I sought out a specific online venue where interested consumers would share their thoughts on the local *witch-related* attractions and history. TripAdvisor (tripadvisor.com), described by Kozinets (2020, p. 50) as "the world's largest travel website, and a pioneer of specialized social media" allows for "rich" peer-to-peer conversations to occur publicly online, and was thus selected as this thesis's third site for observational netnography. The user-generated tourism review site's *main* form of content includes reviews posted by registered users, but like Reddit, these are available to view publicly by anyone *without* registration *i.e.* one does not need a TripAdvisor account to access reviews in their entirety. I pursued data relating to 'Lancashire Witch Tourism'. To locate sites, I entered the specific names of locations, sites, attractions, shops visited for participant observation into the TripAdvisor homepage's main search bar.

All reviews posted for each relevant site, space, and attraction, *etc*. were read in their entirety, as recommend by Kozinets (2020), followed by a process of filtering comments more closely related to the context of the study. This was further in accordance with Kozinet's (2020) protocol - as previously discussed - under the "scout" stage (making use of search operations, filters, and any other tools available on the site). I found TripAdvisor's "keyword" search function *within* comments useful, to filter through relevant reviews (*e.g.* Pendle witches, death, commercialism, consumption, and dark history).

On a final note, as outlined in accordance with Kozinet's (2020) *netnographic investigative data operations* (see pages 51-53)*,* all data from these sites discussed (TikTok, Reddit, and TripAdvisor), to fulfil my observational netnography were saved onto separate Microsoft word documents (one file for each social media site) for analysis (see Section 2.5 Data Analysis & Interpretation).

2.4.4 Historical Methods: Historiography & Digital History

Besides interviews, observations, and netnography, historical methods were important for my thesis. Historical methods grant researchers access to unexplored, unknown, or forgotten insights about the present state of consumption, markets, and marketing (Karababa, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2023; Smith and Lux, 1993). To fulfil this portion of my data collection, I first separated out and categorised three broad periods of the witch's history: 1.) early modernity (*circa.* late 15th century, a period when diversifying relations of production and consumption was beginning to supplant feudal systems); 2.) middle modernity (*circa.* 18th-20th centuries); and 3.) late-present modernity (late 20th-21st century). To examine these periods, I drew from primary and secondary source material, discussed next.

First, I carried out a historiography which involves consulting literature written by historians about a context, phenomenon, or event as their account of the past such as books, chapters, and academic papers – all of which are classifiable as *secondary source material*. Historiography involves comparing alternative explanations and disparities in theoretical and scholarly perspectives around specific events (Smith and Lux, 1993). Historiography also, seeks "to assess, in terms of modern standards, the value of historical works for us" (Becker, 1938, p. 20) and includes typically, "everything that has been written *about* the event subsequent to that time" (Thies, 2002, p. 356) (emphasis added).

Second, I carried out "digital history" – explained as a method of "examining and representing the past that works with the new communication technologies of the computer, the internet network, and software systems" (Nix and Decker, 2021, p. 1050). Digital history refers to *primary source material* that has been digitised via archivists' *retrospective* compiling of this source material, made publicly accessible for researchers online (for a comparison of 'digitised', 'born-digital' or 'reborn-digital' sources in historical methods, please see Brügger, 2019). Digital history is not merely the *digitisation of the past*, rather its use is intended "to create a framework through the technology for people to experience, read, and follow an argument about a major historical problem" (Seefeldt and Thomas, 2009, p. 2). Digital history sources analysed in this thesis conform with the definition according to Nix and Decker (2021, p. 1048) meaning "any historical materials that contain digital elements, whether as a circumstance of their original creation or retrospective alteration". Nix and Decker clarify that digital source materials carry the *same* value as their offline counterparts (such as material

objects located in museums and other historic sites) allowing researchers access to "an ontologically inaccessible past" (*ibid.* p. 1049) as well as affording "new opportunities for historical knowledge production" (p. 1048).

To summarise, my data pool from historical methods included digitised *primary* source material from online data repertoires (see **Table 3.**) and historians' accounts and interpretations of relevant events and contexts in the form of peer-reviewed literature including books, academic articles – constituting this thesis's historical *secondary* source material.

Table 3.: Digital History: Digital Source Materials

Archive Name	Archive Type	URL
Wellcome Collection	health and the human experience, visual culture, books and journals, archives, and manuscript	wellcomecollection.org/collections
Städel Museum Digital Collection	Digitised art from the Städel Museum	sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en
The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database	Electronic resource for the history of witchcraft and witch-hunting in Scotland	apps.shca.ed.ac.uk/witchcraft/
The British Library	National library of the United Kingdom	www.bl.uk/
Cornell University Library's Digital Witchcraft Collection	3,000+ titles documenting the history of inquisitions and persecutions of witchcraft	rmc.library.cornell.edu/witchcraftcoll/
ProQuest Historical Newspapers	Cover-to-cover access to historical newspaper content (digitised, primary source content)	proquest.libguides.com/hnp
Gale Primary Sources	Archives, historical newspapers, (digitised, primary source content)	gale.com/intl/primary-sources
Women's Magazine Archive	Consumer magazines aimed at a female readership	about.proquest.com/en/products-services/Womens-Magazine-Archive/

2.5 Data Analysis & Interpretation

Analysis and interpretation of all data collected for this doctoral thesis were undertaken in accordance with Spiggle's (1994, p. 495) six suggested procedures: categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, and iteration, discussed sequentially as follows.

The first stage of data analysis – *categorisation* – began with bringing all of the diverse qualitative data types from the four research methods (interviews, participant observations, netnography, and historical materials) together as a combined data pool. This means that data was compiled using separate Microsoft Word documents according to the type of data and saved into a main "Data Collection" folder on Google OneDrive, with subsequent folders *within* this for each form of data collection (*e.g.* "Netnographic Data", "Interviews", and so forth). To commence data analysis and interpretation, I carried out *coding*, defined by Spiggle as a "process of classifying or labeling units of data" (1994, p. 493), moving carefully between different types of data – as and when needed – across different word documents. The coding process involved manually highlighting different parts of textual-based data and leaving "comments" (using the "comment" and "new comment" functions on Microsoft Word), or by making notes on paper – or separate Word Document – to organise my thoughts as I coded. This process of coding and classifying data involved a lengthy, and on-going journey of reading and *re-reading* all of the collected text, notes, screenshots of the data. As different data was read, items of value for a particular code – *e.g.* a passage of text from interview transcripts or comment from the netnography – were assigned classificatory *open codes* (flexible, overarching initial code titles) written in bold text which would gradually become revised, relabelled, or combined together under more suitable 'code' names. I drew from a combination of 1.) *deductive labelling*, involving locating data that represented existing themes, theories, constructs, etc. from peer-reviewed literature; and 2.) *inductive labelling*, meaning I identified evolving themes from *within* the data, and then searched through relevant literature to try and find a 'concept' to explain what was occurring in the data.

The second stage, *abstraction* – also referred to as conceptualisation – "collapses more empirically grounded categories into higher-order conceptual constructs" (Spiggle, 1994, p. 493). The researcher, Spiggle encourages, should aim to transcend *beyond* the identification of "patterns" for labelling, developing these into theoretical "conceptual classes" which involves "group[ing] previously identified categories into more general, conceptual classes" (p. 493). In

practice, this meant all previously compiled categories were amalgamated and (re)labelled (again) where necessary, attaching these to a relevant theoretical concept or piece of explanatory literature to help ground them to a *wider phenomenon*. Abstraction was aided by connecting data classes with existing theoretical explanations that I had identified in my preliminary literature review (see Introduction Chapter), or, if I could not locate a suitable existing concept, I would temporarily assign my own 'placeholder' explanation/neologism/working label to the data while I engaged in further reading to identify potential constructs with sufficient explanatory power. The goal of abstraction, Spiggle clarifies, is to determine and map out the theoretical significance of data considering "its relationship to other constructs or its connection to a broader gestalt" (p. 493).

For the next stage, to aid the abstraction of data I engaged in a process of *comparison* which involved conferring with my thesis supervisors about specific conceptual classes to be developed and represented in the research. Comparison is explained as "explor[ing] differences and similarities across incidents within the data" (p. 493). Comparison began as something conducted "implicitly and unsystematically" as a naturally occurring process whilst I was provisionally going back and forth from the field to the library in search of conceptual explanations for what was emerging in my data. This became more systematic as analysis progressed and benefitted from guidance led by my supervisors who helped to steer me toward particular avenues of the literature.

For the fourth stage, *dimensionalization*, I studied the characteristics of concepts identified, the objective being to add rigour to theory-building efforts by "systematically exploring empirical variations across incidents representing a construct" which both "clarifies and enriches its conceptual meaning" (p. 494). An example of dimensionalization in my research can be located in Paper 2 (see Chapter 4), where I found interlinking 'characteristics' of a leading concept – what we refer to as 'managed metempsychosis', to include: *supernatural possibility, haunted space commodification,* and *infrastructures of enchantment*. Each of these complex concepts – while grounded to different phenomena – can be linked together as various dimensions or components of the overall theme.

Throughout these stages, I also engaged in what Spiggle (1994) refers to as *integration*, meaning I was concerned with seeing how all conceptualisations would feed into one overall 'whole'. Throughout categorisation, abstraction, comparison, and dimensionalization, I would try and plot provisional connections between constructs and emergent theoretical arguments

asking (myself) for example, "*what do these constructs reveal about the phenomenon under study?*" and/or "*how do they help to answer our research question(s)?*". The goal of integration is to produce "complex, conceptually woven, integrated theory… [developed] in close conjunction with intense analysis of data" (Strauss, 1987, p. 23). I identified connections between constructs both 'linear' and 'recursive', as part of "an integrated structure". This is deemed essential for developing theoretical contributions over the alternative of "settling for identifying patterns, themes, or a few unrelated propositions" (Spiggle, 1994, p. 495). Practically, using Paper 2 (see Chapter 4) as an example, I mapped out three *overarching*, higher-level constructs (articulated as 'themes' in the paper) that both individually and collectively reveal something pertinent about how, in the context of our paper, dark history supplements rather than subverts today's ideologico-ethical prescriptions (aligning with our research question).

Lastly, *iteration*, Spiggle explains is not so much a 'stage' of data analysis, rather it is a term used to characterise the qualitative analysis and interpretation process as something *nonsequential* meaning the researcher is free to "move back and forth between stages" (Spiggle, 1994, p. 495). This was my experience for the duration of my data analysis and interpretation, as sometimes I would return to previous stages when new literature was consulted, and following on-going feedback and observations shared between the wider research team. The value of iteration, of this nonlinear continual "back and forth" is that it helps with "refining concepts and drawing out their theoretical implications" (*ibid*. p. 495).

This thesis adopted an abductive reasoning approach meaning theory was generated by identifying ideas *outside of* preestablished thinking as a kind of "'induction plus an explanation'" method (Hurley *et al*., 2021, p. 68). This means that the research did not seek to confirm preexisting theories (a deductive approach), neither did it develop theory based on fieldwork findings alone (an inductive approach). Rather, as Belk and Sobh (2019, p. 491) clarify, abductively derived theory is both "*consistent* with the data", but "it *emerges* from the mind of the researcher/theorist" (a mind that is "well-educated and well-read" on the subject in question). For each paper, the deployment of "enabling theories… refining and extending them in original ways" (Sobh and Belk, 2019, p. 490) also constituted part of the abductive reasoning approach (for paper 1, using Derrida's *hauntology*; for paper 2, using the Derridean-Zizekian theories of *supplementarity*; and for paper 3, Zizek's *fetishistic disavowal*). Some

illustrative examples of how abductive reasoning tangibly connected to my research, are explained as follows.

Firstly, in relation to the contributions of paper 2 of this thesis (see Chapter 4) instead of 'testing' or 'looking out for' how my observations across thanatourism sites connects with *preexisting* theories about the ways that thanatourism is marketised and experienced, I strived to theorise a more far-reaching narrative about how Lancashire witch tourism's bloody past functions within commercial and ideological support systems in the post-historical period ("[f]reeing theory construction from existing theory", see Janiszewski and Van Osselaer, 2022, p. 176). While I was able to connect my ethnographic data with theoretical concepts in the dark tourism literature for each of my three themes, emergent insights (i.e. "*emerg[ing]* from the mind of the researcher/theorist" Belk and Sobh, 2019, p. 491) also helped me to crystallise an original and overall theoretical narrative - one where dark histories serve an important role in reinforcing consumers' acceptance of capitalism in the present.

A second example of how abductive reasoning tangibly connects to my theory-making efforts includes the construction of paper 3 and the functioning of witches' belief in magic (based on the data from interviewing witches and netnography of WitchTok and r/witchcraft). Having immersed myself in their worldviews and magical contexts, I observed that witches' experiences seemed far more complex than portrayed in prior literature and did not align with preexisting theories and explanations *i.e.* studies on magical thinking where consumers draw on external, mystical forces to manifest positive outcomes. Early on in my interviews, I had a 'hunch' that there existed an (unexplored) tension around the concept of 'consumerist witchcraft' – given witchcraft is traditionally rooted in communal values and an *anti-materialistic* reverence for nature yet today, exists, supports, and in many cases is accessible only through individual, hyper-materialism and unsustainable systems of consumption and production. Abductive reasoning has been explained and justified here, where: "There is no reason to believe that research inspired by a hunch and then rigorously pursued is any less likely to shed light on consumer behavior than is research derived from a structured theory" (Alba, 2012, p. 983; also "informed curiosity", see Rozin, 2001). I experienced "the generative power of serendipity", Belk and Sobh (2019, p. 491) speak of upon the realisation that witches are acutely *self-aware* of this conflict and thus by extension, the limitations of their magical beliefs to enact positive change or transformative potential (or to co-exist with their beliefs).

I recognised that a theoretical explanation would be useful to explain *why* witches continue to practice their belief in magic despite being cynical of its efficacy (as "*consistent with the data*" but also "*emerg[ing]* from the mind of the researcher/theorist" see Belk and Sobh, 2019, p. 491). While I was able to connect my ethnographic observations to preexisting theoretical concepts (*i.e.* on 'ethical consumption') my findings scaffolded across three themes supported a new way of theorising magic – emerging more as a kind of 'thinking magically' (rather than magical thinking), rooted in the Zizekian psychoanalytic concept of 'fetishistic disavowal'. The abductively derived inference that belief in magic is a fetish *in of itself* is also generative, where it may provide a new lens to consider how other nonsecular, pre-capitalist inspired communitas (*e.g. Thai Buddhism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, Transcendental Meditation* and/or other spiritual cults, to name a few) thrive on their own limitations, contradictions, and problems, leading to consumers 'fetishising' such beliefs (of these), to avoid a harsher reality.

2.6 Evaluating Research

My research adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) dimensions for evaluating qualitative research which act as a preference over criterion adopted by positivist researchers. The following sections outline specific techniques I engaged with to uphold the research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, discussed in turn.

2.6.1 Credibility

Credibility denotes how credible the conceptual interpretations made are, as drawn from the original data. To ensure the credibility of my interpretations and theoretical explanations, I deployed techniques including member-checks, prolonged observation, persistent observation, and peer debriefing. Credibility was further ensured by this research's method of collecting data from *several* perspectives and multiple complimentary ethnographic procedures (see Guba, 1981, p. 87) (*i.e.* in-depth interviews, participant observation, netnography, historical methods).

Firstly, "member-checking", according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) is "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" and involves following up with research participants to confirm that conclusions drawn from their stories (as shared during the in-depth interview) are aligned with the intended meaning of their sentiments. In practice, this involved

asking questions such as: *"in our prior conversation, you shared that you believed…. is this correct*?; and *"when we last spoke, you explained that* [insert topic], *could you expand on this a little more so that I can get a 'fuller picture' about your views on this?"*.

Besides member-checks, "prolonged observation" was also utilised to enhance the credibility of my interpretations which involved immersing myself in my chosen empirical context for adequate time - "learning the 'culture'" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 301) – and developing the confidence to "detect and take account of distortions that might otherwise creep into the data" (p. 302). As Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) convey, credible research is difficult to attain if the researcher "spends virtually no time learning" about the culture of the empirical background under study. For the duration of my doctoral journey in my leisure time I attended several workshops and events related to my empirical context. For example, I attended an online workshop hosted by 'The Viktor Wynd Museum & The Last Tuesday Society' (www.thelasttuesdaysociety.org/event/village-witchcraft-magic-professor-ronald-hutton) entitled *"Village Witchcraft & Magic - Professor Ronald Hutton"* (December 1st, 2021). I also visited an exhibition, "*I Am Witch - Tales from the Roundhouse*", hosted by the 'Silver Spoons Collective' (www.loveisourpower.com/thesilverspoonscollective.html) (4th to 28th January, 2022). I also sought out Pagan spiritual practices (as fostered by some of my participants) by attending private sessions hosted by an experienced practitioner in Lancaster (*e.g.* 'Sound Healing').

I also availed of "peer debriefing" with my colleagues which provides "an external check on the inquiry process" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 301). After each in-depth interview or period of participant observation, I engaged in an informal debrief with my primary supervisor (Professor James Cronin), to discuss my own initial thoughts, interpretations, observations, and relevancy of the findings against the raw data. Debriefing was also carried out when conferring with my supervisors during stages of data analysis and interpretation (as outlined in the comparison process, please refer to Section 2.5). This involved discussing initial emerging concepts within the data, aligning these with existent concepts in the literature. A further form of peer debriefing included the peer-review process through the publication process (the submission of my research) to peer-reviewed journals including *Marketing Theory* and *Annals of Tourism Research* – as well as the academic conferences or workshops I presented at for several extended abstracts and conference papers (see Appendices 5-10).

Further, post-presentation(s), I oftentimes received valuable feedback from my peers in the fields of marketing and consumer research.

2.6.2 Transferability

Transferability, as a form of "external validity" (Guba, 1981), seeks to answer the following question: "How can one determine the extent to which the findings of a particular enquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 290). To guarantee the transferability of my conceptual and empirical work, I drew from the principles of perspicacity which refers to how well ethnographic findings can 'travel': "Ethnographers not only could but should aspire to generate insights that can be *applied* elsewhere" (Stewart, 1998, p. 47). Processes related to perspicacity importantly, may offer a "solution to the question often raised by conventional auditors about ethnography's claim to generalizability" (Arnould, 2000, p. 279). My research's reliance on explanatory theory and efforts to arrive at *contributions* to theory move my research beyond the context level (the witch) into higher-order and context-agnostic conceptual issues (*e.g.* capitalist realism, ideology, and so on). My empirical context is used diagnostically to uncover 'issues' within contemporary consumer culture.

2.6.3 Dependability

Dependability is simply "a concept that embraces elements both of the stability implied by the rationalistic term *reliable* and of the trackability required by explainable changes in instrumentation" (Guba, 1981, p. 81). To achieve dependability, following Lincoln and Guba's advice (1985) I ensured that whilst collecting and analysing data, I periodically engaged in "internal checks on rigor" through my supervisory team who would review my preliminary notes, findings, analysis, and so forth. I consulted with the research team on a regular basis for "mutual debriefings" (p. 237) as well as to consider their (my supervisors') *own* developed concepts, insights, and ideas, based on my research. Lincoln and Guba also emphasise that "overlap methods" – meaning research that draws from more than one complementary method – can enhance the project's dependability (and stability) also referred to as "'multiple-operations'" (see Guba, 1981, p. 86). For example, where I carried out participant observation at Lancashire Witch tourism sites as visited by (thana)tourists *and* complemented these findings by interviewing (thana)tourists to gain insight into their own motivations, experiences, and beliefs. Adopting methods that complement one another, or that "overlap" can help to

mitigate potential "invalidities" that may occur from deferring to just one empirical method. If, Guba (1981) explains, "similar results are found using different methods the case for stability is also strengthened" (p. 86). I also ensured I took time after data collection (*i.e.* after a series of interviews, collection of historic primary source material, or visits to tourism sites and so on), to engage in a reflective appraisal of the data by evaluating how 'well' the data collection was progressing, tactics I was using, and if I was collecting data to the best of my ability to fulfil my thesis's overarching aim.

2.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to how a study's data and conclusions drawn from this can be verified or confirmed by other researchers (Guba, 1981; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Confirmability can be achieved in several ways. Firstly, through *triangulation* as a means of "collecting data from a variety of perspectives, using a variety of methods, and drawing upon a variety of sources so that an inquirer's predilections are tested as strenuously as possible" (Guba, 1981, p. 87). I met such criteria by drawing from a range of critically-informed ethnographic methods to inform this thesis's research findings. Confirmability was also achieved through the collaborative efforts of this thesis's research team. As Guba (1981) writes: "Research teams can be constituted so as to balance out predispositions" (p. 87). Thinking, using a diverse range of data collection methods, sources, and confirming and balancing findings with my supervisors' own observations confirms that this thesis's "predilections [have been] tested as strenuously as possible" (*ibid.* p. 87). Ensuring confirmability in my work was further achieved through *reflexivity*, where the lead researcher (myself) must address "underlying epistemological assumptions which cause him [or her] to formulate a set of questions in a particular way" (Ruby, 1980 cited in Guba, 1981, p. 87). To aid this process, I kept a frequent (albeit not 'fixed' in terms of when, where, or what to write) *introspective journal* throughout my data collection procedures.

2.7 Ethical Conventions

All ethical conventions of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC) were adhered to in the collection of data for this doctoral thesis. Data was collected once approval was granted from Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1). For in-depth interviews, participants were required to read the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix 2) and sign and date the

Participant Consent Form (see Appendix 3). I also familiarised myself with The American Anthropological Association's (AAA) (2012) *Statement on Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibility*[6].

MacClancy and Fuentes (2013) argue that the ethnographic fieldworker should: "negotiate their research path simultaneously through at least three sets of ethics – their own personal one, that of their discipline, that of the locals" (p. 17). When undertaking all forms of ethnographic fieldwork I aimed to comply with all ethical protocols when visiting locations for research purposes.

In accordance with the Public Order Act (1936) a *public place* includes premises "which at the material time the public have or are permitted to have access, whether on payment or otherwise". Therefore, permission was not always required when carrying out participant observation when visiting historic and commercial sites. Photos were *not* taken across sites where photography of historical sites or artefacts were prohibited for any reason. Fieldwork data has been made accessible only through peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and presentations that are appropriate to the research. I upheld respectful, ethical, professional relationships with the supervisory team, all interview participants, and other persons who contributed to the research, including those involved in the collection of data and the distribution of research findings.

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[6] For the AAA's (2012) Statement on Ethics, please see: americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/

Chapter 3: Revenants in The Marketplace: A Hauntology of Retrocorporation

3.1 Introduction to Chapter 3

The first manuscript completed in fulfilment of my PhD by Alternative Format is a conceptual and historically grounded essay, developed throughout the first year of my doctoral journey and published in the journal *Marketing Theory*. Of the three papers included in this thesis document, this paper provides the most 'macro-oriented' view on witches and witchcraft. During the development of the first manuscript, I remained conscious of the all-important role of "setting the scene" for any outputs that would materialise afterwards from my research. Accordingly, much of the reading I engaged with during my first year was tied to systems-wide analyses of political economy and its structuring influence on social life (*i.e.* the 'context-of-context') *rather than* with the more concrete but infinitesimally less transferable 'micro-contexts' of everyday lived experiences.

Amongst the early influences on my writing were the cultural diagnostician Mark Fisher and polemic philosophers Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, three formidable cultural critics who were already notable influences on the writing of my primary supervisor, Professor James Cronin. Fisher's, Derrida's, and Žižek's macro-sociological perspectives influenced my early reading around witches and witchcraft and I soon found myself gravitating toward Silvia Federici's macro-oriented *Caliban and the Witch.* From these sources, I became interested in mapping out a history of the witch and her relationship with consumption over the course of capitalism's development. Tracing this story required fluency with the historical method and this first paper became a proverbial *baptism by fire* in terms of the collection and analysis of historic data.

The completed manuscript, entitled "Revenants in The Marketplace: A Hauntology of Retrocorporation" accounts for how the witch was able to continue capturing imaginations, finding herself integrated with commerce over the course of modernity. With my supervisors as co-authors, we identified three important historic periods to analyse: early, middle, and late modernity. Each epoch includes key events and examples of how witches have historically been 'used' to benefit state and market actors of capitalism. The witch, as we saw it, was a figure of pre-modernity that forces of modernity may well have tried to extinguish yet she also

seemed to be an important force in the expansion of capitalism. The witch remained at large throughout modernity and, if anything, became grossly commodified over time.

We apply a Derridean-Fisherian application of *hauntology* in this paper to explore the witch as a *revenant* of the pre-capitalist past that reflects otherworldly imaginaries and the possibility of a different future. However, we argue that she becomes a "marketplace" revenant because her reflections of otherworldly imaginaries have been co-opted by capitalism throughout history to meet the needs of the marketplace. To make sense of this idea that capitalism reaches into the premodern past to commodify even those things that predated and were perhaps once oppositional to its key principles, we turned to adapting and altering Fisher's idea of 'precorporation'. While Fisher's (2009) theory of precorporation already recognises the role of "futurity" in co-optation theory, we needed to offer *explicit* recognition of the role of the past also, leading to our conceptualisation of *retrocorporation*.

I presented an earlier draft of our paper at the *Interpretive Consumer Research* (ICR) conference at the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom in June 2022. Feedback at this event helped us to clarify and shape our paper prior to submission in the journal of *Marketing Theory*. The paper's theoretical contribution was further refined following the reviewers' insightful suggestions, specifically relating to strengthening our theoretical framework by improving our consistency with concepts, providing more clarity in our methodology, and removing an enabling concept we had previously experimented with (the 'blobjective').

Revenants in the Marketplace:
A Hauntology of Retrocorporation

3.2 Abstract

Drawing upon a cultural-historical reading of the witch, we discuss how modern capitalism is chronically haunted by obstreperous vestiges of what preceded it yet remains proficient in assimilating all that returns to challenge it. By adapting and extending a theoretical toolkit informed by Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher, we trace market and state administrators' co-optation of the primeval witch figure and her ideological trappings: initially, to expropriate those who threatened incipient modernising structures; later, to provoke increasingly secularised subjects towards consumption; and eventually, to calibrate rather than obviate capitalist expansion, so that it remains aligned with consumer interests. Introducing the new concepts of 'retrocorporation' and 'marketplace revenant', we discuss how long-foreclosed, ancient imaginaries become re-invoked and re-programmed to perpetuate capitalism's dominance. Our message for the nascent tradition of 'Terminal Marketing' is that the collision and collusion of past and future has the potential to ossify capitalist realism in the present.

Keywords: Hauntology; Capitalism; Derrida; History; Terminal Marketing; Witch; Fisher.

3.3 Introduction

Marketing scholarship has long reported on consumer culture's fascination with relics from its own past (Brown, 2007; Cantone *et al*., 2020). Recent accounts have drawn upon Jacques Derrida's (2006) hauntology to offer an onto-affective conceptualisation of: the 'haunted' status of our late capitalist moment (Ahlberg *et al*., 2021); the mournful retrospection of its most iconic brands (Brown *et al*., 2021); and the temporal disjunction of its consumer subjects (Takhar, 2021). These applications of hauntology to marketing scholarship emphasise consumer culture's collective realisation that its best times are behind it, or as Ahlberg and colleagues suggest, recent market developments are characterised by "a half-lost remembering that we no longer participate in the optimisms of the past", and "the happy days of marketing

have increasingly evaporated" (2021, p. 169). Although these analyses reveal a cultural longing for a return to some indeterminate but happier episode in capitalism's history, little work in marketing scholarship has considered the possibility that the best times potentially predate capitalism. Although exceptions do exist (see Södergren, 2022), hauntological critiques within marketing and interpretive consumer research are yet to grapple with how pre-modern and semi-mythic pasts that pre-exist capitalism's totalising structures return to shape, and become shaped by, consumer culture. Following the tradition of critical philosophy to interrogate modernity's repressive nostalgia for the authenticity of cultural predecessors (*e.g.* Marcuse, 2002 [1964]), we propose for critical marketing scholarship, a contemporary diagnosis of the allure of surpassed worlds. Understanding the appeal that derives from that which no longer exists despite, or perhaps because of, its negation by the hegemony of consumer culture, we argue, can tell us more about the temporal dynamics of capitalism's 'realism' (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Fisher, 2009; Hietanen *et al.*, 2022; Jones and Hietanen, 2023).

In this paper, we adapt and extend Derrida's hauntological sub-concept of 'revenant' to interrogate how capitalism has, since its incipience, remained chronically haunted by the pre-liberal, anti-commercial Others it effaced through its complex, evolving cultural expansion. Defined vaguely as a figure "whose expected return repeats itself, again and again" (Derrida, 2006, p. 10), we position the revenant as an amorphous ghostly Other that re-appears with visions of a time before capitalist realism normalised ubiquitous marketisation, depriving political subjects of any alternative futures.

To assist in our theorisation, we draw upon a cultural-historical account of 'the witch' – an ancient and undying Other recently discussed in the pages of Marketing Theory (see Zanette *et al.*, 2023) – who first returned as a dissident threat to inchoate modernity in the 15th century and has for much of the transition from subsistence agriculture to complex variants of merchant, liberal, and neo-liberal capitalism, haunted the cultural imaginary. This haunting, we argue, stems from nostalgic reverberations of a kind of magical thinking that pre-exists and once challenged the creeping economic pragmatism and political logic of our times. Unable to provide any 'real' connection with some authentic past, the witch's resurrections function as "temporal pieces of flotsam" (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2021, p. 168) that provide a glimpse of a less rational, more enchanting reality before market fundamentalism sunk all conceivable alternatives. Impossible to repress, the witch continues to haunt consumer culture as various

simulations of her history but also, increasingly, as the imagined absence of her own hyper-commercialisation.

While the Derridean revenant suggests a subversive agent whose hauntings remind us of the fragile contingency of present structures of power, we draw upon the witch to introduce the concept of 'marketplace revenant': a ghostly Other who becomes retroactively assimilated into the circuitry of marketplace structures and supporting ideological systems. Using the witch, we consider how the marketplace revenant's role in capitalism's continuity has, over modernity, been characterised by 'safe' reappearances in culture, consumption, and identity while being made indifferent or even complicit to the reigning political economy. The arch-fantasy reproduced by the marketplace revenant is that capitalism's forever-present can somehow be subverted by remembering and returning to the social symbolism of a pre-modern, magical Other without needing to re-engage with any of her proto-political subtext. In scaffolding our concept, we provide a theoretical extension to Fisher's (2009) notion of precorporation relating to predictive or pre-emptive aspects of market co-optation. We suggest there is also at play retrocorporation: the retroactive reconfiguring of long foreclosed futures, desires, and subjectivities as depoliticising forces for perpetuating capitalist monoculture in the present. Using the materials of Derrida and Fisher, our work centres on two interrelated research questions: what are the main functions of marketplace revenants?; and, how are these revenants retrocorporated to capitalist culture?

In diagnosing the key functions of the marketplace revenant, our work speaks to the nascent agenda of Terminal Marketing (TM), an ultra-realist tradition that problematises the transformative potential of consumption and the utopian assumption that consumers act – and resist – authentically (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022). Following TM's pessimistic axiology, we clarify how political agency is weakened by nostalgic attachments to superseded modes of countercultural expression that carry only the illusion of transformation without challenging underpinning political-economic logics. Using historical methods, we map out how the co-optation of pre-capitalist imaginaries has evolved throughout modernity in ways that reflect and adapt to capitalism's changing economic imperatives and its subjects' increasing inertia. This evolution pushes us to consider market co-optation as a historically contingent and non-static process; one that works not simply by poaching countercultural styles, practices, and aesthetics, but dynamically through the hollowing out of political subjectivity. By emptying historic, disappeared Others of their proto-political subtexts, the market can ensure that all

contemporary countercultural formations based upon their revival remain limited to a regressive reimagining of what might have been, rather than what could be.

3.4 Theoretical Underpinnings

3.4.1 Hauntology: A Closer Look at Revenants

Originally deployed by Derrida (2006) in his book *Spectres of Marx* in reference to the enduring legacy of Marxism after Soviet communism passed into history, 'hauntology' is a portmanteau of ontology (how we view 'what is') and haunting (the 'return' of something) to infer that all that is can only exist against a backdrop of returning, excluded *Others*. Derrida's emphasis on the relationship between the *existing* and the *returning* reveals how past, present, and future can never be completely divorced from one another. A language of haunting is offered encompassing ghosts, specters, and revenants wherein "a specter is always a *revenant*" and, in reverse, a revenant is a specter which is synonymous with a ghost (Derrida 2006, p. 11). Etymologically, revenant derives from revenir (French) meaning 'to come back' whilst specter derives from spectrum (Latin) meaning 'apparition', suggesting that the notion of *returning* is inferred more directly by the former, though Derrida emphasises equivalence between the terms: "A common term for ghost or specter, the *revenant* is literally that which comes back" (2006, p. 224).

Revenants are characterised by 'dyschronia' – *temporal disjuncture* – which conflicts with understandings of time passing in a unidirectional trajectory (Fisher, 2018, p. 140). Derrida conceptualises time by its recursive nature, as *out-of-joint*; punctuated by backward-lookingness, impelling us to revisit why things are the way they are (and are no more), spurring us "to learn to live *with* ghosts" (2006, p. xvii-xviii). To explain dyschronia, we must consider hauntology's philosophical grounding to an ethical axis between that which is *allowed* to exist and what *has* and *will* be oppressed (Södergren, 2022). By appealing to justice for ghosts of the oppressed, hauntology is suffused with ethical responsibilities that modern subjects have to the *Other*. Derrida (2006, p. xviii) intimates that modernity is burdened with debts owed to disappeared *victims* – "certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living" – ensuring that the modern subject remains haunted by "the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence… victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism". Revenants can

thusly be understood by their paradoxical *presence of absence*; they are the reminder of what has been repressed – or made *absent* – for the *present* to be what it is.

The revenant functions as an indictment of hegemony. Derrida (2006, p. 46) clarifies: "Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony". A hegemony is constituted by haunting reminders of that which has been excluded or otherwise extinguished. In consumer research, Södergren's (2022) example of the semi-mythic Viking figure and its perpetual haunting of Swedish consumer culture clarifies the complex reappearance of *what is no longer*. In today's liberal-democratic Sweden, the pre-modern, pre-liberal Viking stalks the present with fantasies of what has been displaced for the current hegemony of liberalism to take hold: brutalism, patriarchy, traditionalism, and white supremacy. The *making absent* of these illiberal features allows the Viking to return as a popular figure for far-right populists, providing them with a lodestar for how things may once have been but are no longer. For consumer culture at large however, "the Viking archetype becomes a haunting specter through the collectivization of guilt" whose "excluded histories can come back to unsettle the consumer" (Södergren, 2022, p. 457). For Derrida, those living under a hegemony cannot avoid collective guilt since they must reconcile themselves with a past that has been written out of their present. What is less clear is what is to be done with this guilt, let alone how it might be harnessed, suppressed, or repurposed when there is nothing on the political or economic horizon to suggest the imminent re-emergence and reintegration of the ghosts of disappeared *Others*. Capitalism's veteran hegemony has shown itself to be adept at absorbing and rechanneling, rather than reckoning with, the feelings and desires of its subjects to ensure its continuity (Hietanen *et al.*, 2022; Jones and Hietanen, 2023). To explore how revenants can be made to work in the service of capitalism, we must first consider the possibility that market *co-optation* functions retrospectively.

3.4.2 The Retrospective Functioning of Co-optation

The many ways that hegemonic systems detect, decipher, and disarm challenges to their reigning ideologies and safely reroute them into their service have been discussed in accounts of market co-optation theory (Goulding *et al.*, 2009; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007a; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007b). A key principle of co-optation under capitalism is that market agents make use of adversarial social formations, reformatting them as commercial resources through dynamic processes of

cultural engineering. In Fisher's (2009, p. 9) *Capitalist Realism*, the principle of co-optation is reimagined in his concept of *precorporation*. Unlike traditional understandings of co-optation that assume adversaries to capitalism become incorporated to mainstream consumer culture through dramatic moves, countermoves, and compromises over time (Giesler, 2008), Fisher's precorporation suggests that adversaries already have the veteran hegemony's beliefs and practices written into their DNA, making them functional rather than antagonistic to market logics from the outset:

> [T]he old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture (Fisher, 2009, p. 9).

Precorporation is predictive, future-looking, and terminal, reflecting a perverse reconstitution of libidinal desire itself (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022; Jones and Hietanen, 2023). It presupposes that those who are opposed to capitalism will self-limit their imaginaries to what is possible and desirable under capitalism: "Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (Fisher, 2009, p. 8). For example, many popular forms of countercultural participation in today's social media age have virtue-signalling, self-expression, or some aspect of private interest for the consumer taken into consideration from their point of inception; all of which strengthen and support (rather than undermine) the networked desiring tendencies of consumer-capitalism.

Precorporation works through engendering an inertia amongst subjects that is debilitating and depoliticising in its effects. This in turn functions on two levels. The first is self-defeating pessimism that naturalises the belief that capitalism cannot ever realistically be replaced, meaning any efforts to resist or rectify its problems must inevitably borrow from, work within, or emulate capitalism (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). The second is the cynical acceptance that conforming to capitalist mechanisms is simply a matter of "pragmatic survival" – a case of simply getting on with how things are, and therefore has no ideological agenda (Fisher and Dean, 2014, p. 27). As Fisher warns though, ideology functions at its purest when it is experienced as non-political; when it is misrecognised as how things are or *ought to be*. Because of this entrenched inertia, all countercultural movements emerging under capitalism become deprived of genuinely subversive potential and have "no significant popular desire for

revolution, or even serious social democratic reform of the system's economic core" (Winlow *et al.*, 2015, p. 14).

This inability to herald anything genuinely oppositional to existing capitalist ideals is premised upon a corrosion of political imagination, or what Fisher (2009, p. 2) identifies as the *realism* of capitalism, where "it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to [capitalism]". As the stultifying effects of precorporation make a post-capitalist *future* inconceivable, the pre-capitalist *past* becomes the only available source for informing subversion. Yet, because the past has already occurred, been superseded, and rendered knowable, any potential for it to inform some "shock of the new" that might challenge capitalism remains limited at best (Winlow *et al.*, 2015, p. 164). Beyond their ethical attachments to the disappeared *Other*, we may speculate that Derridean revenants can bolster capitalism's continuity through stultifying the political imaginary. Revenants may elicit feelings of guilt towards what has been effaced, but their transformative potential is limited to simply "against that which is" (Marcuse, 2002 [1964], p. 66). Revenants may be *against* the depredations and injustices of the past and the present, but do not by themselves offer a progressive alternative. While Fisher suggests that all conceivable futures are pre-emptively formatted by capitalist desires, the inability to generate forms other than those that have already passed us ensures retrospection is as important to securing capitalist realism as prefiguration. This behoves analysts to consider co-optation in terms of 'pre-' but also of 'retro-' corporation.

As we shall explore, retrocorporation limits the political imaginary by ensuring that we have only the defeated *Others* from our past to turn to; figments of disappeared ways of life that cannot compete with today's advanced modes of political economy. The outcome we presuppose is the marketplace revenant; a perverse misconstruction of the past that works to reproduce and assimilate with the consumer-capitalist present. Before diagnosing this figure's functions, we briefly define what a witch is, then elucidate on our methods.

3.5 Who is a 'Witch'?

> The witch is a vision from the past, for only in the past can an alternative to the modern world be imagined. The sense of connection with a lost past is important to modern witches in part because they see themselves as the recoverers of the values lost to modern industrial society (Purkiss, 1996, p. 41).

The witch is an ever-altering entity simultaneously anchored to and unmoored from history, combining past and future – a fricassee of fact, fiction, and fantasy. As the above quote from

Purkiss suggests, the witch presents a yearning to find oneself in what has been lost to modernity. The witch can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamian and Assyrian-Babylonian cultural belief systems (Abusch, 2002). Her long history aside, the witch is best characterised by her reappearances throughout the modern period, with her meanings over the past five centuries proving to be "every bit as expansive and protean as modernity itself—thriving on its contradictions and its silences, usurping its media, puncturing its pretensions" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 286). Because of her protean nature, the witch remains as culturally varied as the real or imagined persons, objects, meanings, and practices attached to the term, preventing anthropologists and historians from reaching a consensus on what or who a witch really 'is'.

For Sempruch (2004, p. 117), the witch functions as a *fantasmatic Other*, a distinctively female ('herstorical') type of imaginary, "a central strategic signifier, a crucial metaphor or metonymy for *herstorically* transmitted female values". Comparably, Zanette *et al.* (2023, p. 167) argue that the witch is characterised by "periods of resurgence", as a signifier that is re-adopted by women and other marginalised groups seeking representation over the course of various mythopoetic cycles. To Zanette and colleagues, the witch's eternal value lies in the identity-seeking efforts of consumers, particularly those who face hardship in some way, to resurrect and reclaim the empowering characteristics attached to *herstory*. The authors discuss how individuals acquire small victories for themselves in the field of identity politics by performing, queering, and "looking the part" of the witch (2023, p. 172). However, no victories in the realm of traditional politics are identified, with contemporary witches' collective actions centring on 'heroic' personal expression and separatist or cultural issues rather than the critique of underpinning socio-economic structures. In contrast to Zanette and colleagues' account of the witch as empowering and heroic, our epistemic focus will centre on the disempowering and subjectifying roles the witch performs throughout modernity.

3.6 Methods

Our analysis of the witch's hauntings throughout modernity follows prior historically informed accounts in marketing and consumer research (Karababa, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2023). We trace modernity in accordance with Karababa's (2012, p. 15) definition of the period, characterised by "mass production, the establishment of capitalist markets, the formation of a reflexive enlightenment subject, and increasing mobility among class structures". Our analyses begin in the late 15th century when long-distance trade,

diversifying relations of production and consumption, and the idea that the world can, in principle, be known and controlled began to gain primacy. We then explore middle modernity, formulated in the late 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and reaching an apex around the Atomic Age of the mid-20th century. We close out with late modernity commencing with the Cambrian explosion of information-technological amenities and lifestyle expressions between the late 20th century and the present period. Research procedures were informed by a critical review of secondary sources (*i.e.* existing scholarship; materials that have been written *about* historic events *subsequent to* those events) and primary sources (*i.e.* original artefacts; period-specific materials produced *at the time of* historic events), accessed from digitised archives (Smith and Lux, 1993).

Beginning with secondary materials, we pursued a process of iteration among multi-disciplinary literatures on the history of witchcraft, identifying and comparing alternative explanations and underpinning theoretical perspectives. This involved seeking out scholarly books and chapters, monographs, and academic articles, using evolving key terms across early, middle, and late modernity. This was facilitated using online academic search systems (OneSearch, Google Scholar, Google Books) that allow for Boolean search phrases which narrowed-down results beyond what analogue paper-based indexes could achieve. Key terms for searches included evolving combinations of people (*e.g.* women, witches); events (*e.g.* witchcraft accusations, rituals, executions), and analytical categories (*e.g.* gender, ideology, markets). To minimise the risk of inheriting original writers' biases or misinterpretations, we avoided reliance on a single secondary historical source or perspective for reaching analytical judgements; instead, comparing multiple accounts including those from philosophically and politically conflicting authors and sources (Karababa and Ger, 2011; Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2023).

Primary sources consisted of period newspapers, popular mass-market books, magazine articles, art, advertisements, pamphlets, and public records, helping us to locate witches within "the record of what really happened" (Smith and Lux, 1993, p. 599). Searches for original materials were assisted digitally using online archives, evolving key terms, and manual assessments of results. For early modern marketplace depictions of witches, we sourced digitalised woodcuts, pamphlets, paintings, and related materials from the Wellcome Collection, the Städel Museum Digital Collection, The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database, The British Library, and Cornell University Library's Digital Witchcraft Collection. Art was

examined in recognition that literacy rates were lower in early modernity. For middle-late modernity, we sought digitised newspaper and magazines (Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2023) concentrating on three archives: ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Gale Primary Sources, and Women's Magazine Archive, which gave us access to titles including the *New York Times, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Time*, *She* and *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

For our analysis, all primary and secondary sources, notes, and evolving observations were combined and categorised by early, middle, and late modern periods. This 'synthesis' stage involved developing preliminary accounts for each period that were incrementally added to, problematised, and developed into an overall "explanatory narrative" (Smith and Lux, 1993, p. 604) of the witch's reappearances and retrocorporation to the marketplace. We adopted iterative procedures by engaging in a continuous back-and-forth process between the data and emerging explanations. Synthesis was followed by "address[ing] the implications of the narrative for the research question" (Smith and Lux, 1993, p. 605). Sub-explanations for each historical period were abstracted using hauntological theory to conceptualise the changing nature of the witch's co-optation and to identify the functions of marketplace revenants.

3.7 Hauntological Analysis

In the following three sections, we explore the witch's re-appearances over modernity, with each haunting providing key theoretical insights into how revenants come to be assimilated by the structures they haunt. Each section discusses first, *why* the witch re-emerged during the period in question; and second, *how* the witch as marketplace revenant came to function in the service of capitalist expansion. Commencing our analysis in early modernity, we explain how the witch re-emerged as a cultural juxtaposition to liberal-humanist transformation but also as a catalyst to justify violence against those who defied incipient capitalism. The witch, while ideologically oppositional to economic pragmatism and rationalism, was co-opted to dispossess – or *expropriate* – anyone who threatened the development of modern markets. Moving into middle modernity, we explain how advanced industrialisation, social conformity, and bourgeois conservatism were haunted by the witch's *provocative* cultural identity – reimagined as fodder for informing consumer objects and individual status. Finally, we explore how the witch returns to haunt late modernity with reminders of pre-technological and animistic ways of life resulting in cultural actions that *calibrate* – rather than obviate – techno-capitalist expansionism so that it aligns with consumer interests.

3.7.1 The Witch in Early Modernity: Expropriation

The collapse of medieval feudalism and the migration into mercantilism in the 15th century saw regular reappearances of the witch-as-revenant and her organised persecution. Early modernity saw the ferment of commercial and intellectual humanist innovation through the introduction of the printing press, precocious urban economies, and a worldview supported by empirical pragmatism. Yet, it also became a cradle to renewed fear and imbittered superstition underpinned by market-mediated texts such as the treatise on witchcraft *Malleus Maleficarum* (translated as the 'Hammer of Witches'), remaining a bestselling book (behind The Bible) for over two hundred years after its publication in 1487 (Thorén, 2015, p. 35). During this period, we discern the first key function of the witch as a marketplace revenant: expropriation.

The reignition of interest in witches and witch-hunting across Europe, and gradually her colonies in North America and beyond, between the 15th to late 18th centuries has been interpreted as an index for the traumatic socio-economic discontinuity with pre-capitalistic patterns of village existence, communitarian-subsistence, and demesne farming. "[T]he persecution of the witches, in Europe as in the New World", Federici (2004, p. 12) argues, "was as important as colonization and the expropriation of the European peasantry from its land were for the development of capitalism". We argue that these features of capitalism's development were not mutually exclusive but, rather, expropriation was achieved *through* use of the witch to exacerbate divisions between men and women and hinder the potential for solidarity amongst peasantries. In an act of what Derrida (2006, p. 56) calls the "[c]ommerce and theatre of gravediggers", the witch was dug up from her proverbial grave by merchant classes – 'gravediggers' – and put into the theatrical service of expropriating capital for the modernising market. For example, the claim of 'alewives' (peasant women who homebrewed ale and beer as a modest means of income) to consumer expenditure was considered a threat to the merchant classes' burgeoning power in the manufacture and distribution of alcohol and so attaching the spectre of witchcraft to homebrewing activities became an effective mode of their expropriation (Graefe and Graefe, 2021).

Whilst the normalcy of alewives had previously ensured that women controlled the ale trade in the late medieval period, by 1600 the modernisation of brewing meant that production largely moved from women's humble village-based operations to urban purpose-built breweries staffed by men to supply markets at home and abroad (Bennett, 1991, 1996). The

introduction of legislation throughout the 16th century, such as the Reinheitsgebot purity laws in Germany and local ordinances controlling the quality and sale of alcohol by women in cities in England and Ireland, afforded merchant classes greater leverage to legitimise men's trade guilds and monopolise the market (Wade, 2018). Women who continued brewing were viewed with suspicion in industrialising areas and disparaged as 'beer witches' (Graefe and Graefe, 2021, p. 50). Bennett (1991, 1996) accounts for the diffusion of hostility towards alewives through early modern literary and artistic forms that allude to sin or witchcraft. Poems such as John Skelton's *The Tunning of Elynour Rummyng* (c.1517) portray alewives as devil-worshipping purveyors of befouled and/or adulterated beverages. Such representations thwarted women's "ability to compete with men for the customers, capital, and official approbation" (Bennett, 1991, p. 169).

In harnessing the "power of the primitive" (Taussig, 1986, p. 168), the spectre of witches propelled incipient capitalism by systematically dispossessing women of their liberties. As Federici (2004, p. 11; also Federici, 2018) explains, the witch was co-opted "as the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone". The expropriation of women's liberties was managed most viscerally through anti-witch market materials including fine art and literature. For example, marketplace depictions of witchcraft linked to the dangerously sexed bodies of women is expressed in the work of German artist Hans Baldung Grien such as his panel painting *Two Witches* (1523), illustrating two nude women (*Figure 1*). One looks seductively over her shoulder as the other sits atop a flowing bed sheet draped over a goat, symbolising Satanism and sexual desire. Such artistry can be interpreted as fomenting the necessary expropriation of those deemed incompatible with the dour, puritan work ethic of early capitalism, but also as helping to *legitimise* the marketability of the witch as a super-desirous object of consumption.

Figure 1. Hans Baldung (1523), 'Two Witches' [painting]. Digital edition sourced from Städel Museum Digital Collection. Public Domain.

The witch was further co-opted between the 16th and 17th centuries in new modes of mass communication facilitated by the popularisation of the printing press, such as woodcut illustrations and 'witchcraft pamphlets' marketed to the semi-literate public (Suhr, 2012). These texts can be interpreted as efforts to make the complexities and inequities of capitalist expansion comprehensible for the general public using the spectre of witchcraft as an explanatory tool. The upsetting of established social structures and power dynamics is, for example, reflected in a woodcut reproduced in *The History of Witches and Wizards* (1720). The image shows common folk offering up dolls as oblations to the Devil in return for material comforts for themselves, playing upon the jealousies that readers might have held towards their upwardly mobile neighbours whose improvement in fortunes seemed inexplicably linked to the modernising conditions around them (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2. Unknown artist, 'Wax dolls being given to devil' [woodcut] in *The History of Witches and Wizards* (1720, p. 15). Digital edition sourced from Wellcome Collection. Public Domain.

Witch hysteria became associated with increased commercialism and urbanism in the late 17th century versus the stagnating quality of life at agricultural hinterlands. Through critical analysis of socio-economic and geographic trends, Boyer and Nissenbaum's (1974, p. xii) neo-Marxist account of the witch-trials of 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts reveals a brutal *acting out* of "inarticulate men and women" whose "lives were being shaped by powerful forces of historical change". Comparable evidence documents how the people of Old Calabar in southern Nigeria became preoccupied with witchcraft as overseas trade, newly acquired merchant wealth, and conspicuous consumption upset traditional class structures in the 18th century. Latham (1972, p. 249) argues that Old Calabar became haunted by reignited interest in witches as "a way of relieving tensions which arose from the repressed conflict between those who owed their status to the traditional lineage system, and those who owed their status to their wealth as merchants". Whether in Europe or any of her colonies, the birth of global capital coincided with the return of the primeval, or as Derrida (2006, p. 3) states: "Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe". Although the English Witchcraft and Conjuration Act of 1736 (repealing capital punishments against witches) defined the end of the early modern era, the witch by no means became less valuable as a resource for market administrators in the centuries that followed.

3.7.2 The Witch in Middle Modernity: Provocation

A second function of the marketplace revenant can be discerned from the witch's reappearance as a *provocative* force throughout the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. During this period, the witch was resurrected and reimagined to countervail cultural stagnancy entrenched by conformity, expertism, and rationalism. The conservative climate was crystallised by the words of Hart (1893, p. 348), the editor of the *British Medical Journal*, who criticised a resurgence of interest in the 'follies' and "false phenomena" of witch activities (seances, mesmerism, and faith-healing) amongst Victorians, including "some ladies of the upper class", as conducive to "an abundant harvest of mentally disordered and pathological creatures". Newspapers including the *Daily Mail* warned of the returning spectre of witchcraft as a seditious activity "inimical to Church and State" and "harmful to the mental and moral outlook of the devotees" (Daily Mail, 1934, p. 14). Parallels were even drawn between witchcraft and Marxism, evidenced by a piece in the *New York Times* outlining how, in the view of some, "modern communism is the linear descendent of the black traditions of medieval sorcery" (Wells, 1927, p. 3). Contemporaneously, in *A Popular History of Witchcraft*, Montague Summers (an English convert to Catholicism and despiser of atheist communism) warned that: "Witches are as numerous, as malign and mischievous in England to-day, as ever they were in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and legislation is as much needed now as then" (Summers, 2011 [1937], p. 246).

For Derrida (2006, p. 60), "the dead can often be more powerful than the living". The return of the witch in middle modernity proved to be more powerful in her provocation than many of the political agents of the living present. The witch's provocativeness can be viewed as *beneficial* rather than oppositional to capitalist expansion however, providing a stimulating model for identity seekers searching for a path out of modernity's increasingly suffocating culture of conformity *without* threatening underlying politico-economic structures. Correspondents at the time said little about witches' politics but identified subversion in witches' reliance on dark forms of consumption such as young men and women engaging in "drink, drugs, and perverted practices" and black masses that "soon degenerated into erotic orgies" (Daily Mail, 1934, p. 14). By abandoning politics for mysticism and hedonism, the provocativeness of the witch provided disaffected subjects of middle modernity with a 'safe' apolitical route out from rational society. As recorded in *She* magazine, "in an age when men

are preparing to go to the moon in spacecraft, the interest in witches on broomsticks is on the increase. Covens are being quietly formed and Sabbats take place" (Hill, 1965, p. 64).

Assimilation of the witch to market interests is reflected in the spread of covens as escapist gatherings for sensation-seeking middle-class consumers, spearheaded by retired colonial administrator Gerald Gardner and his British Wicca movement in the 1950s (Truzzi, 1972). By mourning the passing of a more matri-focal, naturalist, and spiritual way of life before the acceleration of masculinist-technocracy, adherents of Wicca revived the disappeared ancient witch as a figure that Derrida (2006, p. 52) suggests, "cries out the truth, it promises, it provokes" (at least in an illusory sense). Seemingly unmotivated by transformational politics, adherents of British Wicca privately went about their practices, desublimating whatever rage they had towards socio-economic structures into their own insider esoterica, symbolism, and secret rituals centred on feminist spirituality and goddess empowerment. Adherents of mid-20th century feminist-witch movements have been assessed critically as politically hollow and "self-deluded" escapists who substituted in an obscure "personal spiritual solution" in place of an articulate, unified, and popular critique of capitalist patriarchy (Rountree, 1999, p. 138).

Without comprehensible politics at its heart, British Wicca contributed little disturbance to popular discourse other than prurient material for newspaper tabloids. The *Sunday Mirror* reported on: "Men and women dancing in the nude" and engaging in "[s]timulation through wine, music and drumming" (Hawkins, 1955, p. 7), whilst the *Daily Mirror* recounted how "witches met naked, in a circle, with the high priestesses… wearing blue and green garters on the left thighs" (Coolican, 1964, p. 2). The provocativeness of the returning witch was achieved by consumer symbolism, evidenced by the Wicca movements' reliance on esoteric material artefacts (*e.g.* an athame, chalices, candles, or incense) rather than an expandable political consciousness. Like licentious Ottoman coffee houses of the 16th century (Karababa and Ger, 2011), backstreet cabaret of the 19th (Blaszkiewicz, 2021), or illicit raves of the contemporary period (Goulding *et al.*, 2009), woodland covens of the mid-20th century provided modern subjects with sites for cultural experimentation to escape rather than resist bourgeois capitalist norms. Reborn as a performative and participative identity category, the returning witch served less as a revenant for confronting modern subjects with foreclosed pre-capitalist proto-politics and more as "a play-function" (Truzzi, 1972, p. 26) for curious tribes of consumers.

Outside of the UK, the personal branding efforts of feminist countercultures throughout the United States in the 1960s further demonstrate the assimilation of the witch's provocativeness to consumer identity projects. Like British Wicca, whatever resentment members of the US-established women's liberation group Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.) held towards the structural constraints of their lives were obfuscated through theatricality and performativity. In the absence of credible political solutions to women's dissatisfactions, W.I.T.C.H called for the following modes of artistic provocation:

> Your weapons are theatre, magic, satire, explosions, herbs, music, costumes, masks, chants, stickers, stencils and paint, bricks, brooms, guns, voodoo dolls, cats, candles, bells, chalk, your own boundless beautiful imagination. Your power comes from your own self as a woman, and from sharing, rapping, and acting in concert with your sisters (W.I.T.C.H., 1969: 77).

Bereft of any symbolically efficient politics, W.I.T.C.H. relied on guerrilla theatre and consumption materials to achieve aestheticised, identarian modes of expression under capitalism rather than by mobilising popular opposition against it. Examples of their aestheticised approach included marching on Wall Street dressed in capes and pointy black hats (W.I.T.C.H., 1969) and posing "in white face with brooms" when dispensing a hex against First Lady of the United States, Pat Nixon, for her support of the Vietnam war (Robertson, 1969, p. 16).

Whether British Wicca or W.I.T.C.H in the US, those who resuscitated interest in the witch were unable to translate their shared experiences to a political project that could help wider audiences to understand and structurally locate their exploitation. Instead, they found themselves propagating narratives of play, identity, and artistic symbolism that *propel* rather than *subvert* capitalism's hierarchical and communicative structures of cultural domination. This co-optative relationship between the market and the provocative trappings of the witch reached its apogee with the release of popular cultural products including the motion picture *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) portraying witches' darker motivations and the comedy TV series *Bewitched* (1964–1972) portraying their more benevolent, both depicting the witch as fully integrated to the very culture she seemingly rejected. Contemporaneously, commentators observed: "A mystical renaissance is evident everywhere, from television to department stores" (Time, 1968, p. 42) and "tools of the trade–charms, folk stones, herbs, amulets, incense, candles–they're available in a proliferation of shops springing up across the nation" (Fleming,

1972, p. 137). These accounts starkly reflect the witch's haunting of middle modernity as embedded in the consumerist circuitry of market society.

3.7.3 The Witch in Late Modernity: Calibration

A third function of marketplace revenants is detected in the witch's *calibration* of late modernity's technological hold over its subjects, making computers and applied sciences appear compellingly *hostile* yet paradoxically *hostage to* the interests of capitalism. A rapid proliferation of digital technologies and the general creep of gadgetry across all aspects of material life from the early to mid-1970s onwards marked an acceleration of 'disenchanted enchantment' characterised by the "dubious-but-willing consumer" who, as Belk *et al.* (2021, p. 26) suggest, "suspends disbelief and continuously plays along with a procession of one technological magic show after another". For Derrida, the continual invasion of reality by "techno-tele-media apparatuses" (2006, p. 98) brings about a present that feels profoundly *out-of-joint* and prone to being haunted by "[e]ntire regiments of ghosts… armies from every age" (2006, p. 100).

Amongst Derrida's returning regiments of ghosts, we can count the witch who has, since the 1970s, haunted the steady drip-feed of new technologies with both enthusiasm and pessimism; re-emerging to challenge technological advances deemed to be detrimental, while abiding by those that might be integrated to her vision of a utopian feminist future. Increasingly disenchanted by the apocalyptic potential of atomic technoscience, polluting effects of urbanism, and military-industrial escalation of the Cold War, witchcraft-oriented groups formed in the late 20th century to haunt what Derrida (2006, p. 72) calls "scientifico-military forces". Throughout the 1980s, activists dressed as witches at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire, England to protest nuclear weaponry – one of ten 'plagues' Derrida (2006, p. 100) identifies as endemic to the contemporary late modern apparatus. Likewise, the witchcraft movement Pagans Against Nukes (P.A.N) in their pursuit to re-establish a semi-mythic culture of harmony with nature, declared themselves as "an activist organisation dedicated to the banishment of nuclear technology from our Earth… to coordinate all pagans, of whatever land or tradition, in political and magical work to achieve this end" (P.A.N, 1983, p. 1).

These groups' invocations of the witch were undertaken not to dispel technological culture per se but rather to preserve it by way of curbing its most self-destructive tendencies. Beyond their protestations against nuclear technology, several accounts of neopagans and witches in the late 20th century reveal that a decent proportion worked in computer-related occupations, were avid computer users, and "supported high technologies, scientific enquiry, and space exploration" (Adler, 1979, p. 21; Jorgensen and Russell, 1999). Conforming with Haraway's (1991) thesis on cyborg feminism, the seduction and promise of technology in late modernity appeared to blur the lines between men and women, nature and culture, or organisms and machines. Haraway hoped that technology's erasure of such boundaries would enable women to drop their self-limiting attachments with nature (as earth 'goddesses') and identify instead as 'cyborgs' that transcend simple binaries and tools of patriarchal epistemology, thus constituting a way out of subjugation. Haraway's hopes were nonetheless eclipsed by her recognition that women faced renewed subjugation through electronics-dependent jobs, exclusion from masculinist technocultures, and displacement by the high-tech military establishment's phallocentric priorities. If genuine cyborg-witches *did* exist, they functioned only to provide a human face to techno-capitalist expansion rather than its undoing.

The witch's haunting of late modernity, Derrida (2006, p. 100) might argue, has been to challenge "the postmodern excess of arms (information technology, panoptical surveillance via satellite, nuclear threat, and so forth)" rather than to challenge techno-capitalism generally. The witch, as a ghost from a gynocentric past without nuclear weapons, played a role in calibrating late modern technologies such that they remain in the service of techno-capitalist growth through consumer lifestyles rather than military-industrial aggression. Those interested in witchcraft in the 1980s curiously defined themselves as apolitical or rather, "rejected politics narrowly defined except for anti-nuclear and environmental causes, and feminism" (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1986, p. 37). As with their predecessors in middle modernity, those who resuscitated the witch in late modernity seemed less interested in articulating a clear political alternative to capitalism and more concerned with achieving representation within it. The witch's full integration with techno-capitalist culture is evidenced by a wave of celebratory consumerist paperbacks launched at the turn of the millennium including Knight and Telesco's (2002, p. 62) *The Cyber Spellbook* which advocates for "techno-tools for beautification" such as electric hairdryers, straighteners, and curlers to be used in late modern witchcraft.

Besides enrolling everyday consumer objects into their fantasy play, since the 1990s, witches of the late modern period have been increasingly catered to by specialist brands and retail stores. Use of the witch to align capitalism's technological advances with consumerism rather than with militarism or any other mass-destructive ideology has been evidenced most recently on the social media platform, TikTok, where content posted under the '#WitchTok' identifier has attracted global attention (Barnette, 2022). As a digital form of witchcraft, WitchTok centres on liquid aesthetics rather than articulate, unified beliefs and is made up of various short-form videos posted by users exploring witch consumption including tarot reading, protection spells, divination, charms, and manifestation (actualising one's material desires by magical means). Gaining prominence between 2020 and 2022, a period of accentuated social and economic hardship linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of WitchTok might be read as the techno-capitalist retrocorporation of the primitive as a playground for reflexive doubt (Thompson, 2005). Against a backdrop of political indecisiveness, previously improbable alliances between scientific, corporate, and governmental actors, and seemingly never-ending, and sometimes contradictory technocratic discourses on personal-protective measures, digital witchcraft during the Covid-Era allowed for critical reflection on the fallibility of expert systems; and a channelling of the "general desire among young adults to feel powerful and capable of using witchcraft to solve problems their elders cannot or will not resolve" (Barnette, 2022, p. 102).

While cultural scepticism and discourses intended to foster reflexive doubt have been attached to resurgences of witchcraft throughout late modernity, capitalist realism remains practically unchallenged. The late modern subject's appropriation of the witch to aestheticise criticisms of expert systems while maintaining a full and apolitical embrace of consumer culture's techno-tele-media apparatuses serves only to *calibrate* rather than obviate capitalism, ensuring it remains aligned with (rather than antagonistic to) consumer interests.

3.8 Discussion: The Function of 'Retrocorporation'

Through a historical-cultural reading of the witch, we have explored how capitalist modernity has, since its incipience, co-opted and integrated the ghosts of those it effaced. Moving beyond established understandings of co-optation based upon the incorporation of emergent countercultural symbols and practices to the market (Giesler, 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007), we traced the logic of retrocorporation to demonstrate how counterculture remains delimited to the ghosts of what has already been and gone, producing anachronisms that

contribute to, rather than challenge, dominant economic and political structures of the present. The logic of retrocorporation turns attention away from market actors' capabilities to predict or control the future, and towards counterculture's own regressive and restrictive commitments to the past. "The 'past' here", Fisher (2014, p. 122) recognises, "is not an actual historical period so much as a fantasmatic past, a Time that can only ever be retrospectively – retrospectrally – posited". It is that potential to 'retrospectrally' restructure and rewrite the past that has facilitated the colonisation of its disappeared victims as frameworks for consumer desire and market-mediated cultural experimentation.

To explain this, we have introduced the concept of marketplace revenant which differs from Derrida's (2006) original concept in several critical respects. First, while Derrida's revenant is framed as a repressed phantom of sorts, the manifestation of a posthumous desire for justice that disrupts the symbolic present; the marketplace revenant remains a perversion of this, manifested in a consumerist desire for what is missing but might somehow be non-disruptively included in the symbolic present. Second, while the disruptive hauntings by the Derridean revenant are characterised by an ethical relationship, wherein the self is brought to account by the repressed spectral *Other*, hauntings by the marketplace revenant are distinguished by an extractive relationship which makes the *Other* little more than a source of ornamentation for the self. While for Derrida (2006, p. 47), capitalism will remain "haunted by what it attempted to foreclose", the ongoing usefulness of disappeared *Others* for market co-optation suggests that capitalism can remain *exalted* too by what it attempted to foreclose. Third, and relatedly, unlike the Derridean revenant that resists any sense of reconciliatory closure under capitalist hegemony, the marketplace revenant – because of its co-optation – functions *in the service of* capitalist hegemony. The marketplace revenant aligns with Jones and Hietanen's (2023, p. 227) recent discussion of "an apparatus of capture" which explains how capitalism readily co-opts (or 'captures') consumer resistance before it is imagined. For Jones and Hietanen, the desire to resist is often fuelled by affective excitements whose radical intensities necessarily become overtaken by that which is controllable and predictable, ensuring that "the seeds of capture are present from the start" (Jones and Hietanen, 2023, p. 231).

In mapping out how pre-capitalist imaginaries become retroactively assimilated to the machineries of the market, but also how the mode of assimilation itself changes depending on capitalism's current imperatives, we reveal a non-static, evolving process of co-optation that varies from *expropriation* to *provocation* to *calibration*. Based on these functions, we define

the marketplace revenant as: a disappeared *Other* from our collective past that, upon re-appearance in the living present, is retroactively co-opted to *expropriate* noncompliance with current structures of power, privilege, and their cultural fields; *provoke* interest in commodifiable cultural identities; and *calibrate* the market's most objectionable logics to more palatable adjustments. Like Derrida's original conceptualisation, the marketplace revenant carries with it a divergent vision incompatible with the injustices of the present system. Both Derrida's and our new conceptualisation of revenants can be said to reflect the 'Real'; that which is repressed yet keeps re-emerging and re-asserting itself no matter how much psychic distance the reigning political economy puts between it and us (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). However, unlike Derrida's revenant, we propose that the marketplace revenant can only inspire subjects of the living present to go so far as stylisation, affectation, and simulacrum in pursuing an open future. The marketplace revenant offers only sentimentality for an impossible past, "objectively ironized" (Fisher, 2009, p. 4), emptied of its subversive potential, and cynically reduced to a convenient and toyetic anachronism. When revenants are rationalised and commercialised, our collective "hostility toward ghosts, a terrified hostility" (Derrida, 2006: 58) becomes supplanted by individualist desires sated through market-located gratifications.

Although we have presented only a rough schema of the relationship between the capitalist project and the pre-modern disappeared *Others* it helped to efface, our conceptualisation of the marketplace revenant via the witch is not intended to be read as a form of "therapeutic resolution" (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2022, p. 670; see also Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). In contrast to Zanette *et al.*'s (2023) reading of the witch as a benison for self-transformation, offering "new forms of empowerment against antagonising forces" (p. 177), our conceptualisation aligns with the countervailing ultra-realism of terminal (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2022) and de-romanticist (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) marketing scholarship. Though we recognise Zanette et al.'s interpretation of the witch as a source for identity politics and mythmaking, their assumption that self-identification as witches functions as problem-solving 'heroism' for marginalised individuals risks ossifying and reifying the inscribed fantasies of capitalism itself. To quote Ahlberg *et al.*, "conceiving the individual as identity projects in-the-making is manifestly utopian and optimistic about the possibilities of the 'self' as a capable actor in negotiating, understanding, and improving their situation" (2022, p. 673). Rather than undermine the socio-economic structures that render them marginalised to begin with, those who reclaim the witch today do not heroically contradict but arguably *conform* to the basic

ethos of consumer culture: demand representation from the marketplace and seek reprieve from life's injustices through consumption.

The reclamation of a disappeared *Other* – such as the witch – for self-expression and fantasmatic projection in many ways plays out in a mode similar to Marcuse's (2002 [1964]) repressive desublimation. By retroactively restructuring the mythology and proto-politics of ancient figures to fit better with the liberal-capitalist present, those who identify with and benefit from those figures are, "no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order" (Marcuse, 2002 [1964], p. 62).

3.9 Implications for Future Research

Our accounts of retrocorporation and the marketplace revenant in the latter periods of modernity raise an important question for future research: if the resurrection of pre-capitalist imaginaries is motivated by repressive nostalgia more than articulate and politicised dissatisfactions, how can the past ever be invoked to avoid its co-optation? Disappeared figures such as the witch return and haunt modernity so frequently arguably *because* of their affective potential to create opportunities for individuals to have fun and inform their identity projects more so than any political consciousness-raising. This, we must recognise, makes their co-optation likely if not inevitable. Nonetheless, theoretical fundamentalism that necessitates the universal and unreflective devaluation of *all* identarian, affect-based action should be avoided. The liberated self-representations attached to identity-seeking and affective affirmation can and should be faulted for misdirecting resistant energies to the field of culture rather than to political-economic structures but perhaps *not* at the expense of overlooking their positive effects. As repressed *Others* (whether witches, ethnic minorities, religious devotees, LGBTQ+ or other historically marginalised groups) organise to seek representation from a liberalised consumer culture and their recognition becomes market-mediated, their social stigma becomes ameliorated (Zanette *et al*., 2023). Future researchers concerned with social representation might alternatively re-interpret our account of capitalism's move from *expropriation* to *provocation* to *calibration* as a destigmatising evolution from *ostracization* to *exoticization* to *eventual acceptance* (see Eichert and Luedicke, 2022). There is an opportunity to build inventive praxis through reconciling political consciousness-raising with reflection on the greater degrees of recognition and respectability afforded to

previously stigmatised subjects through the liberalisation of legislation, markets, and the media.

Looking to the future, unless we resign ourselves to endlessly re-examine the deadlocks of a repressed life under capitalism, analyst-activists must depart from straightforward leftist critiques and graduate to pluralistic theorising and experimental political praxis. Seeking ways to inject nuance to terminal modes of expression in critical marketing scholarship would not constitute a volte-face on the stultifying effects of the market's repressive desublimation, but could offer more reflexive and adaptive critiques of political economy. As a possible seedbed for informing inventive work in the terminal, de-romanticist space, Fisher (2018, p. 689) counterposes old leftist ascesis with his unfinished 'acid communism' thesis, a (symbolically) psychedelic "mass avant-garde" based upon the speculative convergence of new social movements, socialist-feminist consciousness-raising, permissiveness, and aestheticism with the communist project. Acid communism, a confluence that liberates human consciousness from the norms of capitalism while preserving the destigmatising potential of expressive and collective consumption, has not yet come together in full but "would be unimaginably stranger than anything Marxist-Leninism had projected" (Fisher, 2018, p. 682-683).

Though faint glimmers of such an acidic move can be detected in W.I.T.C.H's identarian street theatre of the late 1960s, this attempt at organisation failed to engender solidarity amongst the wider "substratum of the outcasts and outsiders" – a group consisting of "the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable" (Marcuse, 2002 [1964], p. 260). Efforts to re-politicise and re-aestheticise the witch unfortunately tend to succumb to insiders' own prejudices, tribalism, and desires for difference, delivering little more than spectacle. Still, the witch – like any mythical, rebellious archetype – if somehow cleansed of the prejudices and biases of those who appropriate it, might become a psychedelic vehicle for delivering acidic, post-capitalist praxis. Today, carnivalesque 'memeable' material like WitchTok content could be creatively hijacked by the online left, expanded, and made oppositional to the banality of self-interest, with egalitarianism and solidarity writ in its memetic qualities instead. For now, radically creative, communitarian activity remains, like a ghost, only somewhat present and disappointingly elusive.

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Chapter 4: "If You Like Your History Horrible": The Obscene Supplementarity of Thanatourism

4.1 Introduction to Chapter 4

Following on from my first paper's arguments that capitalism has, over modernity, successfully incorporated (or *retrocorporated*) that which came before it, my second paper explores how consuming the past functions experientially and ideologically in today's late-modern moment. In our paper, entitled "*If You Like Your History Horrible': The Obscene Supplementarity of Thanatourism*", my supervisors as co-authors and I explore how structural disappointments with the present coincide with touristic consumption; specifically, tourism at dark historic sites. Whereas my first paper covered capitalism's co-optation of the witch over an (approximate) 500-year period, the second paper draws upon contemporary witch tourism to empirically explore the complex ways that the witch's history is itself commodified and made palatable for consumption in the present.

Studying for my PhD at Lancaster – a city with a pronounced history of witch trials – ensured that the touristic importance of the witch could not be ignored in my thesis. Throughout my data collection, various anecdotes and observations pertaining to the 17th century execution of the "Pendle Witches" in the city and the significant experience economy now attached to that event were commonly shared by interviewees as well as locals during informal conversations about my research topic. With ease of accessibility to sites located within short distance of where I live and study, I visited several Lancashire historic and commercial tourism sites connected to the Pendle Witches and sought out data specifically related to local witch tourism. In terms of the context-of-context, the historic case of the Pendle Witches and its contemporary commercialisation represents an important insight into the role of history, politics, and gender politics that cannot be unpicked from the witch's relationship with capitalism.

Throughout my critical ethnography, I began to centre my attention on the conditions and motivations that underpin the enrolment of (the Pendle Witches') "death" into commercial and ideological support systems (*e.g.* guides, tours, texts, visual and narratological repertoires across dark tourism sites). To conceptualise these issues I drew upon the broad framing of

thanatourism which pertains to touristic interest in dark and deathly histories and human suffering.

In this paper, my supervisors and I speculate on how the brutalities of the past that are put on display through thanatourism sites are engineered to function as a *failed escape* from the disenchanting, tedious artificiality of the capitalist present. For participants I spoke with, visiting sites attached to the brutal Jacobean world of the Pendle Witches were not to be motivated by a schadenfreud*esque* interest in the suffering of others (as is usually assumed in studies of thanatourism), but instead were sought out to escape the safe tedium of today's world for the chance to glance upon a more fantastic, eventful, magical, and all-around more interesting reality. Participants indicated a desire to rediscover magic, mystery, danger, and otherworldly possibilities *far removed* from their staid modern existence. However, what many participants found was that upon visiting the magical world of witches they were confronted with how bad things actually were in the past which not only allowed them to feel somewhat *better* about their personal circumstances today, but also about the "capitalist realism" that occupies all aspects of the thinkable.

My primary supervisor James Cronin suggested that Žižek's concept of "obscene supplement" based upon Derrida's original idea of supplementarity could be used to explain how the brutalities of pre-capitalist imaginaries like the worlds depicted throughout Lancashire witch tourism, ironically helps to 'prop up' (*i.e.* supplement) *rather than* challenge capitalist realism in the present. Žižek's thinking was valuable to explain how consumer-tourists' "quasi-nostalgic" desire to return to a more eventful, imaginative past can work to perpetuate rather than obviate the political drudgery, inequality, and systemic issues in the present. Furthermore, I was already familiar with Derrida from my first paper and by relating the idea of the supplement *back* to Derrida's broader critical philosophical project and his other concepts (*e.g.* hauntology), I envisioned how the "supplement" is neither secondary nor absent, rather it is *essential* to the very survival of the dominant present. This thinking helped me to crystallise my theory that dark histories, such as those that witch tourism rely upon, serves an important role in reinforcing consumers' apathetic acceptance of capitalism in the present. Paper two creates a space for future critical tourism researchers therefore, to consider the changing functions of thanatourism and its role in upholding capitalist realist structures.

An earlier draft of the paper, entitled "Revisiting Thana-Tourism: The Hauntological Encounter as 'Obscene Supplement'", and an accompanying poem, "Expending Pendle" (published in "*Cornflower Craobh Teg*", a CCT Poetry Anthology) were presented at the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) conference, Lund University, Lund, Sweden in June 2023.

The manuscript's theoretical contribution was refined over the review process in *Annals of Tourism Research* and the final accepted version is reproduced here.

"If You Like Your History Horrible":
The Obscene Supplementarity of Thanatourism

4.2 Highlights

- Dark history sites provide relief from post-historical boredom.

- These sites offer obscene representations of wilder, pre-liberal ways of life.

- Thanatourists seek to escape rather than participate in social competition.

- Consumer symbolism is elevated above political concerns and historical injustices.

- Thanatourism provides ideological support for 'capitalist realism'.

4.3 Abstract

By examining witch tourism in Lancashire, England, this paper reveals the ideological role that dark histories fulfil for consumer culture. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, we explore thanatourism as a means for 'post-historical' subjects to conceive of wilder, pre-liberal worlds before capitalist realism extinguished all alternatives. Nevertheless, because of how history remains subsumed and consumed commercially, thanatourism works to support rather than subvert tacit endorsement of the neoliberal-capitalist present. Using Derrida and Žižek's theoretical articulations of 'supplementarity', we show how thanatourism and its dark historical content is made to function as an 'obscene supplement' to the neoliberal-capitalist present through three processes: managed metempsychosis, governed grotesquerie, and curated kitschification. Authenticity within thanatourism remains illusory, but an illusion that nonetheless perpetuates capitalist realism.

Keywords: Capitalist realism, Post-history, Žižek, Derrida, Witch tourism, Thanatourism

4.4 Introduction

> In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed. (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 18)

History and historical sites continue to feature regularly in global tourism at the putative 'end of history'. Touristic interest in historical sites that are associated with violence, death, and suffering has grown especially in recent years (Goulding and Pressey, 2023; Hartmann *et al.*, 2018; Stone and Morton, 2022). The increased attention given to 'dark histories' coincides with speculation that today's reigning neoliberal-capitalist hegemony is experiencing "structural sclerosis" (Zwick, 2018, p. 926) characterised by a collective sense of disappointment with the present and near total absence of social, political, or economic alternatives that might bring into relief a less disappointing future (Čaušević, 2019).

While significant political events and changes can and still occur (*e.g.* the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the Israel-Hamas conflict), today's subjects of neoliberal capitalism cannot imagine a world that is fundamentally different from the present one. The well-known quip that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson, 2003, p. 76; also Fisher, 2009) is perfectly reflected by today's breadth of films, television shows, videogames, and memes that are more likely to depict the destruction of the planet than to portray a future free from versions of capitalism. The negativity of this 'post-historical' impasse – or 'end of history' – is exacerbated by the increasing financial, environmental, and psychic living costs of an intensely competitive, superficial, and rapacious consumer culture that shows no signs of abating.

In the context of bleak dissatisfaction with capitalist hegemony and intense boredom with the impossibility of change, subjects of 'post-history' have nowhere to turn but the past for social speculation and inspiration (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2021). In this paper, we locate touristic interest in dark histories within the broad church of *thana-capitalism*; an economic subsystem of neoliberalism organised to commoditise death and suffering as a source for consumers' reaffirmation of self and personal privilege (Korstanje, 2017). Thana-capitalism has been assumed to function through a mode of participatory schadenfreude; by consuming the miseries of ancestral *Others*, its subjects – 'thanatourists' – are narcissistically reassured that they are doing comparatively better within today's hyper individualistic framework imposed on them

by neoliberal values. However, we argue it is not individuals' willingness to go along with neoliberalism's imperative for social comparison that motivates thanatourism, but their quixotic pining to *escape* that reality. We explore how thanatourists attempt to offset their boredom at the 'end of history' by visiting dark history sites where they can experience wilder, more authentic (albeit illiberal) ways of living that contrast with those of the sclerotic present and, above all, entertain the idea that alternatives are possible.

Boredom has been discussed as "both a consequence of, and as an irritant within post-history, as a potentially destabilising force that threatens to 'restart' history" (Daly, 2024, p. 474). Nevertheless, because of how history – with all its brutalities, suffering, and superstitions – is obscenely represented and marketed by thanatourism providers, we explore how post-historical boredom is sated in ways that valorise individualistic consumption, depoliticise the past, and ultimately sustain rather than subvert 'capitalist realism'. As defined by Fisher (2009), capitalist realism reflects a collective inability to separate reality from capitalism, a conflation that ensures the market-dominant present becomes the de facto limit to our social imaginaries, naturalising the consensus, "that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative" (p. 2). We draw upon Jacques Derrida's and Slavoj Žižek's writings on 'supplementarity' to interpret how thana-tourism works to supplement rather than undermine capitalist realism.

We structure our analysis according to two interrelated questions: 1.) how does interest in dark history relate to post-historical boredom? And 2.) how does thanatourism function as an 'obscene supplement' to capitalist realism? To address these questions, we draw upon data from an ethnographic study of Lancashire witch tourism in the Northwest of England. Lancashire boasts numerous macabre exhibitions, heritage sites, and retail enterprises that are structured around the brutal persecution of suspected witches in the 17th century, most famously the execution of the 'Pendle Witches' in 1612. The Jacobean period that Lancashire's witch tourism is based upon emphasises a semi-mythic world of political turmoil, superstition, and zealotry coloured by dramatic violence, magical thinking, and rugged agrarian lifestyles far removed from the urbanist, cynically rationalist societies of today. Jacobean society was modernising but not yet overrun by the uniform drudge of secular capitalist realism, presenting thanatourists with fantasies of a very different world than the present.

Our contributions for critical tourism research are two-fold. First, in response to calls to better link tourism with political economy (Dunkley, 2015; Fitchett *et al*., 2021), we deepen

conceptual understanding of the ideological role that historic sites fulfil for contemporary consumer culture. Second, we go beyond the schadenfreude thesis of thanatourism by revealing how consumer interest in dark history is motivated by the desire to drop out of neoliberalism's framework of social competition rather than to perpetuate it.

Although our ethnographic focus on one geographic region in the Northwest of England restricts the external validity of our claims, we outline several recommendations for future researchers to expand our work in the concluding section of this paper.

4.5 Theoretical Underpinnings
4.5.1 Thanatourism & Capitalist Realism: A Speculative Note

While fascination with death is as old as human civilisation, the expansion of thanatourism to a commercial scale has only occurred within the last few decades. This is attributable to diversifying leisure economies, global media and communication technologies that heighten consumer awareness of atrocities and disasters, and evolving discourses of hedonic fulfilment (Hartmann *et al*., 2018; Lynes and Wragg, 2023; Seaton, 1996). Thanatourism is defined as: "travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death" (Seaton, 1996, p. 240). Thanatourism experiences have a pronounced historical aspect and are typically organised around sites significant to tragedies of the past. Dunkley (2015, p. 178) suggests, "thanatourism experiences may appeal to individuals because they promise the chance to 'travel back in time' to historically significant death sites that are cemented at the impasse of their most dramatic historical moment". Rather than providing a dematerialised 'telling' of dark history, thanatourism allows for tragedies of the past to be 'experienced' by visitors. This is accomplished through interactive support systems mediated by stakeholders and interest groups (*e.g.* state and commercial guides, tours, retail, visual and narratological repertoires) that situate thanatourism within a larger economic subsystem, *thana-capitalism* (Korstanje, 2017, Korstanje, 2021).

Korstanje's (2017, p. 67) conceptualisation of thana-capitalism reflects an assumption that "tourism exhibits the main values of society and her economic production". Through thanatourism – which is predicated on the suffering of ancestral *Others* – societal subjects reproduce today's dominant neoliberal-capitalist logic of exploitation. Tragedy and death are made to function as sources of 'value' for personal validation and enjoyment rather than

catalysts for societal cohesion or recovery. This process is assumed to hinge on two interrelated cultural and economic conditions. First, tragedy and death are dislocated from communal concerns and isolated for individual consumption, "through the imposition of allegories, dark landscapes and the spectacle of disaster" (Korstanje, 2021, p. 10). Second, a disintegration of social ties is normalised by the intersection of neoliberal-capitalism's narcissist spirit with ruthless self-assertion and a social-Darwinist arch-fantasy to elevate "survival of fittest as a new ethics" (2017, p. 12). From these conditions, an ideological imperative to celebrate personal success at the expense of *Others* is naturalised:

> The competition fostered by the ideology of capitalism offers the salvation for few ones, at the expense of the rest… Whenever one of our direct competitors fails, we feel an insane happiness. I argue that a similar mechanism is activated during our visit to dark tourism sites. (Korstanje, 2017, p. 67)

Korstanje's thana-capitalist argument reflects the idea that neoliberal-capitalist subjectivity relates to "an expression of other-abasing self-love" and is reified through "a desire to have at the expense of others" (Cluley and Dunne, 2012, p. 253). *Schadenfreude* thus constitutes today's structure of feeling, culminating in what Giroux (2008) calls the neoliberal *theatre of cruelty*. Visiting sites where one can observe the death and suffering of *Others* takes pride of place in this theatre, Korstanje suggests, because it "not only makes us feel special because we are in a race after all, but also reminds us of how special we are" (2017, p. 58).

We do not disagree with Korstanje's reasoning that thanatourism counts as an expressive, life-affirming, and self-aggrandising experience in today's intensely competitive culture, but we perhaps should be critical of the assumption that wilful participation in social-comparison constitutes consumers' default motivation. While Korstanje locates touristic encounters with historic death and suffering as ideologically rooted in "a radical disinterest in the Other, except what is conducive to individual goals" (2017, p.viii), we cannot discount that some thanatourism has been found to engender: social mobilisation to denounce hatred and prejudice against oppressed groups (Soulard *et al.*, 2023); learning and volunteering to develop affective and collective relationships with the past (Driessen, 2022); and moral confirmation of the past ('see it to believe it') which can reinforce a shared identity (Light, 2017; Tinson *et al.*, 2015).

Rather than be motivated cynically by a schadenfreude-esque desire to win against *Others*, thanatourism might alternatively function as an attempt to

temporarily *escape* this race altogether, and to revel in foreclosed worlds filled with more authentic and higher stake events than today's petty social competition. Fantasising about pre-industrial pasts where pastoral community, rugged lifestyles, and mysticism had not yet been extinguished by bourgeois pragmatism are sometimes relied upon as compelling escapes from modern life (Belk and Costa, 1998). Visiting sites of historic death and suffering could, by extension, be read as symptomatic of a collective and tacitly understood impulse for *egress* from today's cynical capitalist realism. "What capitalist realism consolidates," Fisher and Gilbert (2014, p. 90) claim: is the idea that we are in the era of the post-political – that the big ideological conflicts are over […] Capitalist realism isn't the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine; it's the idea that, whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won't change.

By contrasting sharply with today's sclerosed social world, thanatourism with its access to harsher, more dramatic ways of life might be read as allowing for today's *bored* and cynical subjects of post-history and post-politics to engage in a 'back to basics' fantasy: "the unleashing of the barbarian who lurked beneath our apparently civilised, bourgeois society, through the satisfying of the barbarian's 'basic instincts'" (Žižek and Horvat, 2015, p. 107). Importantly, individuals' efforts to pursue these basic instincts does not undermine the neoliberal-capitalist hegemony of the present, because all hegemonies require, as Žižek (1997, p. 71) explains, a minimum of barbarism – a "stain of obscenity" – to legitimise and reproduce themselves.

To better explain how accessing barbarisms of the past works to support rather than subvert capitalist realism, we turn next to the concepts of 'supplementarity' and 'obscene supplement'.

4.5.2 The Obscene Supplement

Derrida's (1997) logic of supplementarity in *Of Grammatology* suggests that a supplement (*supplément*) acts as an addition to, or a replacement of, another entity. The Derridean supplement operates on two levels. First, as that which adds to and enriches: "a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude" (p. 144). Second, as a substitute where an inadequacy or emptiness exists and thus needs to be filled or replaced: "the supplement… adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void" (Derrida, 1997, p. 145). With its potential to replace, supplementarity can be deemed

threatening: "the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]*" (Derrida, 1997, p. 145).

Viewing thanatourism through the lens of supplementarity allows us to see that by seeking out the barbaric, illiberal histories of ancestral *Others* for consumption, a regressive attempt is being made to fill what is perceived to be absent today. Given that neoliberalism's global hegemony has supplanted all other visions of 'the good life', including those once upheld by traditional religions, cultures, and communities, thanatourism might reasonably be assumed to fill that void. However, seeking out aspects of the past to fill perceived absences in the post-historical and post-political present risks threatening the dogmatic ethos of capitalist realism – the thinking that not only are the neoliberal-capitalist values we live under the best and most complete, but there are no conceivable alternatives (Fisher, 2009).

For Žižek however, the Derridean supplement should not be thought of as something which threateningly substitutes or replaces. Rather, supplementarity can also function as an 'obscene' underside which is contradictory yet integrative, such as that which allows subjects to disavow the dominant symbolic tradition while also perpetuating it. An important aspect in Žižek's articulation of supplementarity is 'fantasy', which informs how we narrativise our social reality to shield us from its insuperable deadlocks and contradictions. Fantasy acts as a form of "non-acknowledged obscene support" (1997, p. 64) which makes the traumatic antagonisms of a symbolic tradition's official ideologico-ethical prescriptions not only bearable, but sometimes even *desirable*.

To explain, Žižek provides the example of American soldiers' torture of inmates at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and other related injustices committed under the guise of defending liberty and civility. Such murky events are symbolically incompatible with neoliberalism's official ideologico-ethical prescriptions of tolerance and freedom but, with the addition of some shared fantasy, become tacitly accepted as their necessary complement: "the true Other of liberal democracy is not its fundamentalist enemy, but *its own disavowed underside, its own obscene supplement*" (Žižek, 2006a, p. 365). Insofar as neoliberalism outwardly prescribes humanist, egalitarian values, then some illiberal acts (such as spirited violence against those who oppose these values) can be fantasmatically condoned as "the heroic attitude of 'Somebody has to do the dirty work, so let's do it!'" or permitted as "the dirty obscene underside of Power" (Žižek, 2002, p. 30). Articulated differently, Žižek (2008a, p. 58) clarifies:

One becomes a full member of a community not simply by identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition, but when one also assumes the spectral dimension that sustains this tradition: the undead ghosts that haunt the living, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted 'between the lines', through its lacks and distortions.

Here, what binds a community together is not *following* the explicit symbolic tradition to the letter of the law, but rather in knowing which of its 'laws' to break and how these might be condoned. The tacit expectation that a community's members indulge in certain violations or transgressions serves an obscene, *superegoic* function by "exerting strong pressure on the individual to comply with its mandate of group identification" (Žižek, 2006b, p. 63). Like the psychoanalytic notion of a superego that works under the surface to regulate an individual's behaviour, there is an underside of a community's explicit rules or values that helps to support cohesion between its members. One need only think of how the soldiers in Žižek's Abu Ghraib example likely reaffirmed their status as a closed community through participating in ritualistic abuse of their prisoners thus producing for themselves a kind of "solidarity-in-guilt" (2006b, p. 64).

Applying Žižek's interpretation of supplementarity to thanatourism, we might assume that visiting dark history sites to experience the ghosts of a barbarous, violent world prior to neoliberal-capitalist democracy does not threaten but actually sustains faith in our current political ideology: "far from undermining the [function of ideology], its 'transgression' in fact serves as its ultimate support […] if ideology is to maintain its hold on us, we must experience ourselves as not fully in its grasp" (Žižek, 1997, p. 77). One might only become fully committed to the values of the civilised present not by following them blindly, but by exposing oneself to pre-liberal obscenities that were undertaken in the absence of those values.

In subsequent sections we explore dark history sites as part of an obscene supplementarity that diverts attention from – or *takes-the-place-of* – the contemporary shortcomings of neoliberalism. In this way, thanatourism integrates neoliberal-capitalism's discordant cultural predecessors to promote the impression that all threats to civilisation have been overcome and superseded by the relative freedom and civility of today's post-historical era. We first provide a background to our empirical context and methods.

4.6 Study Area & Methods

The empirical work for this paper was gathered as part of a larger study of witchcraft's relationship with consumer culture. This paper presents results from an ethnographic component undertaken amongst participants and enclaves of Lancashire witch tourism. Lancashire is a county in Northwest England with historical attachments to witchcraft persecution in the pre-liberal early modern period (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018). Touristic interest is specifically structured around the 17th century trial of twelve accused witches from Pendle Hill, an isolated region in the Pennines caricatured as a place "fabled for theft, violence and sexual laxity" (Hasted, 1993, p. 5). The 1612 'Pendle Witch' trials resulted in the hanging of eight women and two men. Accusations of child murder and cannibalism were also made against a group of women referred to as the 'Samlesbury Witches', adding to perceptions of Jacobean Lancashire as particularly wild, transgressive, and far removed from civilised, bourgeois life (Hasted, 1993).

Today, Lancashire is recognised for touristic attractions that tell (and sell) accounts of the Pendle Witches' executions and broader semi-mythic tales of witchcraft-related death and violence. Marketised servicescapes include heritage centres, walking and road trails, guided tours, commemorative plaques, and numerous shops and pubs decorated with a myriad of 'witchy' signage and tchotchkes. Besides opportunities for thanatourists to experience a fantastic return to the primitive through commercial artefacts and consumptionscapes, much of Lancashire's natural environment presents a pastoral reversal of modern industrialism and urbanism. Pendle Hill and its surrounding landscape is a sparse, severe, and windswept place of almost biblical wilderness. Views from the hill's blustery peak reveal a panoramic expanse of grass and stone spilling to the horizon in all directions, belying the world of industry and commerce beyond it.

Ethnographic immersion in Lancashire witch tourism was undertaken by the first author using principles of participant observation, commencing in February 2022 and concluding in June 2023. The fieldwork involved: visiting and revisiting historic sites, gift shops, and museums; participating in walking tours; reading and collecting brochures; and speaking with other tourists.

To support offline observations, we analysed reviews of Lancashire witch-related attractions on TripAdvisor, a site that has been previously utilised for studying tourism at sites

of death and disaster (Sun and Lv, 2021). TripAdvisor is an important venue for diverse individuals to connect, interact, and formulate shared discourse about their tourism-related experiences, allowing for a melting-pot of organic and spontaneous expression (Milazzo and Santos, 2022). TripAdvisor is classifiable under public sites and data (Kozinets, 2020, p. 197) meaning all reviews posted to the website are "open to any browser" and "does not require registration and a log on with a password" to be accessed.

Following principles of observational netnography (Kozinets, 2020), review pages for local witch-related sites were identified for investigative filtering, including Lancaster Castle, Pendle Hill, witchcraft stores, walking tours, and heritage centres. First, all reviews posted for each attraction were read in their entirety, providing us with a broad cultural understanding of tourism in the region, followed by a process of filtering posts specifically related to witches, death, and dark history. Using evolving search chains including keywords and Boolean operators, we subsequently narrowed and explored *within* the reviews, seeking out relevant and rich data relating to our research questions. To safeguard posters' anonymity, usernames are not disclosed in this paper.

From December 2022 to May 2023, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews to complement offline and online observations. Initially, as part of the larger study of witches and consumer culture, the first author spoke with individuals who self-identify as witches, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods facilitated by distributing recruitment posters in the local area. To encompass a broader pool of participants for the tourism sub-project, the snowball sample was expanded with more flexible criteria. We sought adults who visited a witch tourism site in Lancashire and were open to share their experiences. For this paper, we draw upon a mixed sample of 22 interviews that include diverse voices from general tourists to those more invested in witches as an identity category.

The first author acknowledges the potential positive bias of her "female fieldwork experience" when collecting data (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Feminine traits (*e.g.* empathy, supportiveness, approachability) may have helped her to navigate entry and build rapport amongst participants within the female-oriented and 'herstorically' located spaces of witch interest. Although she had no personal investment in witch-related cultures or witch tourism before undertaking the research, she remained empathetic and reflexive about how some participants may frame their experiences in ways that do not conform to secularist, empiricist research assumptions (Ozanne and Appau, 2019). To ensure impartiality in handling dark

111

history materials relating to gendered violence and misogyny, the first author met periodically with the wider research team to share impressions and subject emerging interpretations to scrutiny.

All interviews were undertaken either in-person or by video-calling software, recorded with each participant's informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised. Where possible, follow-up interviews were arranged to explore emerging ideas and confirm our interpretations.

Observations, interviews, and netnographic data were brought together as a combined data pool for analysis. Our analytic procedures adhered to "the hermeneutical back and forth between part and whole" approach: drawing out patterns, making connections, and comparing emerging interpretations against one another and in reference to conceptual connections from the literature (Spiggle, 1994, p. 495). This method enabled us to extract provisional categories which were gradually developed into core themes using Žižek's and Derrida's articulations of supplementarity. While supplementarity provided us with the overall theoretical and explanatory framework for approaching our analysis, the recursive process necessitated moving between the empirical material and the wider academic literature, seeking out additional concepts to support emerging interpretations. This involved consulting the literature on superstition and supernatural activity, (*e.g.* Holloway, 2010), kitsch (*e.g.* Potts, 2012), and other key constructs (*e.g.* the grotesque; see Bakhtin, 1984). Gradually, this process allowed us to crystallise three theory-enfolded themes which explain the interlinking ways through which Lancashire witch tourism supports (rather than subverts) capitalist realism.

4.7 An Ethnography of Lancashire Witch Tourism

We present our findings across three themes. First, we discuss how *metempsychosis*, an empathetic activity undertaken by visitors at witch tourism sites, is managed to be self-fulfilling rather than politically subversive. Second, we report on the emphasis of *grotesquery* at these sites as a way of denuding dark histories of political content and insulating aspects of the present from critique. Third, we explore how *kitschification* is undertaken to soften, ironise, and reduce brutalities of the past to a commodifiable, inoffensive aesthetic. Collectively, these themes reveal how dark history can be carefully dissociated from any reverberating dissidence

in the present, thus supplementing rather than subverting today's ideologico-ethical prescriptions.

4.7.1 Managed Metempsychosis

A prominent theme in our data relates to tourism providers' careful management of 'metempsychosis' to ensure that visitor experiences remain centred on the enjoyable consumption *of*, rather than active justice-seeking *for*, the ancestral *Other*. Metempsychosis manifests in tourism as a 'recreated journey', where visitors follow in the footsteps of, and try to identify with, those being memorialised at historic sites (Laing and Crouch, 2011). Accordingly, metempsychotic identification at locations where mostly women were murdered for witchcraft can reasonably be suspected of presenting a probable risk of reawakening old resentments, stoking gender and class politics, and inciting militant anger in the present. To militate against fuelling the possibility of over-identification and politicised disharmony that might 'restart' history (Daly, 2024), much of the commercial witch tourism we observed in Lancashire is organised to ensure that commemoration of the executed women is grounded to individual, depoliticised consumption experiences rather than collective dissatisfactions with structural injustices that might persist today. Commemoration is encouraged so long as it is 'enjoyable' and one's enjoyment does not disrupt the present symbolic order: "Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, *but* deprived of the substance that makes it dangerous" (Žižek, 2004, p. 507).

One way that metempsychosis is defanged, de-structuralised, and made enjoyable at witch tourism sites is by locating visitors' consumption within the realm of "supernatural possibility" (Holloway, 2010). Lancashire is replete with ghost-hunting activities, legend-telling, and witchcraft mythology which supplants historical reality with entertainment and replaces structures with affects. Recounting the attraction of supernatural possibility, "Emerson", a self-identifying Pagan witch who works as a guide and actor for a museum service spanning multiple sites in the local area, emphasised: "*they* [tourists] *absolutely love it* [supernatural pursuits]*, by far what I get asked about the most at these historic locations*", and; "*people have paid hundreds of pounds to stay at the Judges' Lodgings looking for ghosts*".

To explore the consumer appeal of supernatural possibility, the first author took part in a commercial ghost walk that retraces the Pendle Witches' steps from their trial at Lancaster Castle to their execution on Gallows Hill, visiting supposedly haunted locations in-between.

113

As a form of "haunted space commodification" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 174), ghost walks ground tourism in ludic, performative engagements with the 'uncanny' rather than in any kind of empirical engagement with political, potentially offensive themes such as misogyny, male violence against women, or the continued persecution of marginalised individuals. To render metempsychosis conducive to consumer interests of the self, the ghost tour included a séance within a wooded area where the cadavers of the Pendle Witches were rumoured to have been discarded and left unburied following their execution. During the ghost walk, the guide told comedic anecdotes, punctuating historical facts with folk tales, hearsay, and jokes, and reminding walkers to "share their spooky experiences to Facebook!".

Similarly, a visitor discloses to TripAdvisor the touristic emphasis on supernatural possibility and play at Lancaster Castle where the Pendle Witches were incarcerated and sentenced to death:

> They even staged a mock witch trial. Lots of ghosts and ghouls jumping out at us as we went round which added to the fun… although it had elements of a 'scare attraction' the tour was based on historical facts. Lots of old tales and ghost stories.

Courting supernatural possibility works to temper thana-tourists' metempsychotic journeys and shore up capitalist realism in the present by producing an "aetheric fantasy-space in which reality is irretrievably lost" (Žižek, 2006a, p. 152). By performatively repackaging the obscenities of the past in ways that avoid the stickiness of historical accuracy and political realities, tourism providers rely on "infrastructures of enchantment" defined by Holloway (2010, p. 618), as "affective assemblages of supposition and wonder that momentarily transform space into something charged with the strange and anomalous".

"Elyana", a self-professed Anglophile who relocated from Latin America to Lancashire describes the *leavening* effect of supernatural possibility in thanatourism. Having previously visited other dark tourism attractions she found to be less about enchantment or fantasy making, including favelas in her native Brazil, Elyana suggests supernatural possibility at places of death works to bring levity to the visitor experience:

> …I do think that [supernatural possibility]'s interesting and it's fun, in a way, also to think of an extra element to life: or an extra world beyond life; beyond this sort of 'muggle' reality that we live in… we are trying to look for something that makes this life more bearable… I think that those stories – or trying to connect with 'something else', something more magical – helps. (Elyana)

Rather than subvert faith in today's rational neoliberal environment, or what Elyana calls "this 'muggle' present", supernatural possibility affords her a way to overcome post-historical boredom by adding "an extra element to life". Her choice of the word "muggle" is notable as it is a term borrowed from the *Harry Potter* series of children's fantasy books that references the *non*-magical and reflects Elyana's interest in seeking out a supplement to make today's cynical-rational world "more bearable".

Another way that metempsychosis is depoliticised, consumerised, and made useful for supplementing capitalist realism is through ensuring 'pilgrimages' are perceived as opportunities for consumer accumulation rather than justice-seeking for ancestral victims. Many of the walking routes, trails, and sites of historical importance appeal to an ethos of the self. One of the major pilgrimages, 'The Lancashire Witches Walk', a 51-mile self-guided walking trail which begins in Pendle and ends at Gallows Hill in Lancaster, is punctuated with accumulative activities. While pilgrims are encouraged to metempsychotically retrace the steps undertaken by the Pendle Witches prior to their execution, the walk is well provisioned with witch-themed market offerings along the way including a heritage centre, gift shops, cafes, and pubs. This is reflected by TripAdvisor reviews, such as, "*We was doing the witches trial and before we started we decided to visit the witches galore shop and was impressed by all the products*", and: "*Went to Pendle for a witch hunt. Started our journey at the lovely cafe in the village. Great food and drink and prices very good.*"

As a further accumulative component, The Lancashire Witches Walk is marked by ten iron way markers each engraved with a verse from a commemorative poem, inviting pilgrims to take rubbings at each marker with pencil and paper to collect. Rather than acting as a catalyst to provoke collective reflection on injustices inflicted on ancestral *Others*, walking trails are described by visitors on TripAdvisor as an opportunity for personal fulfilment and pleasure. One tourist writes:

> I have always wanted to visit Pendle Hill with all its haunting history and commanding presence. An avid hiker and witch fan my friend and I hiked to the summit while on a witchy weekend in Pendle… The summit has a monument … perfect for that 'we did it' selfie.

Although metempsychotic journeys can grant visitors access to genuine feelings of empathy for memorialised victims and thus have the potential to engender very real effects on the present, these feelings are, as our above observations illustrate, rerouted into consumer

symbolism, personal enjoyment, and opportunities to collect consumable keepsakes. Educating oneself *of* the past and entertaining oneself *with* the past become the obscene underside of one another in post-history – they are mutually supplemental and co-constituting. By inviting thanatourists to reflect on their own emotions, experiences, and identities rather than on politics or injustices, Lancashire witch tourism neatly supplements rather than subverts today's capitalist present in which individualism and consumerism are massively naturalised.

4.7.2 Governed Grotesquery

The second theme to emerge from our data relates to the subordination of the memorialised dead's legacy to 'grotesquery', defined by content elements that are fearful, degrading, or disgusting. The grotesque aspects of an experience are those characterised by an anti-structural ethos in which "the *id* is uncrowned and transformed into a 'funny monster'" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 49). In playing up to the comic and the horrific when narrating the history of slain witches, tourism providers give primacy to the perverse pleasures and curiosities of the individual consumer. Rather than appeal to more politically articulate concerns of the collective, the grotesque caters to "a disposition that is overall both tasteless and morbid… getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenalin" (Brophy, 1986, p. 5). This orientation towards affects rather than politics supplements rather than contradicts the post-historical ethos in the present, allowing Jacobean bigotry, superstition, and violence – despite their apparent ethical distance from today's neoliberal humanist ideology – to function as its obscene underside. The prospect of grotesquery is even allowed to become a factor in routine consumer decision-making. One visitor describes his motivation for visiting Lancaster Castle on TripAdvisor as the following: "*My missus likes the occult and I enjoy castles, so this was the perfect place to go to as its [sic] got a history in [sic] hanging witches in England's horrible history*".

What this visitor calls "horrible history" encompasses obscene retrospections that offer temporary, enclaved reversals of the present's neoliberal-humanist norms and a revival of the horrors that had been repressed out of bourgeois consciousness. Because these horrors are contained to 'legitimate' heritage sites, they are protected by a degree of fantasy-support allowing visitors to indulge their obscene-perverse desires without feeling that they have compromised any of today's ideologico-ethical prescriptions of tolerance and freedom. As Žižek (2006b, p. 28) suggests, "[a]s numerous analyses from Bakhtin onward have shown,

periodic transgressions are inherent to the social order; they function as a condition of the latter's stability".

Throughout the ethnography, grotesquery featured heavily in tourism providers' emphasis on a carceral aesthetic of suffering. The dehumanising conditions of the Pendle Witches' incarceration and execution were most apparent throughout tours of Lancaster Castle, with guides drawing reference to shackles, torture equipment, and chained masks – 'scold's bridles' – that were used on female inmates to prevent them from talking to one another. In reference to the Castle tours, TripAdvisor posts report that: "*'Witches' were tried and executed here; the place is full of examples of just how unpleasant one human being can be to another*"; "*The tour includes… prison cells, instruments of restraint, details of hangings and the Pendle Witches. This is not for the faint hearted; it is dark but fascinating*", and; "*If you like your history horrible, then well worth a visit*". Contrary to neoliberalism's official privileging of civility, inclusiveness, and dignity, the focus in much of the Castle tour centres "not in the bourgeois ego" but on "degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19).

The Žižekian mode of supplementarity is visible in carceral images of degradation which carry out further violence against historic victims under the aegis of remembrance and education. Rather than explore the political and judiciary biases that might continue into the neoliberal present (thus destabilising faith *in* the present), a surplus of attention and voyeuristic fascination is given to the Pendle Witches' murders, down to the specific hanging methods used by executioners to maximise their suffering. Careful attention is given by the Lancaster Castle tour guides to the notorious dungeon in the Well Tower – or 'the Pit' – where the witches endured confinement under harsh conditions, succumbing to disease and despair before facing their grim fate. A TripAdvisor user remarks: "*You can actually see the cell where the Pendle Witches waited months for their trial and the window they were pushed out of with nooses round there* [sic] *necks*". The surplus of male-on-female violence depicted "provokes us in our innermost being, stirring up automatic sympathy with the ultimate archetypal image of the victimised woman", Žižek (2008b, p. 13) suggests, however there is also at play, "the lie of this sympathy, the obscene pleasure we gain from seeing the victim suffer".

Although confronting visitors with obscene details of the brutal mistreatment of women would ordinarily incur disgust within most venues of the civilised neoliberal present, it is nevertheless granted license within the thanatourism context. The deaths of

ancestral *Others* are recast "not of actual social history with its sober facts and figures, but of a deliberately grotesque and exaggerated account of the past" (Inglis and Holmes, 2003, p. 59). "Rose", a higher education teacher with interest in Lancaster's dark history, describes how learning about the gruesome ways women were silenced in the Jacobean age provoked in her disgust and alarm, but also granted perspective on the improved status of women today. Rose is well-aware that women remain unequal and objectified in many contemporary environments. However, having been confronted at Lancaster Castle with grotesque carceral details of how society's most vulnerable were mistreated throughout pre-liberal history, Rose finds herself willing to disavow many of the injustices that persist in the capitalist present:

> … they [tour guides] talked about making a mark on somebody if they were being convicted… obviously we don't do things like that and now. You do think, 'oh gosh, that's a bit gruesome'… I feel thankful that as a society we've changed. And perhaps appreciative of what we have… when you look at stories like the Pendle witches, you think that is a context in time *but* a portrayal of what *happened* to women. (Rose)

Grotesquery is dramatically invoked to emphasise "the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 48). By immersing visitors in the otherworldly barbarism of an illiberal past, an enclave is set up for bounded play removed from the safe humanist present, while working epistemically and ideologically to reinforce the capitalist realist fantasy that things are indeed truly 'better' under neoliberalism. Similarly, "Elyana" explains that while the pressures of today's individualist competition sometimes frustrate her and make her pine for more pastoral, primitive ways of living, Lancashire heritage sites give her pause:

> …[visiting these sites] is almost like a reminding exercise how far things have come. So, it's hard to get today to be great or perfect, but we've definitely come a long way from basically being barbarians and, you know, in a way we are grateful for that… I think we do have more guarantees [today], a little bit more assurance that we are protected from these things. (Elyana)

For Rose and Elyana, while thanatourism caters to visitors' curiosities about – or even beliefs in – alternative possibilities, the barbarism they are confronted with ensures that they do not take their beliefs too seriously. As Fisher (2009, p. 5) suggests of capitalist realism, "[i]n claiming… to have delivered us from the 'fatal abstractions' inspired by the 'ideologies of the past'", it "presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself". By revealing to visitors some of the perils that can emerge from over-identifying with pre-liberal ways of life, witch tourism distracts from contemporary cruelties that persist today.

4.7.3 Curated Kitschification

A third way that witch tourism is made to function as an obscene supplement to capitalist realism is through market actors' enrolment of "kitschy aestheticization" from which the gravitas of real tragedy is "reduced to a thrilling sensation, its truth-claim is suspended" (Žižek, 1997, p. 197). Exemplified by an expansive range of witchcraft-themed pens, fridge magnets, keyrings, mugs, postcards, tote bags, t-shirts, jewellery, dolls, plush toys, souvenirs, and tchotchkes available to buy at museum gift shops and independent retailers, sentimental kitsch is relied upon to diffuse the austere and soften the atrocities of bigotry and male-led systems of exploitation. Kitsch is characterised by an excess of garishness or gaiety and likened to a "folding screen to curtain off death" (Kundera, 1985, p. 253). Though kitsch has been approached as commodification that produces a cheap or insouciant reinterpretation of events for easy consumption (Sharpley and Stone, 2009), we observed that kitsch also works ideologically to insulate today's cultural-political landscape from critique.

"Quirky" is a term frequently used by visitors as a euphemism for kitsch in the context of Lancashire witch tourism sites and retail spaces, exemplified by statements on TripAdvisor such as: "*Really nice quirky shop filled with lots of souvenirs and knick knacks. Bought a beautiful Pendle witch and some cute owls*"; "*Lots of quirky things to get, magnets, tea towels, witches on brooms*", and; "*Small heritage centre, gift shop with some quirky items*".

A miscellany of "quirky" bric-a-brac marketed in the spirit of detoxifying, satirising, and commodifying once controversial, discriminatory symbols were observed across sites, such as merchandise featuring witch woodcuts. In early modernity, witch woodcuts were crudely printed illustrations used in pamphlets distributed throughout Europe to promote suspicion towards 'unruly' women and to foment the criminalisation of witchcraft. In their updated kitschy form, satirising text is placed beneath reprints of woodcuts, such as a postcard featuring two witches with a 'pet' demon alongside the text '#Relationship Goals' and a tote bag emblazoned with a woodcut of witches celebrating their Sabbat with the text 'Hex, drugs & mind control'. Distilling historic injustices through kitsch denudes dark histories of their complex origins and gender politics, salvaging for visitors "feelings of comfort, safety and hope" (Sharpley and Stone, 2009, p. 127).

Much of the reliance on kitsch we observed aligns with the "teddy-bearification" of suffering (Potts, 2012), characterised by repackaging historical tragedy to assist in the perpetuation of *consumerised* subjectivities rather than reawakening political agency. Teddy-bearifying the past works by "screening out political realities" (Potts, 2012, p. 234) and promoting in their place "sentimental artefacts and symbols" (p. 235). For instance, through dolls modelled on those who were executed in 1612 being sold at a shop in Pendle, historic victims are unmoored from the political gravitas of their mistreatment and made into mascots for individualist fantasy-making and sensation-seeking.

By relying upon kitsch to supplant structural problems related to class and gender and the fallibility of witness depositions that persist under neoliberal-capitalism today, thanatourism reduces potentially polemic issues to decorative items that are less likely to arouse anxiety or invite political attention. Commodity culture becomes an important part of the tourism experience, or as one TripAdvisor tourist recommends:

> If you're in the trail of the witches in Pendle, you can't really pass by this little shop without having a look…The shop sells witch-related gifts and collectables, including Pendle Hill souvenirs, local interest books and has a selection of witchcraft products.

This is not to say that visitors uncritically *accept* commercial influence at sites of death, but being able to cynically distance themselves from the commercialisation of victims' suffering while still revelling in its treats provides visitors with a pragmatic means for making their experience enjoyable. Cheap, mass-produced tchotchkes are allowed to take on value more than their material worth and thus serve as a Žižekian *fetish* wherein, "the fetish [is] an illusion obfuscating the true state of things" (Žižek, 2008b, p. 299).

"Apollo", a Greek marketing executive who moved from London to Lancaster to work remotely after the COVID-19 lockdown measures were lifted, spoke to us about the fetishistic nature of the witch souvenirs he owns. The women's cruel imprisonment, he felt, reflected his personal experiences of alienation and confinement in London during the lockdown. Apollo described purchasing a 'Pendle Witch County' fridge magnet and a plush witch doll from the Judges' Lodgings Museum gift shop as keepsakes. The kitschy nature of these items, for Apollo, obfuscate – and allow him to disavow – the genuine horrors that the real women experienced:

> I wanted to get something to be reminded of this experience I had, and I think 'what's the best way to do this?' It's getting a souvenir… for example the witch dolls… cute

little dolls, soft and squishy… that generic stereotypical witch that you would probably imagine how a 'witch' would look […] every time I walk by my fridge I can see that witch magnet I got from my visit [too]… immediately I'm thinking about the witches, the trip that I had, the stories that I heard … it's not necessarily, you know, all the bad things that happened to those witches. Its more related to *myself*, the experiences that *I* had [at that time], the interactions that *I* had on the guided tour… not necessarily all the historic things that have happened there which, I know, they are quite dark and not always easy to digest. (Apollo)

Such purchases allow visitors to retain memories of the witches while curtaining off their more traumatic aspects. Apollo's fridge magnet reflects what Žižek (2008b) would classify as a "a tiny stupid object to which [he] cling[s]" (p. 298), a festishistic means to get close to historical injustices "without paying the full price for it" (p. 300).

Though visitors become well aware that the Jacobean witch-hunt period was punctuated with rampant misogyny, state-sponsored violence, and religious bigotry, fetishes such as witch-themed dolls, magnets, jewellery, homeware, and other material accessories allow them to look past these hard truths and hold onto their fantasies of the era being more wondrous, raucous, and beguiling than today's post-historical and staid social climate, *without* needing to identify too closely with it.

4.8 Discussion & Conclusion

Using Lancashire witch tourism as our empirical context, we investigated how thanatourism functions as a response to post-historical boredom, providing visitors with a means of accessing an ostensibly more authentic, more eventful world before the cynical realism of neoliberal-capitalism erased all conceivable alternatives. In our findings, we illustrated how thanatourism is entwined complexly with the current cultural impasse: the feeling of bored resignation to a depoliticised, liberalised present shorn of all mysticism and anything outside of money, markets, or consumption.

Thanatourism is staged as an illusory means of transportation to a time where more exciting, dramatic, and oftentimes brutal events once occurred and life as we know it had not yet been remoulded according to reason, industry, and civility. Beyond thanatourism functioning as an enclaved, transgressive 'way out' from the suffocating rationalism and commercialism of neoliberal day-to-day life, we argue that such egress is inherent in the present social order, and that the fantasy of escape is a necessary supplemental condition of the order's stability. Our themes reveal that thanatourism functions as an obscene supplement to capitalist

realism through processes of: 1.) aligning visitors' metempsychotic journeys with consumption rather than politics; 2.) confronting visitors with grotesquery to ensure their fantasies are not taken too seriously, and 3.) providing visitors with enough kitsch to curtain off the traumas that reside in the past and potentially persist today. Our work offers two key contributions for tourism research.

First, our analysis responds to calls for more critical consideration of the interrelationships between tourism and political economy (Dunkley, 2015; Fitchett *et al.*, 2021). In a note for *Annals of Tourism Research*, Dunkley (2015) called for researchers to rethink thanatourism's relationship with societal conditions and to place a greater focus on the implications that memorialising tragic historical moments have for the present. Elsewhere, Light (2017) lamented that, "[m]any researchers have approached dark tourism or thanatourism from a rather narrow perspective which neglects the broader social and political context in which they are situated" (p. 283). Thanatourism studies have remained predominantly epistemologically centred on lived experiences rather than on the structuring influences of market and social systems. Accordingly, travel to sites associated with death and suffering has been assumed to be motivated by individual tourists' personal desires to learn (Driessen, 2022), enhance feelings of some kind of collective identity (Tinson *et al.*, 2015), revel in "ghoulish titillation" (Wilson, 2008, p. 169), or satisfy schadenfreude-esque urges (Dale and Robinson, 2011).

While we do not disregard the importance of individually and experientially based perspectives, approaching thanatourism with an exclusively 'grounded' emphasis on the personal motivations of consumer-tourists can narrow our appreciation of the relationships that thanatourism has with its broader surrounds, thus neglecting the 'unseen' structural influences of a historical or cultural character. Although some theorists have compellingly linked aspects of thanatourism to structural patterning, such as how thanatourists' voyeuristic schadenfreude is normalised and institutionalised by a culture of cynical, competitive neoliberalism that fosters thana-capitalism (*e.g.* Korstanje, 2017; Tzanelli, 2016), we have made important adjustments to this perspective by inscribing tourists' personal experiences within the ideological preconditions of market-mediated post-political and post-historical systems. We urge future researchers to follow suit in expanding epistemological accounts of thanatourism by seeking a 'calibrated' perspective; one that integrates the phenomenology of tourists' lived

experiences with appreciation of the wider structural, contextual conditions that cannot be so easily reflected upon.

Second and relatedly, in our efforts to adopt a calibrated perspective, we complicate and invert the structural functioning of thanatourism. Drawing upon the logic of obscene supplementarity, we considered how thanatourism can be underpinned by a superegoic imperative to offset collective boredom with the sclerotic present or, more accurately, to leave the quiet comforts of post-history behind for the superstitious and brutal obscenities of history. Contrary to Korstanje's assumption that thanatourism produces and is produced by capitalism's injunction to reaffirm personal success through observing the miseries of ancestral *Others*, we propose that thanatourism is more likely linked to an obscene superegoic pressure to transcend (or transgress) these petty injunctions and the limits they place on our freedom while nonetheless sustaining their appearance.

Rather than suggest consumer interest in places associated with death reflects an encultured "sadist obsession for enjoying 'the Other's pain'" (Korstanje, 2017, p. 15), we propose thanatourism may be better thought of as a fantasy-attempt to revisit a world before today's post-historical, cynical conditions normalised obsessive hyper-competitiveness. While for Korstanje, consumers brazenly use thanatourism sites to *opt-in* to a game of neoliberal competition, we identify these sites as appealing epistemically to an unsaid urge to *drop out* of neoliberal competition altogether. However, because commercial thanatourism sites remain aligned with consumer interests of the self rather than with structural and collective politics, dropping out remains illusory. Thanatourism thus perpetuates rather than obviates post-historical sclerosis by catering to consumers' quixotic desires to experience something different while at the same time, foreclosing any alternatives.

By revealing how thanatourism provides only temporary access to wider cultural predecessors and does little more for contemporary social imaginaries than confirm neoliberalism's supremacy, we help to clarify and expand Fitchett *et al.*'s (2021, p. 9) statement that "tourism is a sector in which capitalism conceals its contradictions". Although others have considered how aspects of the sector, such as responsible or eco-tourism, allows for capitalism to sustain itself *in the face of* inherent contradictions (Fletcher, 2011), we have shown how thanatourism appears to function *through* contradictions. In thanatourism, history is invoked paradoxically to defend the post-historical present. As an obscene supplement, thanatourism is

something that appears to remedy a lack or fill an absence but works ideologically to obscure the problems of the neoliberal-capitalist present and insulate its social order from critique.

Moreover, while thanatourism is similar to eco-tourism in the sense that both locate discourses and practices – including those on ethics and morality – within the realm of consumption, one works progressively and the other regressively. Rather than appear as a progressive 'fix' in the face of problems associated with mass consumerism, as eco-tourism does, thanatourism works regressively to conceal the (living) antagonisms of the present, functioning to distract from the many legitimate criticisms to be made against our contemporary 'civilised' political economy. In these respects, while eco-tourism is presented as an alternative form of development that might overcome some of the problems of a neoliberal capitalist present, thanatourism works in the service of ossifying the present by confronting visitors with the horrors of a world *before* taken-for-granted comforts and rights were afforded to them by capitalism.

"The power of capitalist realism", Fisher (2009, p. 4) explains, "derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history". Put differently, thanatourism reflects a kind of "cultural necrophilia" (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2021, p. 164) which sees historic events, objects, people, and places resurrected and remarketed in ways that benefit and legitimise the post-historical, post-political present. Our accounts of this process, however, were restricted geographically to the Northwest of England and therefore bound by Anglo-cultural and historical idiosyncrasies that may not translate to other contexts of witch tourism. Our interpretations may be extended or problematised by comparing with destinations such as Salem in the U.S, renowned for its advanced commercialism, or the Fête du Vodoun festival in Benin where witchcraft remains a living and participative affair. These locations amongst others could offer valuable insight to how thanatourism relates to and differs from neoliberal political economy across borders while enhancing the external validity of the claims made in this paper.

Furthermore, while we have explored how depoliticisation is perpetuated through the de-realising effects of visitors thinking about witches, ghosts, magic and so forth, future researchers must ask if the political hollowing out of the visitor experience is obtainable to the same extent in other thanatouristic formations. Contexts beyond witch tourism that function as obscene supplementation for capitalist realism may include 20th century concentration camps (Goulding and Pressey, 2023). Although concentration camps are not underpinned by magical

124

fantasy or superstition, they still present a gateway to an illiberal, alternative world marked out by death, drama, and brutal imaginaries. Auschwitz as a symbol of Nazi terror has long been used to memorialise the perils posed by believing in politics outside of the liberal-democratic variety, and thus may be interrogated for its function in preserving faith in the staid, post-historical and post-political present.

Importantly, depoliticising effects may not be unique to thanatourism or its attachments to deathly and superstitious histories, particularly if we consider that it is often difficult to convincingly demonstrate that thanatourism is different from heritage tourism (Light, 2017). Accordingly, future researchers should consider how tourism sites besides those associated with death may be useful to capitalist realism. Seeking out vestiges of the Jacobean world of witches in Lancashire may be broadly comparable to that of visitors gazing upon the relics of 20th century "Yugo-nostalgia" across museums in the Balkans (Čaušević, 2019), or pilgrims who travel to Rocky Mountain rendezvous sites to re-enact the early 19th century American West fur trade (Belk and Costa, 1998). These expressions of heritage consumption, like witchcraft tourism, foment fantasies about returning to older systems which have passed into history, priming service providers to respond with market-friendly representations. However, unlike Belk and Costa (1998) who conceptualise visiting a semi-mythic past as an innocuous opportunity for social play, or Čaušević (2019), who speculates on its utopian spatial possibilities, we see the potential for heritage to contribute ideologically to visitors' passive acceptance of the market-dominant present. The pre-liberal past can indeed be rediscovered and enjoyed as "temporary solace" (Čaušević, 2019, p. 23) *but*, we suggest, only so long as it is not taken too seriously and any realistic hopes for its permanent revival are jettisoned upon exiting the gift shop.

We encourage an evolving stream of critical tourism research that interrogates the diverse and changing functions of not only thanatourism, but all of heritage tourism's obscene supplementarity for supporting the market-dominant present.

4.9 References

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4.10 CCT Poetry Anthology: Expending Pendle

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Heaving Pendle Hill on the emblem of Burnley,

Bewitched forgotten chronicles dark and eerie,

Guilty verdicts saw ten witches hanged,

Witchcraft wanders Pendle's feral land.

In Lancaster Castle's pit beneath 'Well Tower',

Fate sealed by Clergy and magisterial powers,

1612 trials witness footsteps flourished,

Unjust decrees ensnared and embellished.

Witch Tourism recounts our darkest tapestries,

Heritage bays for late suffering and atrocities,

Witches' relics hampered in despair,

Spectral Others whispering beware.

Expending death through gaze and expression,

Neglected signifiers for feminist subjugation,

Igniting violent legacies now re-drawn,

Of pastimes and present in brutal form.

Chapter 5: From Magical Thinking To 'Thinking Magically': Contemporary Witchcraft & Its Structure Of Disavowal

5.1 Introduction to Chapter 5

The third and final paper of my thesis, entitled "*From Magical Thinking To 'Thinking Magically': Contemporary Witchcraft & Its Structure Of Disavowal*" is a single-authored working manuscript and expands on the key theoretical proposition explored in the second paper, namely that consumers' interest in the pre-capitalist past functions paradoxically as both an escape from and a *justification for* their faith in capitalist realism. Paper 2 explored this proposition by ethnographically examining how consumers' boredom with the post-historical present brought them into proximity with thanatouristic experiences that reproduce rather than challenge capitalist realism. Paper 3 considers how structural disappointment with the capitalist present brings consumers into proximity with magical beliefs that ultimately end up reinforcing *rather than* weakening reliance on the market, expressed through complex identifications with the witch and witchcraft as a cultural community.

The overarching objective of my third paper is to explore the contradictions faced by those who believe in, and identify as, witches within a secularised present where belief has been subordinated to reason: magic has long been supplanted by cynical instrumentalism, and all forms of expression are now market-oriented. I explore how today's witches remain cynical and pragmatic about the efficacy of magic yet continue to believe in the mystical power of the witch because belief *in of itself* allows them to disavow the reality that *there is no* alternative to the coldly secular character of today's capitalist realist forever-present (a reality that is too traumatic to come to terms with). Maintaining belief in magic – even if one knows fully well that it is not real – serves an important way for consumers to tolerate the cruelties and boredoms of a deeply liberalised and secularised existence.

For this paper I return to the explanatory theories of Slavoj Žižek (in-keeping with Paper 1 and Paper 2). A large part of my thinking for Paper 3 is informed by Žižek's concept of "fetishistic disavowal" which enables a person to actively admit the limitations of their beliefs even as they still celebrate and uphold them. By *fetishising* some desirable aspect of one's beliefs, this allows the individual to look past or ignore (i.e. *disavowal*) their less desirable aspects. I had initially become intrigued by this concept of fetishistic disavowal when

reading Žižek's work on obscene supplementarity for Paper 2, but it did not emerge as fully useful for my analysis until I began working on Paper 3.

Drawing on netnographic data and interviews with self-identifying witches, this manuscript departs from current understandings of magical thinking in extant consumer research which tends to focus on subjects' genuine belief in magic. Instead, I seek to account for the more *cynical* aspects of one's belief in magic. Following the logic of fetishistic disavowal, I introduce the term '*thinking magically*' which explains how modern witches can simultaneously acknowledge the limitations of their belief in magic and continue acting as if they are 'unaware' of this dissonance-inducing reality.

At the heart of Paper 3 is the following conundrum: *how can consumer interest in magical communal values and an anti-materialistic reverence for nature function within a modernised, rationalised, and secularised society that is governed by individual, hyper-material values and unsustainable systems of consumption and production?* To address this problem, the paper reveals several neutralisation strategies used by witches to disavowal the problems inherent in their beliefs in magic. Relating back to the overarching thesis, one's belief in magic enacted through the witch – as a vestige of an archaic past – serves an important role in consumer capitalist society, by giving individuals a space to *simultaneously* be cynical of the problems inherent in their alternative, magical worldview *and* carry on acting as if these problems are not so, rather than *act on* such problems (thus keeping one in a state of conformity to the status quo).

From Magical Thinking To 'Thinking Magically': Contemporary Witchcraft & Its Structure Of Disavowal

5.2 Abstract

Although consumer researchers have previously explored magical thinking wherein thoughts and behaviours are believed to have a magical influence on the world around us, what has been considered less is how magical belief – *in and of itself* – provides us with a "fetish" to achieve a more favourable view of reality. Following Žižek's concept of "fetishistic disavowal" which implies subjects may recognise the falsity of their beliefs yet still act '*as if*' they were true, this paper introduces the new concept of 'thinking magically' to account for consumer culture's cynically pragmatic belief in magic. Drawing upon netnographic data and interviews with self-identifying witches, I explore how knowledge that magic is little more than spectacle - is frequently disavowed as an accepted part of the identity investments and community-building efforts of witchcraft. To the *witch-as-fetishist*, belief is necessary for coping with the various traumas of our times. Findings are structured according to three strategies of disavowal to protect one's belief in magic: *maintaining benevolence, maintaining authenticity*, and *maintaining relevance.* Ultimately consumers disavowal the viability of magic choosing to systematically repress and forget harsher truths. The benefit of doing so, is that witches can disavowal knowledge of the 'thing' which is upsetting, injurious or sensitive by pushing it from consciousness.

Keywords: Magical thinking, magic, witchcraft, fetishistic disavowal, Žižek

5.3 Introduction

> For some, an interest in astrology and other occult practices will last for the length of a 30-second TikTok. For others, the act of burning herbs or looking to the stars for answers is part of a deeper cultural identity. It's part of their lifestyle, or their religion. What unites these various experiences is a desire to reach out and connect with each other, and touch parts of our existence that can't be understood or controlled...And even if one doesn't rationally believe burning a bay leaf with the word "happiness" written on it will change their lives, there can still be a positive power in doing something – anything – to make sense of it all (CNN, 2021)

In liberal-secular societies characterised by anthropogenic dominance over nature, deference to scientific evidence, and 'expert' pronouncements on all aspects of life (see Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Thompson, 2005), mainstream reliance on magic, myth, and superstition might reasonably be assumed anachronistic (Frazer, 1959). Rather than writing magic off as a vestige of a more benighted time in human history however, consumers continue to rely on magical objects, discourses, and experiences for a variety of reasons (Arnould *et al.*, 1999; Arnould and Price, 1993; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; Hamerman, 2009; St. James *et al.*, 2011). Tarot reading (Kedzior and Scaraboto, 2020), "sacred shopping" (MacLaran and Scott, 2009), vampire roleplay (Goulding and Saren, 2008), or communing with ghosts (Preece *et al.*, 2022) have all become impassioned interests for consumers around the world. As foreshadowed by Arnould *et al.* (1999), in postmodernity, thinking about and 'doing' magic has re-emerged from the margins of modern thought and reclaimed its place amongst diverse cultural milieu.

As shown epigraphically, people are increasingly turning to magic - in the form of witchcraft – to navigate the complexity, stresses, instability of modern life. Gen Z is now referred to as "The Witch Generation" facilitated by social media where self-identified and self-styled witches, exchange ideas on a range of topics from spell-casting to celebrating witchcraft's heretical lineage (Rawnsley, 2023).

Though we know perhaps why magic is relied upon, what is less understood is why consumers commit to magic in full and cynical recognition that magic is not really 'real' and cannot really change anything. Rather, magic, they understand is something that functions more as an aesthetic style and way to boost consumers' expression as opposed to anything truly 'magic' in any mystical-powerful connotations of the term as something that defies the laws of causation leading to some idyllic end mode. While consumer culture remains interpellated by technocratic, material secular systems, even those *well versed* in said pragmatic, technological, scientific logics of dominant cultural institutions can and do, believe in unprovable belief systems like magic.

This paper considers belief in magic to be rooted in the formula of Žižek's (2008a) fetishistic disavowal, characterised by the sentiment of, "'1 know very well, but still...'" (p. 12) – the 'but still' refers to the idea that a subject will *know* something is so but will act as if it is *not* so. Fetishistic disavowal is best thought of as "recognition through denial" (Žižek, 1997, p. 137) or "acceptance-through-disavowal" (p. 142). Fetishistic disavowal is thus a technique that allows the individual to *choose* to systematically repress and ultimately overlook truth through

some kind of justification they cling to ("I know it is not real, but I am going to participate in this anyway). The individual can disavow knowledge of a truth that is difficult to face, pushing it from consciousness, and, this capacity to disavowal the recognition that something is not real, requires the individual to fetishise something. Even if a consumer is cynically resigned to the fact that magic is not 'real', she may continue to act as if it were simply as a way of "break[ing] the spell of zombieism" where everything is somewhat economically predetermined, in contemporary life (McNally, 2011, p. 268). *Believing* in an external, mystical power allows consumers to disavow current realities that are too traumatic to encounter.

Drawing from a Žižekian structure of disavowal allows us to complicate and move beyond the concept of "magical thinking" used to characterise how one genuinely believes in the power of mystical external forces to effect desirable outcomes on material goods and circumstances (St. James *et al*., 2011; Arnould *et al*., 1999; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; Hamerman, 2009). Fetishistic disavowal introduces to that formulation the more cynical assumption that the general act of believing rather than the specific material content *of* the belief itself constitutes the fetish, offering a cross between an explanatory framework and an opiate, functioning as a convenient and comforting resolution that temporarily nullifies one's duty to contend with more traumatic realities. Leveraging this addendum, we depart from magical thinking and introduce the term *thinking magically* to account for the cynical distance from material truths that magic affords to the beholder. Thinking magically, we submit, offers a more critical perspective on the continuity of magic within liberal-secular consumer culture. By taking this perspective, I seek to answer the following research question: *What do witches do that enables them to continue engaging in witchcraft even though they know it has problems*? To answer this question, a nonobtrusive ethnographic study was undertaken involving 23 in-depth interviews with self-identifying witches supported by a netnographic analysis of internet communities on TikTok ('WitchTok') and Reddit ('r/witchcraft').

One of the contributions of this paper is that magical thinking – a phenomenon traditionally presented as something *progressive* in consumer research (Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; St. James *et al*., 2011) - can function as regressive when it upholds the current problematic state of things. By following the Zizekian reading of the term, this paper also offers a different meaning of "fetish" to accounts of magic in consumer research than what is used currently (Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011, p. 296).

135

5.4 Theoretical Underpinnings

5.4.1 Magic & Magical Thinking

Although trying to define magic (Greek. *mageria* referring to ritual and ceremony performed by priest magicians named *magoi*) is described as a "maddening task", most modern definitions and understandings today make "references to the supernatural, superstition, illusion, trickery, miracles, fantasies and as a simple superlative" (Davies, 2012, p. 1). The term has been used throughout history as an accusation toward *Otherness* and/or in reference to an assumptive world that is at once different from secular but also religious worldviews. When empirical solutions fail us, magic is turned to as a way to solve our problems, or as Arnould *et al*. (1999, p. 37) echo: "Resource to magic is a non-Cartesian strategy for resolving intractable social problems". Magic has long been considered the antithesis of economic rationalism and empiricism so characteristic to modernity. "The battle against magic", Federici (2004, p. 173) points out, "has always accompanied the development of capitalism, to this very day", wherein "magic seemed a form of refusal of work, of insubordination, and an instrument of grassroots resistance to power. The world had to be 'disenchanted' in order to be dominated" (p. 174).

Related to magic, the term 'magical thinking' refers to the beliefs that a person has about the role of their thoughts, emotions, words, or rituals in changing the material world in non-scientific ways (Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; Hamerman, 2009; Hamerman and Johar, 2009; Kramer and Block, 2011; Kramer and Block, 2009; St. James *et al*., 2011). Magical thinking has subsequently been used historically, synonymously with terms like 'illogical belief', 'irrational', 'superstitious belief' and 'peculiarity of belief'. For St James *et al*. (2011) magical thinking is not an illogical belief per se but rather a characteristic of a cognitive in-between realm filled with opportunities for new possibilities: in this space consumers believe that they can overcome assumed barriers between the mental, physical, and external realities and environments and offer consumers a space for optimism during particularly stressful scenarios. Magical thinking is enacted when consumers demonstrate a type of "chimerical agency" which refers to the process through which consumers "blur fantasy and reality to cope with cultural expectations of control" (p. 632). Others, such as Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) explore the idea of magical thinking as something "concretized" aka the process by which an abstract, external concept like magic is symbolically stimulated in the material concrete object: "Magic, and the magical thinking that produces it, is often tangibilized… magic is abstract and thus may be more easily recalled and employed if represented in a more

136

concrete manner" (p. 279). According to this logic, consumers fetishize material objects to "help them become more successful in their performance endeavors" (p. 295). Success transpires for the individual in this case, where they transform a 'mass produced good' into something with magical powers because it is either a replica of an item that was owned by someone successful, or, is a relic (the authentic item) owned by someone successful (hitherto by owning this relic or replica, a consumer will mirror the original owner's success or at least gain some form of power from the replica/relic's perceived magical aura) (see Brown *et al.*, 2003; Belk, 1991, 1995, 2001).

Importantly, "consumers may base their choices on magical thinking, *even while recognizing and acknowledging that this is irrational*" (Hamerman, 2009 p. 31). Hamerman lists plentiful examples of consumers acting *as if* they believe in some external power. For example, uttering certain words will 'set things in motion' and lead to *negative* material consequences. The same applies to uttering other words that will lead to beneficial consequences. Possible explanations as to why a well-informed, 'rational' person can believe in the power of magical thinking while simultaneously *knowing* that such belief is false are explained through ideas of "illusionary control", which refers to the idea that one can be 'tricked' into believing they can control events in a way that defies logic and the laws of causality (our experiences of having a conscious will are merely illusionary) (see Wegner and Wheatley, 1999). Hamerman and Johar (2009) also find that superstitious strategies akin to magical thinking guide consumers' actions and beliefs, even when they know that the concept of 'superstition' and its supposed powers are somewhat farfetched.

The idea that superstitious beliefs are maintained even when people know they are not true occurs through a process of *superstitious acquiescence* (Risen, 2006). Consumers who act according to superstitious beliefs do not simply act *as if* they believe, rather "they actually hold the belief or intuition to some degree… a form of *partial* belief" (p. 193). This assumes that consumers *partially* believe in some external mystical power. Even those "well versed in the rules of logic" (Risen and Gilovich, 2009 p. 33) who simultaneously acquiesce to some external, mystical power can be explained by the fact that superstitious beliefs can coexist *alongside* a subject's more logical modes of thinking (a logical thinker can also believe in superstition). Few marketing and consumer researchers have explored the role of magical thinking and *superstitious acquiescence* in disavowing structural issues.

5.4.2 Fetishistic Disavowal

Consumer researchers have previously discussed how individuals' ideological compliance to any organised group relies on, the individual upholding a certain amount of "cynical distance" *toward* their own actions of compliance (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Hoang *et al*., 2023). Žižek (2008a) explains that it is this deep-rooted cynicism that reframes individuals' subjective consciousness as *favourable* to enabling systems under capitalism. Žižek clarifies that subjects are fully *conscious* of their own cynicism, distancing, dissident beliefs, and so forth (expressed at a level of discourse) but carry on acting as if they are *not* conscious of this reality. The benefit of doing so ensures that individuals can avoid experiencing any kind of dissonance: in most cases, this is to avoid the harsh reality that individuals and groups will never truly be able to truly 'disidentify' with things they deem problematic. To negate this reality subjects can cling to a "fetish". Traditionally referred to as "fetishistic disavowal", this concept explains how consumers may *disavowal* anything problematic by clinging to some material fetish: "Through the use of the fetish, the practitioner is able to continue to believe the false, while also knowing that it can not be true" (Gammon and Makkinen, 1994, p. 445–6). Or put differently, "*Disavowal*, the psychological defence of having it both ways" (Kaplan, 2006, p. 27).

Comprised of competing psychoanalytic dialogues, fetishistic disavowal therefore involves a conscious degree of self-deception, where the process allows people to maintain their own beliefs, adopting various lifestyles and ontological constellations - all the while being cynical of the viability of these being able to achieve whatever end goal. Fetishistic disavowal may also be thought of therefore as a type of avoidance: 'I have expressed what I find problematic with our economic-political present therefore I do not need to engage with/in any radical forms of action'. As Žižek (1991b) clarifies, fetishistic disavowal allows individuals to negate 'doing the real work' of enacting any change.

The fetish, Žižek (1991b) points out, also therefore "abolishes the problem of belief, magic or not" (p. 92), meaning what is real and what is fantasy is no longer of concern. As an embodiment of the fantasy which enables us to *neutralise* the unendurable truth: "fetishists are 'not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thorough 'realists', able to accept the way things are – because they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to defuse the full impact of reality" (Žižek, 2014b, p. 282). Fetishistic disavowal allows the individual to *choose* to systematically neutralise and ultimately forget the truth through some kind of 'justification'

they cling to ('I know this is not real but I carry on anyway because...'). The individual can disavowal knowledge of that which is upsetting, injurious or sensitive by pushing it from consciousness, eliminating any discrepancy. In this sense, disavowal can be used to neutralise problematic realities, actions, and/or phenomena, and disavowal its harmful effects, whatever these may be. In many ways disavowal may be turned to by individuals as cerebral way of finding redemption for the unethical outcomes resulting from their actions, thus "negating the felt need for any radical change" (Hoang *et al.*, 2023, p. 590; also Cronin and Fitchett, 2021).

A Žižek formula of fetishistic disavowal here becomes a useful concept to understand why persons may find themselves acquiescing to beliefs that we know to be false. In the subsequent sections, I present my research analysis as structured according to three interrelated disavowal-rooted strategies used by contemporary witches to reconcile the *limits* of their magical beliefs and practices. Before doing so, a background to this paper's empirical context and methods is provided.

5.5 Contemporary Witchcraft: A Brief Background

Unlike other mythical figures rooted in ancient mythology like goddesses, centaurs, mermaids, or fairies, witches live amongst us with many people identifying with and adopting beliefs, practices, rituals, and aesthetics associated with witchcraft. Witches may identify as solitary witches, Pagan, Wiccan, New Agers, Neo-pagan, spiritualists, divination practitioners, Chaos magicians, lightworkers, among other labels. Some identify explicitly as a 'witch' whilst others are more fluid in their categorisation. Understandings of what a 'witch' is are inherently – unclear and always evolving, thus the term continues to refuse any concrete definition (Barnette, 2023). Historically, witches sought "to distinguish themselves from commercialization" (Miller, 2022a, p. 22), superseding patriarchal and male-dominated systems of empiricism such as market principles, science, technology, with a strong emphasis on feminine principles and female empowerment (Rountree, 1999). In contrast, today's modern witchcraft enthusiasm exists as an amorphous marketplace culture that bridges secularist commerciality with magic, promoting an "ideology of consumption… for the purpose of selling commodities such as books of spells and bottles of lotion" (Ezzy, 2001, p. 42). The surge of interest in witchcraft in consumer culture since the 1990s as a time when witchcraft became more popularised through mass media, has led to many scholars' 'picking apart' this paradox of: how can witches be *adverse* to their own intersections with capitalist consumer culture when

they are increasingly defined, shaped, and find identity and community through the marketplace (Ezzy, 2001; Waldron, 2005; Ezzy, 2006; Cush, 2007). Ezzy (2006, p. 16) claims, "Witchcraft has colonised and utilised consumer capitalism for its own ends and consumerist capitalism has colonised contemporary Witchcraft for it[s] ends".

Premier amongst the relationship between contemporary witchcraft and consumer capitalism is the digitalisation of witches' material culture, discourses, and routes to sociality as reflected in the popularity of the "online witch-sphere" (Zanette *et al*., 2023. p. 177), home to a constellation of different and at times conflicting identities, cultural beliefs, styles, and interpretations of witchraft and magic. In recent years, the most prolific of these digital zones is 'WitchTok' – a neologism for 'witches' and 'TikTok' characterised as a type of "pop culture witchcraft" (Johnson, 2023) that plays out on the eponymous social media site. WitchTok is best described as a genre of video content, part subculture, aesthetic 'category', and viral trend, and encompassing videos uploaded by witches to TikTok (tagging the hashtag 'Witchtok' as the community identifier) relating to (but not limited to): demonstrations on how to cast spells, design charms, astronomy and astrology or read tarot cards and short reels documenting the day-to-day lives of witches. With its short-form video content receiving over 50 billion views to date worldwide, WitchTok operates as an aesthetically vibrant, performative, digital community that blends technological re-enchantment and consumption with spirituality (Barnette, 2022; Miller, 2022; Houlbrook and Phillip, 2023; Partridge, 2021), and activism. Elsewhere, witches have involved themselves in progressive political concerns such as '#WitchTok vs. Putin' (Palonek-Kozdęba, 2023) or using spells to criticise Supreme Court members who ruled in favour of overturning *Roe v. Wade* (see Sell, 2023). The movement has also been recognised as a source and signifier of feminist power (Winqvist, 2023; Zanette *et al*., 2023).

5.6 Methods

This empirical material for this paper includes observational netnography and in-depth interviews amongst self-identifying witches. For the observational netnography, I draw upon TikTok and Reddit, both selected following Kozinets's (2020, p. 227) recommendations as reputable online spaces in accordance with this paper's research questions. On TikTok, approximately 250 WitchTok videos were sampled. There was no 'set' schedule per day or week for how many videos were to be consumed, however I ensured that I was consistent in opening up the TikTok app (or, viewing this on my desktop browser) to view WitchTok videos,

intermittently 'checking in' with the #witchtok hashtag to review recent content and trends. I followed Kozinet's (2020, p. 214) five investigative data operations of *simplify, search, scout, select, save* to analyse both TikTok and Reddit content.

Commencing data collection on TikTok, firstly in accordance with Kozinets's (2020, p. 214-215) "simplify" stage, this requires simplifying the overarching research question guiding the study into keywords, hashtags, trends, or other terms to focus data searching. Kozinets (2020) advises that the process of converting abstract, complex research questions into concrete search terms and keywords require a certain degree of trial and error, especially given that abstractions are complex and, where language in of itself contains multiple cultural connections. I used an evolving set of keywords and Boolean search terms, entering these into the TikTok search bar alongside the "#witchtok" hashtag identifier e.g. #witchtok AND capitalism, or #witchtok AND consumption, or #witchtok AND magic, or #witchtok AND ethics, or #witchtok AND sustainable, or #witchtok AND shopping, or #witchtok AND marketing, to name a few. Following Kozinets's (2020) I also tried misspellings and alternate spellings of searchable terms to see if this yielded different data. Content generated from hashtag and keyword combinations were the result of TikTok's automatic compiling with the site's search engine usually prioritising videos with the highest engagement metrics (i.e. most liked, shared, saved, viewed, and/or commented on). Results also frequently changed over time given that content is continually uploaded by community members. Following this process I 'searched' (the second stage) through the TikTok search engine to generate data to be scouted. Whilst Kozinets (2020, p. 221) recommends extending search vocabulary and making use of the social media site's "advanced search operations" - TikTok does not have any filtering or advanced search tools.

The third stage involves what Kozinets (2020) refers to as "scouting", requiring the researcher to: "Click, follow, enter, read, watch, listen, and reconnoiter the sites, threads, images, podcasts, videos, and other content" (p. 215) generated by the keywords. In doing so, I found that results generated something led to the discovery of new search terms, valuable for further "translat[ing] your research focus into more effective search terms" (p. 224). On TikTok, I scouted and viewed videos in their entirety, making notes of anything noteworthy. Practically, this involved making a note of the video title, URL, and notes about the content on a word document, the goal being to develop "a deeper cultural understanding" of the content under inspection (p. 224). Aspects of each video that were scrutinised included the content of

the video itself (recurring themes, ideas in the visuals) and comments posted under each WitchTok video deemed relevant (comments are usually written by other WitchTok community members who have viewed the video content).

The fourth stage, "select" according to Kozinet's (2020) netnographic investigative data operations requires the researcher to be *judicious* regarding what data should be *saved* for analysis. WitchTok videos were selected in accordance with the select stage's five criteria to guide "careful decision-making and scrutinizing", including relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness (p. 227).

The fifth and final stage of Kozinets's (2020) investigative data operations - "save" - involves saving the final investigative dataset (content and annotations) onto a word document using a combination of "capture, cut and paste" (p. 214) ready to be interpreted for consolidative data analysis. For Kozinets, the save stage is when the social media site's information is "transformed into the data that becomes the most important part of your research project" (p. 237). I alternated between capturing screenshots and using copy-paste functions to transfer data from each social media site to separate word documents.

Netnographic analysis of WitchTok content helped me to acquire a general overview of the trends, beliefs, practices, and colloquialisms used by a divergent range of witches, and the sub-segments that exist within this community. I found that WitchTok did not yield the most in-depth discussions, opinions, views, debates and so forth in the form of user comments posted to WitchTok videos. As others (*e.g.* Miller, 2022a) have observed, this is a potential challenge when analysing TikTok content for qualitative research purposes because "TikTok limits comment length to 150 characters" (*ibid.* p. 3), thus limiting the depth of content posters and users' comments, as well as the issue that "users often manipulate hashtags to circumvent restrictions, subvert intended meanings, and boost views" (p. 3). I found these to be recurring issues during my data collection.

To overcome the limitations of WitchTok content, I carried out a parallel analysis of the Reddit social media platform which, as a message-board style online space, provides much lengthier, in-depth discursive data. Specifically, I chose the forum (subreddit) entitled 'r/witchcraft' which had over 455 thousand subscribers at the time of writing and features in the top 1% of Reddit communities based on consistently high frequency of postings and interactions. As noted previously, I followed Kozinets's (2020) investigative data operation

procedures (as followed to collect data on WitchTok). For my Reddit netnographic data collection and analysis I used an evolving set of relevant keywords on the 'r/witchcraft' community search bar including but not limited to: 'consumption', 'materialism', 'commercial', 'ethics', 'WitchTok', 'capitalism', 'magic', 'science', and more. Once again, I tried misspellings and alternate spellings for terms (for the purpose of rigour). As Kozinets (2020) points out, new keywords/search terms can be discovered from the initial terms selected. For example, when I entered 'ethics' into the search bar, I discovered and narrowed down sub-terms reflecting what the *specific* ethical concerns of the community were are for example 'crystals', 'mining', 'sage'.

Only threads posted within the previous 5 years were considered. Threads generated for each keyword were narrowed down into the most relevant to analyse, and those with good engagement. Threads were analysed and were selected based on their relevancy to the study, and high levels of engagement on the thread, as evidenced by the number of comments attached to each. In total, approximately 23 threads and 2,667 comments were read through in their entirety. As stated, I followed Kozinets's (2020, p. 214) five investigative data operations of *simplify, search, scout, select, save* to select and analyse Reddit data.

As a note on ethics, both TikTok and Reddit are classifiable under *public sites and data* meaning it was not an ethical requirement to notify any online witch members about the research (see Kozinets, 2020, p. 197). Nevertheless, as an added precaution for ensuring confidentiality, no original usernames are included in this paper and posters have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Online observations were complemented by 23 interviews with individuals who identify as a witch and/or who engage with witchcraft aligned practices. The difference between those who identify as a 'witch' versus those who do not identify as a witch, but who still practice witchcraft is a matter of personal preference. Some do not use the term 'witch' to describe themselves, preferring identifiers such as 'wiccan', or 'pagan', 'pythoness', 'druid' (*among others*). I came across no witches, pagans, wiccans, silos practitioners, and so on who rejected the term 'witch' because they found it pejorative or did not want to associate with the term - rather, there was a minority interviewed who, whilst they accepted that their practices were a type of *witchcraft*, preferred to use another term identifying as a *type* of witch. I strived to account for a wide range of witch-based identities in my recruitment poster. Requirements included being aged 18+, identifying as a witch and/or as someone who engages in witchcraft

practices (which may include *spell-casting, potion-making, divination, astrology, astronomy, herbology, wellness, or other rituals grounded in the spiritual, magical, and mystical*). Snowball sampling was also used for "accesses[ing] informants through contact information that is provided by other informants" (see Noy, 2008, p. 330) as a popular method used by consumer researchers (e.g. Appau *et al*., 2020; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Frenzen and Davis, 1990; Venkatraman, 2024) to obtain access to and introductions with select groups (i.e. witches). Snowball sampling "relies on and partakes in the *dynamics of natural and organic social networks*" (Noy, 2008. p. 329). For example, one of my earlier witches, "Blair", provided me with the contact details of two other witches from within her own witchcraft community, to contact to ask if they would like to participate in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out from December, 2022 to January, 2024. To protect witches' anonymity, names have been pseudonymised in this manuscript. Interviews were semi-structured and included questions relating to self-identification, beliefs, engagement with witchcraft, the role of consumption in informing respective magical based activities, conflict or problems with one's beliefs, community attachments, and digital activity. Interviews were conducted in person or using digital technologies such as Zoom and MS Teams depending on location and preference of the participant(s).

All offline and online data was compiled onto a singular word document as a combined data pool for analysis. I engaged in a hermeneutical back-and-forth which involved going between the data and any themes that emerged adhering to Spiggle's (1994) qualitative data analysis principles of categorisation, abstraction, dimensionalization, integration, and iteration. This method enabled me to extract provisional categories which were gradually developed into three themes.

5.7 Analysis: Disavowing Problems with One's Beliefs

My findings are structured according to three interrelated themes, each representing different disavowal strategies used by witches to reconcile the problems and contradictions involved in their belief in magic today. The first theme relates to how witches *maintain benevolence* in light of their reliance on rare crystals, endangered herbs and other natural resources through the marketplace. The second theme centres on witches' attempts to *maintain authenticity* wherein, they *distance* themselves from those they perceive to be promoting inauthentic representations and parodies of their beliefs. The third theme explores witches' efforts to

maintain relevance for their craft in a world of secularism, rationalism and technological advancements. Here, I consider how witches are forced to make compromises and incorporate such advancements into their practices.

5.7.1 Maintaining Benevolence

By maintaining benevolence, witches attempt to alleviate the negative emotions and outcomes attached to, recognising the problems and contradictions that believing in magic bring. On a r/witchcraft subreddit (entitled, "Capitalism in Witchcraft") a member shares their discontent toward the materialism of witchcraft writing: *"...every time I try to dig deeper into witchcraft in general, I hit a big problem of materialism... witchcraft really does come off materialist or even capitalist... it's all about buying or selling the neatest trinkets",* with witchcraft now questioned as being inaccessible to *"poor or unmaterialistic people?".* In their attempts to maintain benevolence whilst actively participating in consumerist activity that contradicts with their ecological concerns, members echo this sentiment responding with the belief that buying from other witches is more ethically aligned. In a subreddit entitled "Capitalism in Witchcraft":

> "This putting a price on everything does feel inherently gross… as I feel any crossing of spirituality/religion and money goes… if we can/feel the need to spend money, it's best to keep it within the witchy community… Something is worth what someone else is willing to pay for it. And yes, witchcraft/paganism isn't exempt from this principle. Instead, we as individuals need to remove ourselves from the consumerist mindset of "ooh, that's shiny, I want it". It's not witchcraft's fault, it's our own".

Engagement with pro-consumerist activity is neutralised by keeping trade "*within the witchy community*" perceived as a more benevolent mode of being and doing witchcraft today, involving material consumption. Another witch shares (on the same subreddit) *"Of course, I do still love to collect "witchy" things. I'm a sucker for the aesthetic. But I try to get my stuff from local, sustainable, eco-friendly sources. Not always possible, but I do it when I can".* Witches here, are trying to neutralise the impact of their consumption by suggesting that buying 'local' or more 'sustainable' is a sort of lesser than two evils. A further way that witches seek to maintain their benevolence is by suggesting that their participation in 'alternative economies' is, or at least feels like a more ethical place of consumption. In a subreddit (entitled "Consumerism, Commercialism & Materialism"), one witch shares: "*On platforms like Etsy, it feels very much like we are participating in a basic, alternative economy - and such economies can be helpful in the struggle against soulless capitalism*".

Some witches are conscious of their personal contribution to environmental degradation, labour conditions, and other negative effects through their involvement in market exchange, particularly 'witchy' materials sourced from the natural world such as crystals and sage. This is particularly concerning for "Lola" (aged 18) a crystal healing enthusiast and passionate collector of crystals since her discovery of witchcraft on the microblogging website, Tumblr, in her early teenage years. Lola expresses her disappointment with witches' *seemingly* unavoidable participation in ecologically harmful activities:

> "I do think there's definitely a rise in, like, very weird 'witch' stores that seem very like synthetic… It's hard because at the end of the day, there's not a lot like the places you can buy and you don't actually know where they're getting it from… I try like my best to shop local or small like that aren't obviously chains and obvious stuff like that.. it's a bit tricky because there's not a lot you can do about it. And even those sellers would say it's like environmentally sustainable or it's not mined or whatever, you can never know…" (Lola, 18).

Although more benevolent alternatives presented here such as "*to shop local or small*" may feel more meaningful and in-keeping with their beliefs – perceived as more "intimate and localized alternative provision and consumption projects" (Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2018, p. 259) - witches like Lola understand the harsh reality that 'responsibility' assumed by most versions of sustainability and ethics have little (if any) impact of deterring capitalist logic. This is reflected in her sentiments such as "*there's not a lot you can do about it*". All ethically sourced and sustainable consumption is, as others have argued, maintained under the illusions of consumer sovereignty and choice (*e.g.* Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2018; Chatzidakis *et al*., 2012).

Being cynical *of* the viability of sustainable modes of consumption ensures that witches do not challenge how their beliefs have been commercialised as a whole. In a video showing where witches can buy more sustainable witchcraft materials, one WitchTok witch offers advice to others sharing: *"It's best to buy from a local herb shop or spiritual hub near you!";* Witches' attitudes here conform with several prior arguments relating to the complexities involved in consumers' attempts to consume ethically: the harsh reality remains however (and one that witches do not want to confront) that most sustainable, ethical 'choices' in the marketplace are "embedded in growth-oriented business logics" (Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2018, p. 256). Carrington and Chatzidakis argue that the fetishisation of what is marketed as, ethical and sustainable forms of consumption, constitutes a form of *guilt fetishism* (p. 258; see also Cremin, 2012), where produce associated with ethical trade become symbolic of one's

ethical morality. As the data discussed here reveals, by fetishising some part of magic, witches can continue believing in it despite being knowledgeable of its harmful attachments and consequences.

This predicament is also raised by "Jade" (aged 47), a WitchTok performer, entrepreneur, and artist from England. Jade provides online coaching and support for female witches centred on an ethos of "*natural living*" via a YouTube channel, a closed Facebook group, a "*circle of witches*" Patreon, and an online witchy store (with over 3,000 retail sales to date). Jade shares *why* she believes witches consciously and paradoxically, participate in environmentally destructive consumption activities which may uphold their desired lifestyle and identity, but also contradict this:

> … crystals have become so popular now, and the Earth's just getting really like mined and raped and blown up… there's a saying. 'They know not what they do'. So I think a lot of people don't know, they don't know what they're doing. They believe they're doing a good thing. They *believe* that they're doing that and that's up to *them*. That's their belief. Personally, I wouldn't buy into that, just like I wouldn't buy palo santo, or white sage. I wouldn't buy any of that because it's endangered. But other people do so that's up to *them*. I think for many years I was quite angry about all the injustice in the world, and I was very vocal about it. And then I realised that I can *only* do *my* own thing for *me*. I can only do what *I* can do and then it's up to *them*. Everyone's on a different journey. So it's up to *them*. (Jade, 47)

Speaking of the *limits* of magic being able to bring about transformation and improvements in society, Jade defers to the power of "doing her own thing".

For other witches, they are more cynical of environmental and ethical 'alternatives' offered through the marketplace, understanding that simply 'opting out' of shopping with big retailers, corporations, and so forth, is not enough to realistically counter or prevent ecological crises fuelled by consumer culture. This is reflected in a subreddit (entitled, "Why are not many witches are discussing about the ethics behind crystals?"):

> A few thousand witches deciding not to buy them [crystals] is not going to significantly impact that market, except perhaps to drive the prices down due to over-abundance… You will not affect change in this regard simply by not buying crystals.

Other witches similarly share: "*If you want to re purpose those crystals for good, but don't want to contribute to the cycle of environmental destruction, then go sabotage some mining sites and don't pay for your crystals. There's really nothing else you can do…*". This member's sentiment of "there's really nothing else you can do" conforms with the concept of "political

147

acquiescence" which is the idea that, one's attempts to raise issues of morality does not function as a way of "signalling to others the moral urgency that the world must be changed", but becomes a way to conform "to the perceived reality that so little of the world *can* be changed" (Hoang *et al.*, 2023, p. 601) (*emphasis added*).

To summarise, maintaining benevolence is important for witches to appear *as if* they are not engaging in harmful material activities that *conflict* with their immaterial goals and beliefs, specifically those relating to patterns that harm the natural environment.

5.7.2 Maintaining Authenticity

The second theme to emerge from my data relates to how witches are conscious of and concerned about the negative impact that the 'mainstreaming' of witchcraft is having on their identity. I find that witches try to *neutralise* this reality by turning to several techniques based on, trying to keep the community 'small', and, by creating distance between themselves and perceived inauthentic "others" within the wider group. Conscious that their identities are becoming culturally reworked by the stereotypical aesthetic depiction of what has been identified in recent years as the rise of the "witchy aesthetic" (emphasis on fashion, dark colours, symbols, gothic style influence) (*e.g.* Miller, 2022a), many group members express how they feel this has diminished the cultural value of the community and its identity (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). This is evidenced in a subreddit (entitled, "How do you feel about the witchcraft community on tiktok?"), as one witch shares:

> We need people in the community who will represent us well to the public instead of making asses out of all of us. Witchcraft, as most of us practice it, is a beautiful spiritual practice and philosophy that is mostly lost on these kids who just want to be cool and cast spells. The rising popularity of witchcraft also cheapens it. Historically, long before we were even called witches, our spiritual ancestors were always few in number… Witchcraft, and the practices that witchcraft is descended from (even if only in spirit) have always been the path of the few (r/witchcraft member)

This sentiment is supported by another witch (posting on the same subreddit), sharing: *"I think part of the problem is that witchcraft is becoming "cool" and thus marketable*", and in a further subreddit (entitled "tiktok witches really have to stop") a witch writes:

> Why should we normalise witchcraft, though? Witchcraft is built on sources in which the witch is portrayed as an underground rebel. To make it public and 'just another innocent religion' is to strip it of much of its character and heritage… you absolutely must be critical of trends which undermine it. An important part of defending a

community is defining what the community is not and encouraging others to eschew corrosive trends (r/witchcraft member)

As evidenced by these witches, cynicism is directed toward the community's dissolving cultural cachet – the "cheapening" of their beliefs and subversive identities as a result of the figure of the witch and her craft becoming increasingly commericalised and accessible to all. In their attempts to manage the community's authenticity, this passage conforms with the sentiment that members will "actively work against share growth" by engaging in online discourse relating to identity work and the corrupt influences of "trend followers and faddists" (Luedicke *et al*., 2010, p. 1017; also Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Such disputes become a *distraction* from one's ability to think critically about one's own activities, and questioning the systemic processes that have led to, witchcraft becoming "*strip[ped]… of much of its character and heritage*". By asserting how the witch historically was more akin to an "*underground rebel*", and as another witch shares (subreddit entitled, "Rethinking the materialism of modern witchcraft") how witchcraft is *"by definition rebellious… Imo Capitalism/consumer culture is antithetical to that. It can be hard for those of us raised in that culture to learn to trust ourselves and our power, especially women/feminized people"* – this data also conforms with the concept of "symbolic demarcation". This process occurs when members of a group will try to *reestablish* their "historical ties to countercultural creativity and coolness" (Arsel and Thompson, 2011, p. 800).

To reinforce symbolic boundaries *against* the mainstreaming of witchcraft, others such as "Blair", also turn to the witch's authentic past to re-balance their perceived *in*authenticity. "Blair" is a data librarian living in the UK and a self-described 'Chaos witch practitioner' (also 'chaos magick', understood as a modern type of magic falling under Neo-pagan classification). "Blair" shares with me that she left her long-term witch coven due to her discomfort with its members placing more emphasis on building and promoting personal wealth (for example, using meetings and sacred gatherings to market and sell their products and services). Blair is experiencing dissonance as she is conflicted, due to her desire to explore other income streams to support her family, using her 'craft': these include using her high-profile status in the witchcraft community (from being a coven leader) and becoming what she describes as a "celebrity witch…with the whole suite of YouTube adverts courses for sale, divination consultation". Blair confides in me how she is incentivised to follow this path, having been overlooked for a promotion in her workplace due to the stigma of being a 'witch', and the rising

cost of living. To neutralise the idea of potentially making her authentic beliefs, "inauthentic" (through monetisation), her justification is shared:

> … I don't want to have money involved in what I'm doing at all… but people say often this concept of like the cunning woman and the cunning man in the village, that they would have charged for spell work. And it's only the same. And these concepts of like money circulating around the community… I think these are good arguments… That's the closest I've got to like yeah, I see you as a cunning person and certainly using witchcraft in order to be cunning is something I advocate for cunning within a system in order to survive. (Blair)

"Blair" finds comfort in returning to the history of the witch's origins as a "cunning woman", inspired by the sentiment that authenticity is only found in "the poor, the oppressed, the violent, and the primitive" (Trilling, 1972, p. 102). This becomes a way for "Blair" to neutralise the reality that relocating the traditional values of the group for "superficial or inauthentic pleasures promoted by the commercial marketplace" (Luedicke *et al*., 2010, p. 1016) appears to be an attractive and, in her eyes, necessary condition under present political-economic conditions as a means of "survival" within the current capitalist system.

For other witches, their attempts to protect the authenticity results in wanting to *dis-identify* from the 'witch' term entirely, believing it has become a "*corrosive*" term as one r/witchcraft member writes in a subreddit (entitled, "tiktok witches really have to stop"): "*TikTok (and Gen Z/social media witchcraft in general) seems especially dilute and corrosive to the craft. Because of them and their influence, sometimes I really wish I could revive some other term so I didn't have to consider myself part of the community with them*". Here, witches seem to cast themselves as "heroic moral protagonists" in trying to preserve their "values, beliefs, and ideals", as a means of validating their own individual worth (Luedicke *et al*., 2010, p. 1028). This data also conforms with the principle that witches may choose to "do their own thing" by detaching and carving out a personal (over community) path to maintain authenticity of their beliefs (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). Emphasis is firmly placed on maintaining the individuals' self-worth, leading to a playground of 'sub-groups' with different styles, beliefs, values diluting the community further.

Supporting these findings, in a subreddit (entitled, "tiktok witches really have to stop"), WitchTok is described as "*the dumbest thing… Nothing but young charlatans and shit to give teens and tweens more complexes. So much fake info of all kinds, wannabe influencers, bullshit diviners getting money for bs spitballed "readings". It's all gross*"; and others echo how: "*It's*

also something that makes witchcraft look like it's supposed to be all about aesthetics"; "*There are ways a form of witchcraft can be inferior to another*"; and as "*cultural misrepresentation by mass media*". Witches here are trying to vocalise how the witchcraft community's interests are "multidimensionsal" comprising of syncretistic identity projects – which, while perceived as negative – does help witches to *easily* 'distance' themselves from those "subsumed to a parochial set of aesthetic interests" that threaten the authenticity of their capital (Arsel and Thompson, 2011, p. 801). Others engage in aesthetic discrimination (see Arsel and Thompson (2011, p. 799) by creating 'labels' for those harbouring inauthentic identities. This is evidenced in a subreddit (entitled, "Rethinking the materialism of modern witchcraft"), as one witch shares: "*I don't want to be an Amazon Prime Witch*"; and "*Lumping in the "TV witches" with people who actually practice..is quite hurtful*".

Maintaining authenticity is important for witches to appear *as if* their own magical based identities and beliefs are not becoming defined and shaped by commercial forces and undesirable stereotypes, parodies, and, that they (witch individuals within the community) are somehow different from those who adopt more 'mainstream' witch identities within the same community. Through disavowal, witches can disavowal more aesthetically inclined identity, while simultaneously consuming many of the same objects, styles, practices, and so on.

5.7.3 Maintaining Relevance

The third and final theme arising from my data relates to how contemporary witches reconcile their beliefs based on magic with advancements of the modern world such as technology, science, biomedicine, materialism. Being a witch today, requires a certain amount of conformity *to* such advancements, despite their ideological resistance towards these. "Rhea" shares her thoughts on this conundrum, recognising that modern society has extinguished many witches' less modernised, technological aspirations of life, she voices how she has come to *accept* that "the technology-based side of life" *must* be "balanced" and "blended" to ensure the witchcraft community does not get "left behind" and loose its perceived relevancy:

> …I equate it all very much to moving through the age of Aquarius where we're all supposed to be kind of putting down the technology, putting down the very the blank side of life, the very technology-based side of life and non-emotive side of life. We're moving into various ways people are starting to go on that spiritual journey and starting to kind of metaphysically connect rather than physically connect… we're starting to see the tides kind of changing… especially within paganism and witchcraft we're able to take with us the old, the ancient way, but also kind of balance it and blend it with what

where we live now. I think other religions really struggle to update. They've really struggled to embrace the, the present around them, whereas paganism and witchcraft, we are so in embedded with our ancestors and our and our history, but we still are able to utilise and bring forth like what's going on around us now. (Rhea, 36)

"Rhea's" choice of terms like "balance", "blend", bridging the "old and new" shows how, given belief in the magical and spiritual has become progressively entangled with materiality, consumption, and technology (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019), witches have little choice but to embrace ways of life that conform with technological advancements that do not align with their values. Rhea conveys the struggle of living in "the age of Aquarius" – an age where spiritualism is supposed to be returning to people's lives but remains suppressed by society's reliance on modern conveniences.

Of note is the idea that adopting technological practices presents itself as a necessary condition to 'being' a witch today, with many sharing their discomfort at the blend of technology, AI, algorithmic consumption, and so forth into their lives. As evidenced on a thread (entitled "Technology and magic: How might AI alter our craft?), one witch shares: "*Giving it [magic] away openly to technology and to the government… It's basically the government then having a way to mold and form and control or practice and religion if you connect your craft to any religious work*" and, "*admit you are okay with openly ruining witchcraft by letting technology and the government intervene and ruin it*". Others, express, under the illusion witches have the choice to incorporate or not incorporate technology into their beliefs and practices, how technology is perceived as a form of 'modern convenience' (thread, "Ways of incorporating technology into the craft"): "*like we sometimes focus a lot on the rustic, nature vibes and don't think to include modern conveniences into our craft*"

"Endora" a witch and writer living in the U.S. meanwhile, shares how communities fostered on magic as the antithesis to institutionally-produced norms must learn to "straddle both words", comprising of the empirical and the magical and spiritual ('nontechnological') in order to survive as individuals in today's fraught political-economic environment:

I mean, yeah, so the thing is that I kind of straddle both worlds. I completely understand these entrepreneurs… the problem is that you have to live in the world that you were born in in a way, right? So you can have this natural magic, but you have to be able to have one foot in both worlds, otherwise you're not gonna be successful. You know, I don't know. It's hard… [witch practitioners] are looking for an entrepreneurial blend and it's almost like they want one foot in one world where they're making the money but one foot in the other where they have their own life (Endora, 49)

152

Supporting these ideas, in a subreddit (entitled, "Why is being a witch so expensive"), witches echo these sentiments by sharing their thoughts: "*instead of going against the system, you have to flow with it*". Witches are expressing how they have no choice but to make compromises to "flow" with the system, even if this goes against their beliefs. Such sentiments relating to witches having no choice but "*to flow with it [capitalism]*" conforms with the concept of "pragmatic adjustment" (see Fisher and Gilbert, 2013, p. 90) where present modes of living under the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism are considered the internal condition of every society. Other witches welcome their use of technology by focusing on how it can be beneficial e.g. for 'technopaganism', or how one could "take advantage" of it to "connect" with other witches.

Maintaining relevancy by making some compromises to one's beliefs is also evidenced by witches in their struggle against mechanical medicine and pharmaceutical goods. In a subreddit (entitled, "Need advice on the effects of prescription drugs on magick") witches express how taking prescribed medication *can* be justified through practical reasoning, for example as a means to an end –the idea that one can endorse their conformity to prescription drugs in order to practice witchcraft eventually without it. Or, that it can enhance one's magical journey: "*Your practice and medication could work together pretty well to help you with your personal situation so that maybe one day you can come off the medication";* and "*since this is a prescription to help you with your highest good.. If anything this may help you reach further states of meditation and help you focus more*"; whilst, in a subreddit (entitled, "Medications and the Metaphysical"), witches share: "*I'm on medication… It actually HELPED me and made me advance to more expert levels… I get messages from spirits much better now and I also have an easier time communicating what I'm being given by Spirit".* Witches engage in extrinsic actions (influenced by the institutional practices of capitalism) that *compromise* their beliefs in order to achieve internal, nonmaterial goals. Another witch shares their transition from natural remedies to "prescription medications", stating "*I finally gave in a couple of years ago and saw a doctor… Has this affected my practice? Yes, but not in a detrimental way… I have more motivation to actually practice [witchcraft]".*

This final theme has demonstrated how witches seek relief from the problems in their beliefs in magic, relating to their need to adopt empirical, institutionally governed activities. The idea that this infrastructure is needed to stay relevant and in some cases even enhance their

magic, shields the community from the reality that they are having to make compromises that go against their beliefs.

5.8 Discussion & Conclusion

Answering this paper's research question, my findings have revealed three themes comprised of distinct neutralisation techniques used by witches to reconcile the problems and contradictions involved in their belief in magic: *maintaining benevolence, maintaining authenticity, and maintaining relevance.* The unifying characteristic across these themes and their respective neutralisation (or softening) strategies – whether sustainable consumption, guilt fetishism, discourse of desired marginality, demythologizing, and so on – is that they illustrate how witches' disavowal the dissonance-inducing that magic is not 'all good' and is in many ways, problematic, out of line with their moral beliefs. To maintain their benevolence, authenticity, and relevancy as a cultural group, witches cope by disavowing this reality which also ensures that they can simultaneously *keep on* enjoying the momentary escape, relief, sparkle, mythos, and fantasy that their belief in magic, enacted through witchcraft, affords them. My data has revealed how many witches are fully conscious of, "the global radical deadlock" at play regarding the problems and contradictions in their belief in magic and its intersections with unsustainable systems of consumption and production, with such "absolute knowledge' denot[ing] a subjective position which finally accepts' contradiction' as an internal condition of every identity" (Žižek, 2008, p. xxix). All three strategies require witches to adopt contradictory projects, ideas, and values, resulting in a disintegration of community with ostenibly unlimited choices, identities, entrepreneurial pursuits: the consequence being, that witches are unable to commit meaningfully to any one unifying political praxis to engender any radical change through their belief in magic. Where magic historically reveals to us that other imaginaries outside of the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism are possible, even the capacity to *imagine* alternatives to the status quo through alternative worldviews like magic is flawed because 'magic' as something of an antithesis to the empirical, industrialised logic of capitalism, has become paradoxically 'hostage' to, and an accompaniment to its logic. Witches, by engaging in the fantasy and illusion produced by the marketplace of there being more meaningful, less harmful, alternatives and modes of consumption only feeds into consumer capitalism's ethos of: "provid[ing] illusions of transformation without changing any of the fundamentals of capitalist markets" (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022, p. 3).

154

In light of these findings, I introduce the concept of 'thinking magically' to explain how many self-identifying witches are knowledgeable about the problems with magic today (how it perpetuates hyper-competition, fragmentation, ecological damage, removal of traditional values, and so on), but *disavowal* these truths by fetishising their belief *in* magic. One's belief is what one clings to avoid a dissonance-inducing reality. My working definition of thinking magically for marketing and consumption readership is as follows. Thinking magically may be understood as a *broad set of discourses encompassing the belief in magical and mystical forces and associated practices adopted by communities who position themselves as opponents of, industrial modernity's deeply liberalised discourse of markets, efficiency, and empiricism.*

'Thinking magically' offers a distinctly different reading of consumers' belief in magic than prior understandings: magical thinking assumes that magic is invoked through consumers' fetishisation of material objects to achieve desired ends, operating as something transformative, meaningful, active, and empowering (e.g. Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011). Magical thinking is thus positioned as a radical, *progressive* belief in its ability to offer genuine relief from the rationalisation of modernity, for "magical thinking represents a form of cultural empowerment that enables consumers to creatively find agency in a cultural space that otherwise affords them very little" (St James *et al.*, 2011, p. 248). On the contrary, my findings reveal how magical thinking may function more as "thinking magically" – as the *antithesis* to a practice and belief system that is pro-active, transformative, or progressive. If magical thinking is deemed by prior literature as an emancipatory framework (Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; Hamerman, 2009; Kramer and Block, 2011; Kramer and Block, 2009; St. James *et al.*, 2011), thinking magically reveals how one's belief in magic is a *regressive*, superficial mode of socio-cultural expression, underpinned by cynical modes of thought and neutralisation techniques of disavowal that only *sustain* problems of the present. Further, where current understanding of magical thinking locates consumers as empowered active subjects (under the assumption that believers of magic can change their circumstances regardless of the socio-economic forces around them) thinking magically operates as something that makes consumers *passive* to the problems of the secular present, and those within their belief systems. My analyses show how consumerist witches are afforded a library of magical, spiritual, mythological narratives, communities, identities, and material goods that have been aestheticised in the name of 'inspiration' and 'transformation' at a *metaphorical* level only not at a level of "extraordinary empowerment and influence" (Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011, p. 278).

155

The re-emergence of magic against a backdrop of political, economic, and ecological turmoil, I have argued, signals how consumers are increasingly, searching for answers (where empiricism has failed), resurrect hope and protection from the trauma of a secular reality that does not seem to hold all the answers. By disavowing the problems with witchcraft today, magical practitioners perpetuate the non-liberating dimensions of the market that seem to be the root-cause of many of their problems. Challengingly, the idea of 'magic' in the marketplace, whether accessed through alternative economies, online communities, algorithmic consumption, and more, becomes not merely a place that afford consumerist witches a "expansive and heterogeneous palette of resources from which to construct individual and collective identities" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 871), but is one that only extends dissatisfactions, competition, shared feeling of exploitation, the collapse of community, environmental degradation, and more. Even when one's magical beliefs makes the subject *feel* as though they may be able to conjure up powerful forces, their own cynicism toward this actuality (because it cannot be otherwise) cements a lack of change toward more imaginative and transformative problem-solving.

Through such conceptualisations, this manuscript has firstly, made important contributions to critical marketing scholarship referred to as "de-romanticist consumer research" (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) or "Terminal Marketing" (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022). By theorising contemporary witches' methods of disavowal relating to the limitations of their belief in magic, I show how modes of thinking fostered on alternative imaginaries, are "delimited in scale and scope because they work *with* market logics and *in* market systems, so their critiques and critical responses tend to firmly remain *within* the event horizon of the extant socioeconomic system" (p. 672). The concept of thinking magically problematises the idea that forms of pastness like magic are filled with creativity and raw imaginative potential. In this regard, this manuscript demythologises in this context, "the agentic and individualistically creative consumer" (Ahlberg *et al*., 2022, p. 667), articulating how all 'meaning' consumers derive from magic systematically *represses* rather than progresses one's ability to dream up 'new' ways of thinking about how society and culture could and perhaps should, be organised. Magic, rather than acting as a gateway toward anything utopic, imaginative and/or 'new - becomes a signifier of our society's crisis of imagination (bringing with it a weakening of historicity, imaginative destitution, and so on), with magic (as an archaism) unable to offer a way out of the naturalisation of neoliberal-capitalist consumer affairs, markets, and culture.

156

My findings illustrate how magic has been stripped of its transcendental potential with all critical, collective reflexivity diminished to something complicit with capitalist accumulation - the cultural logic of capitalism essentialises, romanticises, and reduces magic and its sensations to a shallow therapeutic device within hierarchical power structures. Secondly, my research has contextualised and offered an original reading of magic and its intersections with consumer culture. As discussed, CCT scholars theorise magical thinking as an empowering, emancipatory tool and belief system – as an abundant mythical resource that affords consumers with a means to regain agency under a suppressive political economic system (achieved by fetishising material goods) (e.g. St. James *et al*., 2011; Arnould *et al*., 1999; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; Hamerman, 2009). The problem, I argue, with theorising consumers belief in magic through fetishised processes relating to the commodity good, (concretised magic) is that it disregards the psychosocial dimensions of capitalism, under which such magical thought exists. To remedy this, I have sketched out "thinking magically" using a more critical Žižekian perspective on the continuity of magic within liberal-secular consumer culture, locating magic and its intersections with the material within wider ideological structural operations and their heightened effects (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

As a note on future research there is scope to explore how the lifestyles and beliefs of communities fostered on transcendent, mystical, and magical expressions and sensations are made to be complicit with market logics and neoliberal ideologies. This manuscript has shown how magic is enabled through psychological modes of thought like cynicism and fetishistic disavowal. When exploring the intersections between ideological, pre-historical, and sociological phenomena that shape consumption activity (such as magic and witchcraft) research may ethnographically account for other nonsecular, pre-capitalist inspired communitas such as *Thai Buddhism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, Transcendental Meditation* and/or other spiritual cults, to name a few. Research may also assess how the limitations, contradictions, and problems of alternative belief systems fostered on thinking magically, are disavowed by its members through justifications that differ from those explored here (i.e. to maintain one's benevolency, authenticity, and relevancy). Future research may offer new disavowal-avoidance strategies adopted by consumers as a way to cope with undesirable traumatic realities.

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Chapter 6: Discussion & Conclusion

As the final chapter of this thesis, this section synthesises the core ideas and overarching contributions of my research focusing on how this body of work problematises current accounts of the retro and magical discourse in consumer culture before concluding with its limitations and opportunities for future research.

6.1 Overall Contribution Summary

This thesis has explored how consumers' efforts to rediscover magical alternatives to the post-historical present offer at best only a partial, temporary, or illusory modicum of escape and at worst, maintain one's passive conformity to the beliefs and conditions of hegemonic capitalism. In trying to find a unifying concept or metaphor to summarise the overall lesson learned from the three papers of my thesis, I am drawn to the "cruel optimism" of nostalgia and how it enables capitalism to structure reality itself (see also M'Rabty, 2024). If we take cruel optimism to mean a hopeful attachment to something which is in reality, problematic, its basic formula reflects my observations that the more consumers attach themselves to a pre-capitalist past, the less chance they have at securing a post-capitalist future. I have shown how escapism based on a return to the past lacks the positive and nuanced futurity necessary to deliver emancipation, thus ironically – *cruelly* – creating a closed loop. To explain this phenomenon, I have introduced new concepts including *marketplace revenant*, *retrocorporation*, and *thinking magically*. Using the witch as my empirical context, the three papers in this thesis have attempted to show how archaisms – *i.e.* vestiges of the premodern past – in consumer culture should be analysed within a broader setting of political economy, moving away from romantic visions of the consumer subject.

As a note on locating the contributions of my thesis within the broader marketing literature, I recognise that consumer researchers have frequently discussed how consumers seek out escapes from the trials and tribulations of modern life. These escapes often involve pursuing experiences where "rational order of the normal… bureaucratic and corporate existence is transcended" (Belk and Costa, 1998, p. 234; also Banister and Cocker, 2014; Chatzidakis *et al*., 2012; Jones *et al*., 2020). Much of this previous work assumes that genuine escape is not only achievable through consumption but is the default prerogative of those agentic sensation-seekers and identity-makers who dare to experience something 'other' than what has become

habitualised and overdetermined in their immediate lives. Previous research has identified various groups drawn to consuming the flamboyant and captivating excesses of a real or imagined past as a way out of a monotonous present. These include accounts of pilgrims who seek out myth and legend at mystical, historic sites like Glastonbury (MacLaran and Scott, 2009), suburbanites who travel deep into mountain enclaves to model themselves on the rugged frontiersmen of an idyllic American past (Belk and Costa, 1998), neo-primitivist survivalists who flock to desert festivals like Burning Man in pursuit of authentic social exchange (Kozinets, 2002a), or cosplayers who reject mass-market imagery in favour of bespoke costumes of ancient mages, orks, fairies, and Norse gods (Seregina and Weijo, 2017). These diverse examples illustrate the widespread appeal of past-oriented escapism in consumer culture. However, while this body of research often frames such escapism in a positive or neutral light, my thesis takes a more critical stance. My work problematises these conceptualisations by advancing a more pessimistic account of escapism – and particularly past-oriented escapism (see also Ahlberg *et al.*, 2021; Fisher, 2009, 2014; Reynolds, 2020; Södergren, 2022) – arguing that nostalgic fantasies only hinder one's ability to *face up to* a broader crisis of imagination and further contribute to a cultural stagnation of the present.

Although there have been valuable accounts published within consumer research which problematise, complicate, or extend some aspect of consumer escapism (see Carù and Cova, 2003; Cova *et al.*, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2020; Orazi and Van Laer, 2023; Tumbat and Belk, 2011), much of this work remains centred on lived experience at phenomenological or symbolic interactionist levels and does not venture to expose or critique the specific political-economic power relations at the heart of consumption. Tumbat and Belk's (2011) now classic problematisation of the structure-antistructure dialectic helps to account for how extraordinary escapes may not be as romantic as assumed by earlier consumer culture theorists and reveals how commercialism and competition amongst individuals can colour their experiences of escapism. However, the authors fall short of identifying these tell-tale features (corporate co-optation and individualism) with the neoliberal-capitalist dynamics which indiscriminately shape and constrain all conceivable action. The focus remains epistemologically on the interactions, goals, and meanings that individual identity-seeking subjects ascribe to their experiences. Critique is substantively distanced from political and economic determinisms allowing for the subject position of the individual consumer to be over-signified. Though they refer to an "ideology of individual performance", only at one point in their manuscript do Tumbat and Belk specifically invoke the word capitalism (suggesting "[i]t has been assumed

that people seek extraordinary consumption experiences as a restorative response to the late market capitalism" 2011, p. 56) and they do not substantially expand upon the subjectifying conditions or specific ideological fantasies which prefigure certain ways of being, seeing, and 'escaping' that naturalise and perpetuate consumption, choice-making individualism, and self over society. Comparatively, Orazi and Van Laer (2023) focus epistemologically on the aftermath of extraordinary escapist experiences for individuals without attendant discussion of the vicissitudes of economic and political structures. By zeroing in on the "embodied phenomenology" of "consumers' subjective understanding of the [escapist] experience in relation to their ordinary life" (p. 921), Orazi and Van Laer (2023) conform to what Thompson et al. (2013) refer to as the humanistic/experientialist convention of consumer research, something which is better thought of as a product of liberal-capitalist ideology than a response to it (Fitchett et al., 2014). Unlike in critical theory, for example, which centres on de-ontologising the outcomes of capitalist structures and their consumptionscapes in our writing (see Fitchett and Cronin, 2022), the discourses of individuals (via individual feelings, roles, experiences) which capitalism champions are located by Tumbat and Belk and Orazi and Van Laer as a primary site of action.

Additionally, Carù and Cova's (2003) recognition that the concept of experience is "defined in ideological terms" (p. 268) provides insight on the distortions that we, as marketing scholars, have imposed upon escapism but still fails to make explicit the onto-epistemological connection to broader cultural logics of capitalism. Even in Cova *et al.*'s (2018) 'enlarged typology' of consumer escapes which highlights the "[p]honiness, and inauthenticity of commercial interactions" (p. 448), there is still a reluctance to bring the functioning of capitalism's logics into the cold light of day. Attempts to roll the generic 'market' and 'commerce' into half-way critical conceptualisations while stopping short of a full-blown critique of capitalism are lamented elsewhere by Winlow and Hall (2019, p. 26) who sardonically and sarcastically state "[w]e are free to identify problems, and we are free to criticize existing policies, but it is considered very bad form indeed to offer a deep structural critique of our socio-economic system in one's final report… We must not dig too deeply into reality as we contextualize our data, and we must identify only mid-range proximal rather than fundamental causes".

In much of the consumer research on escapism, there is a tacit emphasis on the significant roles of human agency and experience in shaping social realities and navigating

commercial exploitation while, nevertheless, avoiding commentary on the political-ideological corralling of a self-interested subjectivity by capitalism's "overarching fantasmatic framework at the heart of consumer culture" (Cronin and Fitchett, 2022, p. 18). Emphasis tends to remain on the lived accounts and discourses of individuals and groups in a vacuum while the determinisms of political economy and subjectivity are backgrounded as mere details of some mid-range commercialised conditions ('the market') that most people – if given the choice – are assumed to try and *escape from* (ostensibly through further consumption). This assumption has rolled around recurrently on the well-worn gears of asking *"can consumers escape the market?"* (*e.g.* Arnould, 2007, 2012; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2005; Heath *et al.*, 2017; Kozinets, 2002a; Nelson *et al.*, 2007). But such a question minimises if not trivialises the rhizomatic complexity of capitalism's hegemonic fields and the ingenuity of its ideological functioning by which it achieves its naturalisation and unshakeable attachments to individual autonomy and the entirely private domain of personal consumption. Asking *"can consumers escape the market?"* not only overestimates the agentic potential of individuals as 'consumers' but fundamentally misrecognises the sense of realism through which capitalism ensures that any and all ideas of 'escape' are already assiduously and pre-emptively co-opted, facilitated by, and de facto made an intrinsic part of the de-politicised, post-historical and thoroughly consumerised present.

What is lacking in material such as Carù and Cova (2003), Cova *et al.* (2018), Tumbat and Belk (2011), Orazi and Van Laer (2023) and others who have theorised escapism at phenomenological and symbolic-interactionist levels is a properly anti-individualist philosophy that elevates analysis beyond the subjective personal experiences of consumer subjects. To speak only in terms of individuals' and groups' actions, feelings and thoughts not only accords to them a very high level of personal autonomy but plays entirely into the very fantasies that prop up capitalism's privileging of 'inner' subjective states instead of the public good.

For the nascent field of terminalist or de-romanticist thinking which I situate my thesis in (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2022; Fitchett and Cronin, 2022), there is no "can" consumers escape the market; rather, escape must be accepted as an ideologically sanctioned act that is *fully expected* and *encouraged* to occur as an important market-mediated expression that, if anything, only takes consumers deeper into its clutches. As Fisher (2009, p. 9) aptly points out, "the old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation,

seems to have been played out", and, as a result "[w]hat we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, [their]... pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture". Accordingly, rather than highlight their aesthetic playful functions, the three papers in my thesis seek to re-evaluate the "magical meaningfulness" (Kozinets, 2002a, p. 32) of nostalgic escapes, emphasising instead their cruel optimism. My work points here to the idea that nostalgia is not just melancholic (*i.e.* consumers' desires to escape to things that have been lost such as pre-capitalist worlds) but is something that maintains one's attachments to something problematic: any form of "magical meaningfulness" tells us more therefore, about the cruelty at play in ensuring consumers remained attached to the past that offers nothing more than a collection of impossible promises about a future to come.

Using understandings of cruel optimism as a point of departure from previous accounts of consumer escapes, one's attachments to the past and its beliefs such as belief in magic - of which I refer to as "thinking magically" (see Paper 3) - is cruel because attachments *to* this belief keeps consumers trapped in a continuous deadlock of looking to the past. Fetishising past worlds filled with pre-capitalist ways of life and other worldviews (*i.e.* magic) is problematic because it becomes the basis of cruel optimism - an "obstacle" - diverting consumers' attention *away* from social, ethical, and political norms that should be more closely scrutinised (not taken as 'naturalised'), today. One's fascination with the past ultimately, I argue, strips consumers of their ability to deal with the futurity of things.

Not only do consumers' efforts to escape the marketplace through fetishising the past and its magical attachments re-embed them in consumer culture, but their basic belief that escape is possible through doing so functions as part of capitalism's own "obscene supplementarity" (see Paper 2). By considering the deadlocks and disappointments that accompany consumers' attempts to escape into pre-capitalist pasts, I have shown how nostalgia becomes the "obscene" means through which capitalism supplements and sustains its forever-present as the best possible and least flawed reality. In doing so, my thesis identifies the cruel optimism of nostalgia as tied up in a kind of 'bad faith' consumer resistance. In this sense, past-oriented escapists, and particularly those invested in archaisms, are comparable to *accelerationists* – like 'preppers' (Campbell *et al*., 2019) – who act in bad faith by holding out for the end of the world, preparing for an apocalyptic event they see as a panacea for all problems. Nostalgia for the archaic past is like preparing for some post-apocalyptic world

because it reroutes any transformative energies *away* from making a better future and into self-indulgent nihilism.

Just like accelerationists who would cynically let things unravel to their fullest extent by playing into – rather than seeking to militate against – the worst excesses of capitalism, those who turn to the distant past as a way out have jettisoned all good faith in favour of a foregone and nihilist conclusion that the present is unsalvageable: past-oriented escapists and accelerationists are both so crippled by their cruel optimism that neither offer new ideas or possibilities for meaningful change beyond contemplating with some degree of titillation those outlandish peculiarities of what once was long ago, or could once again be only through total societal ruination. Taking this thinking to its natural conclusion, consumers' fascination with archaisms is profoundly nihilistic: it not only suspends any requirement to fantasise about something better but, through its quixotic nature *perpetuates* the post-historical present.

A further contribution of my thesis is the revaluation of the political worth of community achieved through nostalgia. My three papers suggest that nostalgia's failure to stimulate any kind of transformative praxis is compounded by the disintegration of community ties thus contradicting romanticised interpretations such as Brown *et al*. (2003) who suggest "in times of threat or of sociocultural and economic turbulence, nostalgia would provide a sense of comfort and close-knit community, a safe haven in an unsafe world" (p. 20). By contrast, many of the nostalgic, past-oriented groups discussed across the three papers of my thesis – including Gerald Gardner's British Wicca movement, the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.), Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, cyber witches, and Witchtokers – despite forming during times of turbulence have been more interested in fragmentary identity projects, magical performativity, aesthetics, and social play rather than any kind of articulate, unifying political demands. Instead of carrying a coherent and expandable political vision that the majority of subjects under capitalism may be able to sympathise with, relate to, and unify under, each falls squarely into their own self-selected lifestyle interests, eccentricities, and guarded leisure avocations associated with "marketized belonging" (Wickstrom *et al*., 2021). Such groups – through their communal consumption of archaisms – might be capable of nurturing what Belk and Costa (1998, p. 234) call an "intensified sense of passionate community", but not, as far as I have seen, politically-centred solidarity projects. As Wickstrom *et al*. (2021, p. 83) argue, "collective consumption feeds upon constant separation and individualization, or the cyclic hunt for moments of 'joy' through

170

rituals and the perfection of practices, rather than boundless relations as these would require a different ontological ground, that is, the possibility to be without boundaries, a loss of self". The ideals of community and belonging organised around one's nostalgic attachments to the past, unlike trade unions, suffragettes, environmentalists, and human rights groups where everyone who shares commitment to some coherent goal can join and truly 'belong', witch groups with their primitivism, esoterica, and exclusive rituals and aesthetics tend toward desired marginality (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005) rather the inclusive and expansive spread of ideas.

In contrast to political solidarity movements that require mass participation, the witch groups studied in this thesis I found to be set up for the purpose of experiencing joy, building self, and celebrating distinctiveness and individuality. As consumption communities rather than truly political units, the witch groups lack what Wickstrom *et al*. (2021) call "ontological unboundedness". Instead of allowing themselves to be boundlessly expandable to others, they remain bounded rigidly to a particular marketplace culture (of esoteric earth-bound paganist pursuits) that may not be universally appealing to all consumers, thus ensuring some marginality. This is not to say that *all* marketplace cultures that draw consumption-related inspiration from the esoterica and mythology of a semi-mythic past will lack the potential for political coherence and expandability. Recent reports about the rising popularity of "cultural Christianity" for example, suggest that consuming esoterica could still provide some unifying grounds for power and influence over culture. Solidarity may blossom, as Davies (2024, p. n.p) for the *New Statesman* ponders, "from believing in mad things […] People want the supernatural, they want to strange, they want what they don't get out of a Labour Party manifesto". There may be at present a much-needed opportunity for a "refreshingly weird conversation about faith's place in our lives and politics" (*ibid.* n.p.). Such an approach could potentially become the biting force for making politics become more incisive to get people to believe and fight for something.

As a note on the research's contribution to improving knowledge and humanity, counter to the pursuit of 'performative knowledge' generation (Fournier and Grey, 2000) this thesis's emphasis on realism aligns with the critical axiological impetus to *denaturalise* and lay bare the underlying assumptions and limitations of marketing, markets, and capitalism (rather than propositioning new policies or frameworks to remedy these). This thesis encourages future

research to approach consumers' engagement with the past from a structural perspective, one that covers political determinants like those explored here.

6.2 Limitations & Future Research

As is customary with research projects, this study has several limitations. Addressing these limitations will establish fruitful lines of enquiry that may help to extend, clarify, or complicate some of the theoretical and empirical facets of my research. Three avenues for future research based upon the limitations of my work are outlined below.

6.2.1 Thinking Beyond a Western Cultural Lens

This doctoral research's first limitation centres on the biasing influence of the cultural conditions and environments that the ethnographic data was collected and interpreted within. Kozinets (2010) has suggested that "there is no *really real* ethnography, no *de facto* perfect ethnography that would satisfy every methodological purist" (p. 62). Certainly, in my case, I followed a critical stance to ethnography centred on a context-of-context'*esque* attention to how my empirical context shapes and is shaped by political-economic and ideological structures as we experience and understand them in the United Kingdom. An ethnographer with a humanist-phenomenological or idealist stance perhaps would have discounted all of this structural baggage and looked much more closely at the individualistic and micro-social minutiae of my empirical context, and perhaps may have even participated firsthand as a neophyte amongst witch cultures.

Moreover, in all three papers, the histories, practices, identities, beliefs around the witch and witchcraft were gathered in a Western cultural setting in the North of England –are interpreted through Western eyes and are grounded in Western theories and concepts. In the absence of any comparative data from other parts of the world where histories, attitudes, and the marketisation and touristification of witchcraft may differ, my research cannot speak authoritatively to the complex relationship between witchcraft and consumption within non-Western political economies. In these respects, my research unfortunately runs afoul of Coffin and Hill's (2022) cautionary reflection that "forms of thinking from the Global South are side-lined, reinforcing well-established intellectual hierarchies" (p. 1614).

The absence of non-Western expressions of witchcraft from my research is regrettable, not least because having such insights would only further enrich our understanding about the eternal recurrence of the witch throughout modern world history. As Monica Hunter Wilson wrote for the *American Journal of Sociology* over seven decades ago, "I see witch beliefs as the standardized nightmare of a group, and I believe that the comparative analysis of such nightmares is not merely an antiquarian exercise but one of the keys to the understanding of society" (Wilson, 1951, p. 313). Tracing across region and culture the possibility of the witch being a "standardized nightmare" of modernity would have added to my thesis enormously. Specifically, understanding the role of the witch in consumer culture could be advanced considerably by accounting carefully for the many postcolonial tribal communities in the Global South who remain reliant *today* on the historical practices, beliefs, values of witchcraft and magic. Witchcraft belief systems are geographically widespread. For example in communities throughout the African continent, belief in the power of witchcraft, the supernatural and the Occult more widely are central to many communities' ancestry and present-day cultural traits (see Dolvo, 2007; Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020; Zungu, 2020). Meanwhile Voodoo practitioners in Benin, West Africa and Brujería covens in Latin America will have experienced their own relations with political economy and perhaps deviate in form and content to the modes of 'consumption' I have accounted for in the Global North. In other parts of the world such as Islamic countries, witchcraft is not something that is celebrated, marketised, or touristified in popular culture, rather it is considered a capital crime punishable by imprisonment, torture, and/or death (Horowitz, 2014; Edwards, 2013).

Including the experiences, fantasies and the functioning of the witch in African, Latin, and Islamic regions would presumably generate different insights from those reported in this thesis. Moreover, these communities – in responding to their own challenges of capitalist globalisation and the realism it engenders – could offer important understanding of how post-historical consumer culture is experienced multiculturally.

6.2.2 Snapshot in Time

If we return to a quote from Cova and Cova (2001) cited in my Introductory Chapter: "[marketplace cultures] are fuzzy; more societal sparkle than socio-economic certainty" (p. 70), we may soon recognise that the ethnographic findings of this thesis, at best, equate to only a *snapshot* of sparkly 'fuzziness' in one place at one time rather than conclusive proclamations

that will hold validity into the future. As settings and political-economic situations change over time, marketplace cultures will evolve also, adapting to new and emergent circumstances and behaving differently. Witches – like all marketplace cultures – adapt to new trends and experiences meaning many of the ethnographic observations detailed in this thesis will be unlikely to occur in precisely the same way again in ten, twenty, or thirty-years' time.

The witch may have existed in the cultural and social imaginary for a significant portion of human history, but she has *not* as my research has shown, remained static; she continues to shape and be shaped by politics, marketplace systems, and consumption practices. For example, while the digital economy of witch communities featured heavily over the course of my doctoral journey, one must appreciate that some relatively *recent* phenomena (*e.g.* WitchTok) seemingly peaked during the Covid pandemic, and are already in decline as I approach the end of my studies. Furthermore, we cannot count on the host platform TikTok or Reddit (or social media most generally) as continuing to be the most popular fora for witchcraft in the future. Likewise, the economy built around witch tourism explored in this thesis differs significantly from how it was half a century ago, and will likely be subject to change again over the next half century. Readers of my thesis must recognise that, as times passes us by, the theoretical accounts arrived at here will lose relevance and will need to be replaced by new studies.

Lastly, this thesis has been solely reliant on the witch for its empirical background. Analysing the existence and function of *other* marketplace cultures reflective of pre-capitalist imaginaries could provide a more nuanced analysis and insights into the role of archaisms in post-historical consumer culture. For example, the commodification, exoticism, and appropriation of the Geisha from pre-modern Japan, contemporary subcultures descending from Cowboy culture (Spanish. *Vaquero)* originating from medieval Spain (circa. 5th-15th century), gothic inspired mythologies derived from the folkloric figure of the Vampire from Southeastern Europe (circa. 18th-century for modern interpretations of the Vampire aesthetic, while its origins can be traced back to ancient Greece, *i.e.* the *Empousa* figure).

6.2.3 Absence of Ethnographic Feminist Gaze

The ethnographer's gaze adopted in this thesis was one aligned with critical theory and was thus somewhat selective in these respects. While this gaze did bring my research into contact with Marxist-feminist authors such as Silvia Federici, I recognise that another ethnographer

adopting a more pronounced feminist gaze may have detected issues other than those accounted for in my thesis. For example, feminist critique and theorisation could be developed by exploring the evolution of the 'sexy witch' and how this contributes to "the pornification of culture" (Maclaran, 2015, p. 1735). Unpacking how the witch's historicity has been co-opted to sustain "erotic capital" through (predominantly female) self-objectification could also inform a sustained study in its own right and would provide important consumer cultural insights on how, why, and to what level of agency do women adopt hyper-sexualised interpretations of the witch.

There is also unexplored evidence in my data that points to the conflicting views held by witches relating to the intersections of feminism and the witch *i.e.* while some of my participants consider witchcraft and feminism to be intimately connected, cynical views were also expressed about the witch-feminism trope. Not everyone within witch-related marketplace cultures believe in the mantra that "*we are the granddaughters of the witches you could not burn*", recognising such sentiments to be constructed purely for the goals of consumer capitalism (expressed as a good 'story' to tell, sell and appeal to women who exist on the margins of society). As my research has only skimmed the surface on these areas, future feminist researchers are encouraged to explore the legitimacy of networked witchcraft feminism (also 'cyberfeminism') and/or the "digital sisterhood" (Fotopoulou, 2016) performed across online witchcraft communities. One could carry out a netnographic study using a similar Reddit community as the one used in this study (*e.g.* "r/WitchesVSPatriarchy").

Lastly, returning to the absence of cross-cultural perspectives in this thesis, researchers and agencies such as the United Nations (UN) consider the discriminatory treatment of women accused of witchcraft to be one of the most complex human rights issues today, leading to a landmark UN resolution, entitled "*The Elimination of Harmful Practices related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks*" being passed at the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council, 2021. In an article for *The New York Times*, Horowitz (2014) recounts how "murders of supposed witches as numbering in the thousands each year, while beatings and banishments could run into the millions", while "accused women are sometimes beaten to death… or the victims may be stoned or beheaded, as have been reported in Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa" (n.p.).

Including these views, experiences, contexts, would certainly generate different results from those presented in this thesis.

7.0 References

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8.0 Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1: Ethics Approval by FASS-LUMS Ethics Committee

[External] FASSLUMS-2022-2137-RECR-3 Ethics Approval from FREC

donotreply@infonetica.net

To: James, Sophie (Postgraduate Researcher) <s.james7@lancaster.ac.uk>

Cc: Cronin, James; Patterson, Anthony

Fri 18/11/2022 11:07

Letter.pdf
118 KB

This email originated outside the University. Check before clicking links or attachments.
Name: Sophie James
Supervisor: James Cronin
Department: LUMS
FASS LUMS **REC Reference:** FASSLUMS-2022-2137-RECR-3
Title: The Haunting of Consumer Culture: The Witch in the Contemporary Marketplace (PhD thesis)

Dear Miss Sophie James,
Thank you for submitting your ethics application in REAMS, Lancaster University's online ethics review system for research. The application was recommended for approval by the FASS LUMS Research Ethics Committee, and on behalf of the Committee, I can confirm that approval has been granted for this application.
As Principal Investigator/Co-Investigator your responsibilities include:
 - ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licences and approvals have been obtained.
 - reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research to the Research Ethics Officer at the email address below (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress).
 - submitting any changes to your application, including in your participant facing materials (see attached amendment guidance).
Please keep a copy of this email for your records. Please contact me if you have any queries or require further information.
Yours sincerely,
Dr Karolina Follis / Professor Panos Athanasopoulos
Chair and Deputy Chair FASS/LUMS Research Ethics Committee
fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk

8.2 Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Lancaster University

Participant Information Sheet

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Sophie James and I am a Doctoral Researcher with the Department of Marketing at Lancaster University Management School. As part of my PhD, I am undertaking research into the role and impact of marketing, markets, and the political economy on witchcraft and the functions that witches play in today's consumer culture. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Please take your time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

Using witchcraft as an exemplar, my doctoral research explores the roles and functions that premodern imaginaries fulfil in today's modern consumer culture. My study will develop insights into how and why consumers of the contemporary period identify as witches, what witchcraft means to them, how witchcraft is consumed, and how they see the symbolism and spirituality of witchcraft interact and interrelate with commercialism and consumerism.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you as you self-identify as a witch or partake in witchcraft practices, and, accordingly, I believe that you will be able to offer unique insights that contribute to my research project in meaningful ways. I would, therefore, be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, your participation will involve the following:

Undertake an approximately 1 – 1.5 hour conversational 'interview' with myself, the doctoral researcher for the project. This will be conducted in a space that feels comfortable for you, and at a convenient time in line with your daily activities. The interview will be largely centred on your perspectives and experiences of witches and witchcraft, how you practice and express witchcraft, and your thoughts on how witches are served and represented in today's marketplace.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences of witchcraft and offer unique insights to an area of academic study that is currently underdeveloped.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not need to take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw your data up to 3 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages to taking part in the study. You will be required to invest (approx.) 1-1.5 hours of your time for an interview with me. Should you decide to take part, you have the right to answer or refuse any questions that you like, and if anything upsets you during the interview, please let me know. You can ask me to stop the interview at any point.

Will my data be identifiable?

In accordance with the *Information Commissioners Office Code of Practice*, I am not able to *guarantee* the anonymisation of personal data. For more information, please see
www.ico.org.uk/media/1061/anonymisation-code.pdf

However, all necessary steps will be taken to ensure your personal information is safeguarded, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). After you complete your interview, your audio recording will be saved under an anonymous file name with pseudonyms being used later for citing quotes to make sure that no one can identify you or anyone else who you mention in your interview. After the interview, only myself (the researcher conducting this study) will have access to the original audio recording but interview transcripts may be shared with the immediate supervisor team. I will keep all identifying information about you confidential; for example, your name and other personal and/or sensitive information that can identify you. That is, I will not share this information with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of all participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
My PhD thesis and academic publications; for example, peer reviewed academic journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences. When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you have kindly shared with me. I will use anonymised quotes to ensure that all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in the academic publication of materials.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely until my PhD completion. After this point, data will be transferred to my supervisor Professor James Cronin's encrypted, password-protected software. Data will be stored for 10 years.

Risk of Harm

Although risk of harm is considered low for this research as the focus is on consumption aspects of witchcraft, in the event that you share something with me in the interview that suggests that you or somebody else, including myself, might be at risk of harm, because of witchcraft activities, then I will be obliged to share this information with 1) my supervisors; and 2) the head of research in my department immediately. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens during your participation in the study, please contact me:

Name: Sophie James
Email: s.james7@lancaster.ac.uk

Or alternatively, you can contact my supervisors for this research:

Name: Professor James Cronin
Email: j.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk
Name: Professor Anthony Patterson
Email: a.patterson2@lancaster.ac.uk

Sources of support

Lancaster Wellbeing & Support: www.lancaster.ac.uk/study/why-lancaster/wellbeing-and-support/
NHS Central Lancashire Mental Health: www.centrallancashireccgs.nhs.uk/local-services/your-health/mental-health

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

8.3 Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: The Haunting of Consumer Culture: The Witch In The Contemporary Marketplace
Name of Researcher: Sophie James
Email: s.james7@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 3 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 3 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. ☐

3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. ☐

4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation without my consent. ☐

5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure. ☐

6. I understand that data will be kept according to university guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study. ☐

7. I understand that a**lthough risk of harm is considered low for this research as the focus is on consumption aspects of witchcraft, in the event that you share something with me in the interview that suggests that you or somebody else, including myself, might be at <u>risk of harm</u>, because of witchcraft activities, then I will be obliged to share this information with 1) my supervisors; and 2) the head of research in my department immediately. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.** ☐

8. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____   Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

8.4 Appendix 4: Recruitment Poster

8.5 Appendix 5: Accounting for the Lack of Lack: Fetishistic Disavowal within Networks of Desire, NETNOCON2023 Conference Abstract

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

Sophie James, James Cronin, Anthony Patterson

Department of Marketing, Lancaster University Management School, UK

Abstract

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 Deleuzean 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 *et al*., 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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 semiocapitalism 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 semiocapitalist interests.

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8.6 Appendix 6: Heritage of Atrocity & Inherent Transgression Under Capitalism, CCTC 2023 Conference Abstract

Heritage of Atrocity & Inherent Transgression Under Capitalism

Sophie James, James Cronin, Anthony Patterson

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the heritage commodification process as an important – and 'obscene' – complement to today's neoliberal-capitalist hegemony. Chief amongst this obscenity is the role of the 'heritage of atrocity' (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000, p. 165) in justifying the ideologico-ethical superiority of our neoliberal present, and thus in ossifying post-historical capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009). Our exploration follows in the footsteps of De-romanticist (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) and Terminal (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2022) approaches to consumer culture theoretics that suggest life under global capitalism is experiencing a paralysis suffused with a collective sense of disappointment with the present (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Coffin and Egan-Wyler, 2022; Jones and Hietanen, 2022; Hoang *et al.*, 2022). Without any plausible solutions, today's consumers have nowhere to turn but the past to try and imagine ways out of their structural deadlock. Whilst this has directed commentators' attention to the consumption of retro-brands and retro-aesthetics (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2021), we suggest structural disappointment with the present coincides most obviously with heritage consumption and touristic interest in the past.

Consumer demand for experiencing a pre-liberal, pre-capitalist past with its comparably more authentic and raucous, albeit *brutal* ways of life is often met through visiting locations that foreground violent death and suffering (Seaton, 1996). Atrocity heritage is assumed to be organized around satisfying a hyper-competitive ethos of neoliberalism; by consuming the miseries of foreign or ancestral *Others*, consumer-tourists are reassured that they are doing comparably better in their own lives (Korstanje, 2017, 2021). We expand this assumption by considering how consuming the heritage of atrocity functions at a level deeper

than one's willful perpetuation of neoliberalism's game of social competition. We claim motivation to gaze upon the violence and death of historic *Others* is not a product of one's conscious participation in other-abasing, ruthless one-upmanship, but emerges paradoxically through the desire to *escape* today's petty 'winner takes all' logic of social competition altogether. Rather than participate in and reproduce neoliberalism's rivalrous culture of narcissism and exploitation, consumer-tourists as 'death-seekers' (Korstanje, 2017), we argue, are prompted by their desperation to leave behind the artificiality of the present in favor of a materially harsher, long-foreclosed world which kept "real" issues such as violent death at the forefront of personal awareness. Nevertheless, any transgressive potential for egress under capitalist realism is self-defeating, imminently deferrable, and amenable to market 'capture' (Jones and Hietanen, 2022). Encounters with history's unfiltered *obscenity* – including its gratuitous violence and political volatility – lend themselves to super-desirous spectacle, marketized reproduction and, ultimately reaffirmation that the neoliberal present remains the "best worst" system available.

To assist in our theorization, we draw upon what Žižek (1998) calls the 'inherent transgression' of an ideological and hegemonic system. For Žižek, a system such as neoliberal capitalism does not function dogmatically but works by being necessarily accompanied by a disavowed, obscene underside: an excessive opposite, a point of illicit enjoyment, or periodic transgressive relief. Visiting the brutal, illiberal past provides an apparent way *out* of the present liberal system, but as Žižek argues, works to sustain rather than undermine that system's supremacy. Because any transgression achieved remains only temporary, at the level of image, and ultimately impotent, the experience is neither truly authentic nor passive, but precisely *interpassive.* Using the functioning of distant violence in Bosnia for Western liberals of the 1990s as an example, Žižek (1998, p. 5-6) argues, "is the Western liberal academic's obsession with the suffering in Bosnia not the outstanding recent example of interpassive suffering? One can authentically suffer through reports on rapes and mass killings in Bosnia, while calmly pursuing one's academic career". The situation, we suggest, is comparable with historic atrocities for the consumer-tourist: one can wedge some distance between oneself and today's world of artifice, social competition, and narcissism through historic death-seeking, *yet* continue to participate in all of the comforts of contemporary consumer culture uninterrupted. The heritage of atrocity becomes for the consumer-tourist an obscene rite to exorcize one's disappointment with the present *not* through one's direct suffering by trying to change the present but through the *suffering of the long-dead Other*.

To provide empirical grounding for atrocity heritage as a kind of permissive and interpassive transgression, we draw upon an ethnographic study of dark heritage sites in the North of England centred on the brutal trials and executions of suspected witches in the Jacobean period. Our fieldwork encompasses non-participant observation at heritage sites over 12 months, 22 semi-structured interviews with visitors of key locations, and observational netnography on TripAdvisor (Çakar, 2018).

Our analyses reveal that the heritage of atrocity is strategically organized to preserve the onto-affectivity of today's capitalist realism: the collective feeling that not only is our neoliberal present the best system that humans have ever constructed for themselves, but that no realistic alternatives can exist (Fisher, 2009). While gruesome details of historical injustices were observed at "witch tourism" sites, these are frequently presented without any critical debate about their continuing, vestigial influence on class and gender politics today. Much of the attention given by commercial tourism providers is directed to dramatized descriptions of past brutalities rather than to social factors that persevere today. Moreover, the heritage of atrocity remains fully integrated with market logics through heavy reliance on a commodity culture comprised of souvenirs, images, and fetishes, all of which enable consumer-tourists to escape the staid, civilized present while disavowing – or maintaining distance from – the full horror of what they are spectating.

By revealing how capitalist realism benefits from subsuming its cultural predecessors, we provide a critical reinterpretation of the functioning of historic, folkloric playgrounds in consumer culture (see Belk and Costa, 1998). Beyond simply offering consumers sites of fantasy enactment, we show how sites with attachments to atrocity are (re)made to exist *within* rather than *without* market structures, thus providing clarity for how market actors "retroactively restructure" (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021) and subsume the past to capitalistic desire (Ahlberg *et al*., 2021).

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8.7 Appendix 7: On Managing Dartainment Responsibly: A hauntological critique of marketised deathscapes, MSP 2022 Conference Abstract

On Managing Dartainment Responsibly:
A hauntological critique of marketised deathscapes

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Abstract

In what Korstanje (2017) conceptualises as a type of 'Thana-capitalism' (from Greek θάνατος / Thanatos, meaning 'death'), death, effectively, becomes a lucrative basis for commodity exchange. Although most closely linked to dark tourism, Thana-capitalism is not reducible to the "touristification of deathscapes" alone (Stone and Grebenar, 2021, p. 2; Dresler and Fuchs, 2021); rather, the commodification of historic suffering has permeated multiple spheres of consumer culture including popular books, movies, TV series, documentary film, and videogames. This morbid consumption economy has incurred critical attention concerning the ethics involved in the consumer-cultural management of market offerings that instrumentalise historic suffering (Light, 2017). To explore the nexus between the commodification of death, consumer culture, ethics, and history, our working paper critically engages with the ethical pitfalls of managing 'dartainment'; dark attractions marketized for their entertainment value (Dale and Robinson, 2011). We address the following research question: what barriers, if any, prevent dartainment from functioning as a mode of affective engagement, learning, and moral reflection?

To provide an empirical context for our work, we draw upon an interpretive analysis of the marketisation of the Lancashire witch trials of 1612, which have sustained public curiosity for over four centuries and are referred to as the "most famous and best documented of all English witch trials" (Poole, 2002, p. x). Our analysis is informed by secondary research and engagement with primary touristic sites and texts. To interpret the morbid cultural interest that

situates and perpetuates the witch trials as dartainment, we deploy Derrida's (2006) concept of hauntology as an analytical lens. As inspired by Sterling (2021), adapting hauntology provides a novel way to detect points of tension in the heritage and culture industry.

We explore how spectrality of the dead Other is key to Lancashire's heritage process. Derridean 'hauntings' (i.e. re-appearances) of 'spectres' (*i.e.* those effaced by some structure of power) alert us (i.e. consumers/tourists, managers, local communities) to that which has been repressed in order for the present to exist. For Derrida, we in the living present are subject to an ethical responsibility to historic repressed Others. Our analyses, however, suggest that the potential for genuine collective responsibility is obfuscated by market-mediation of the consumer-subject's desires for self-expression and self-fulfilment. Genuine commemoration of those who suffered long ago is allowed to be subordinated to market-imperatives for ornamentation of the self as expressed through commodifiable interest in witchcraft memorabilia, aesthetics, and atmosphere of location generally. Moreover, the ghosts of victims are unable to be laid to rest by market-means if the original brutalism that beset their persecution is not entirely concluded in the present but simply reconfigured into a 'sadist spectacle' (Korstanje, 2017, p. 11) – a commodifiable other abasing experience analogous to commodity narcissism (Cluley and Dunne, 2012).

By pursing a hauntological critique of dartainment, we respond to the need "to develop or apply theory in order to understand tourism at places of death and suffering" (Light, 2017: 294). We provide important insights on the ethical dimensions of Thana-capitalism and managerial implications pertaining to the moral-educational-commodification of dartainment.

Keywords: Dartainment, Dark Tourism, Deathscapes, Hauntology, Lancashire Witch Trials, Thana-capitalism

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8.8 Appendix 8: Bewitching the Blob: A Hauntology of Witches in the Marketplace, ICR2022 Conference Abstract

To cite: James, S, Cronin, J. and Patterson, A. (2022) 'Bewitching the Blob: A Hauntology of Witches in the Marketplace', *Paper presented at Interpretive Consumer Research Conference*, Liverpool, United Kingdom, 9/06/22 - 10/06/22.

Bewitching the Blob: A Hauntology of Witches in the Marketplace

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Introduction

Recent deployments of Derrida's (2006) "hauntology" in interpretive consumer research emphasise that contemporary consumer culture is locked into an endless gyre of resurrection, reiteration, reimagining, reboots, re-releases, retrobrands, and re-permutation (Ahlberg *et al.*, 2021; Brown *et al.*, 2021). Though hauntology enables us to explore consumer culture's fascination with its own past, Derrida's concept also provides us with a lens for understanding how ideas and values that predate – and were eventually laid to rest by – the coming of consumer culture inevitably return to disrupt the capitalist present. Ours is by no means the first historical period to be preoccupied with the ghosts of its past, though our omnipotent late modern consumer culture has certainly effaced a great number of alternative perspectives and ways of being in its expansion. In this paper, we adapt and extend Derrida's hauntological sub-concept of "revenant" to explore how the social architecture of consumer culture has, since it's incipience, remained chronically haunted by pre-modern, pre-liberal and pre-capitalist *Others* that were supplanted by marketplace ideology. Understood vaguely as a figure who we have not seen the end of and "whose expected return repeats itself, again and again" (Derrida, 2006, p. 10), the revenant offers haunting reminders of life before today's cynical capitalist realism deprived us of any conceivable futures without capitalism.

To assist in an adaptation and development of the revenant concept, we draw upon a cultural-historical account of "the witch" – an ancient undead and undying *Other* from our pre-capitalist past; a long-foreclosed vision of a magical future that never arrived but whose radical ethos is today absorbed into the politically hollow processes of commodity exchange. The

witch, as we shall discuss, functions paradoxically as both an enemy and an ally to the marketplace. She is a figure of old that is at once diametrically opposed to the modernising apparatuses of liberalism, rationalism, humanism, and voluntary market exchange, *yet* also personifies the radical individualism and countercultural energy that is valuable to market innovations and is so very often co-opted by marketing management. "Witchcraft," as Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, p. 286) point out, "has proven to be every bit as expansive and protean as modernity itself – thriving on its contradictions and its silences, usurping its media, puncturing its pretensions". We consider how the witch's place in the marketplace has, over modernity, been characterised by "blobjectivity" in the sense that if we visualise capitalism as the classic *blob* that absorbs all that it comes into contact with, the figures that most threaten it, become its primary targets for assimilation (see Colquhoun, 2020; Fisher, 2009).

With the explanatory power of blobjectivity and concepts from Derrida, our paper seeks to answer two interrelated research questions: *what are the main features of revenants?*; and, *how do revenants become assimilated into capitalism?* Using cultural-historical methods we address calls in ICR for attentiveness to "the past in marketing" and the distant contexts from which our present cultural economy of consumption has been borne (Balmer and Burghausen, 2019; Karababa, 2012). Also, by considering the witch's unique ability to "harmonize and rupture the multiple temporal orientations (past, present, and future) to create shared consumption communities or counter-communities of time" (Robinson *et al.*, 2021, p. 13), our research brings further attention to the historical, political, and intersectional undercurrents involved in the persistent reformation of market system dynamics.

Hauntology: A Closer Look at Revenants

The word "hauntology" is a compound assembly of "ontology" (how we view 'what is') and "haunting" (the return of something). Originally deployed by Derrida in his book *Spectres of Marx* (2006), in reference to the enduring legacy of Marxism after Soviet communism passed into history, hauntology infers that all that *is* can only exist against a backdrop of returning, excluded *Others*. These *Others* have presented themselves as a considerable source of debate in critical theory and cultural analyses, but Derrida's sub-concept of "revenant", the returning spectre, helps to provide some theoretical depth and coloration on the topic. Revenants function as a key archetype within hauntological investigation – they are, at their most elementary level, those people, things, or ideas that step out of their graves to re-enter history and disturb the consumer capitalist present. For Derrida, revenants equate to "the ghosts of those who are not

yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism" (Derrida, 2006, p. xviii). Their core feature is that they are the re-appearance of *what is not*, or perhaps, in many cases, *what is no longer*. The revenant is the paradoxical *presence of absence*; it is the reminder of what is *absent* for the *present* to be what it is. In consumer research, Södergren's (2022) example of the historic semi-mythic Viking, and his perpetual haunting of Swedish consumer culture, helps to clarify this complex conceptualisation. In today's liberal-democratic Sweden, the Viking stalks the present with imagined images of what have been made absent for liberalism to take hold: brutalism, patriarchy, traditionalism, and violence. The *making absent* of these features by contemporary liberal ways of life allows the Viking to return as a popular figure for far-right populists, providing them with a lodestar for how things may once have been but no longer are. For consumer culture at large however, the "Viking archetype becomes a haunting specter through the collectivization of guilt" and whose "excluded histories can come back to unsettle the consumer" (2022, p. 9).

This reveals another key feature of the revenant: it is internal to the identity of those who behold it rather than external. Revenants should not be confused with some literally spectral or supernatural threat from outside of human civilisation. Rather revenants, in the Derridean sense, are the cultural and psychological projections of civilisation itself and how it contends with what it is, what it was, and what it is not. Mourning, for Derrida (2006, p. 9) is one of the ways that civilisation conjure the return of revenants because mourning "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead". Mourning a lost person or object brings the departed to the foreground of one's consciousness, allowing one to identify with and closely reflect on it, thus allowing the departed to "return". Accordingly, what is notable about mourning for Derrida is not the experience of sadness but rather the attempt "to ontologize", which is ultimately how revenants (or anything) come to be treated are real. To ontologize, localise, and identify with those that have been made absent is a catalyst for them to haunt us. To provide clarity on how returning revenants can then be, and have been, assimilated into the market we now turn to the concepts of market system dynamics and blobjectivity.

Market System Dynamics & Blobjectivity

Market system dynamics have been well discussed in CCT in relation to countercultural co-optation (Thompson and Coskuner Balli, 2007; Giesler, 2008; Kozinets, 2002; Holt, 2002). The literature outlines the ways in which market capitalism detects, deciphers, and pre-emptively reroutes any critique that wishes to contest its symbolic order, into its service – thus both ensuring its legitimacy, and futureproofing itself against emergent counter-ideological acts or subversion. Mark Fisher (2009, p. 9), in his excellent *Capitalist Realism*, provides a useful summation of this thinking in his concept of "precorporation", as "the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture". Through precorporation, alternatives of – and threats to – capitalist culture are often disarmed, defanged, and incorporated by market actors before those threats can ever realistically catalyse a future that is politically independent of liberal capitalism. In (anti)consumers' participation of, and optimism for, countercultural acts which promise an alternate future, they have often unwittingly and ironically "already succumbed to the fundamental logic of capitalism" (McGowan, 2016, p. 13). This brings us to the concept of "blobjective" – a loosely defined construct coined by Colquhoun (2020, p. 88) in the context of Fisher's arguments – which provides a useful adjective for "capitalism's consolidatory forces" by which any anti-capitalist counter-cultural resistances are ultimately "folded back into the system they were attempting to escape from". Capitalism is imagined as the monopolistic "blob" (as per the eponymous 1958 Cold War era horror film, *The Blob*) that indiscriminately absorbs and transforms all forms of rebellion into commodities. Conceptually, the idea of blobjectivity serves as a useful overarching summation for "the way in which capitalism absorbs all it comes into contact with, bringing otherwise disparate elements within its orbit" (Coverley, 2020, p. 14). Linguistically and thematically, the idea of the blob – in its vaguely B-movie, horror-show, or science fiction-*y* qualities – resonates tonally with the hauntological language of ghosts, spectres, death, apparitions, exorcisms, presence of absence, conjurement and so on, allowing us to better assimilate with Derrida's conceptual apparatus. Adapting and extending blobjectivity provides an apt enabling theory to interpret the relationship between the returning witch and the marketplace. Using that relationship as our context, we explore what the main features of revenants are; and, how revenants become assimilated into capitalism.

Context & Method

The witch, in her "emotional ambiguity, straddling boundaries between life and death", is a figure that has, for millennia, evoked "subconscious manifestations of complex, often conflicted relationships" (Gaskill, 2010, p. 2). Although the witch returns time and time again over human history, she is a malleable figure that is difficult to pin down and define. As summarised by Hutton (2004, p. 420) "there is no general agreement on what a witch or witchcraft is supposed to be". Resultingly, the meaning of a "witch", and by extension witchcraft – are as historically and culturally varied as the objects, practices, and ideologies associated with them today. We consider the witch's haunting returns over three broad periods of modernity spanning approximately five hundred years: early modernity, middle modernity, and late modernity. Our cultural-historical analysis of the witch follows Karababa's (2012, p. 15) recommendation that given its historical importance to contemporary consumer culture, "the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries" should be privileged and so this becomes a key part of our context. We rely on secondary historical materials.

Early Modernity: Expropriation

Characterised by economic upheaval in the transition from feudalism to merchant capitalism between the 15th and 18th centuries, historians consider this period of modernity to be a time of ideological struggle, maturation, and integration during which transformations in trade and production coincided with malicious witch-hunting hysteria across Europe. Levack (2006, p. 96) asserts "there were many apparent links between the process of state-building and witch-hunting", whilst critical feminist readings of the witch hunts suggest the demonisation and killings of predominantly women, can be explained "just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus 'liberated' from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labor" (Federici, 2004, p. 184). The expropriation of women's liberties according to incipient forms of market-capitalist logic – whether their anatomy, sexuality productivity, earnings, political authorities – helped to secure the masculinist, rationalist framework for a technocratic and professionalised bases for production. This suppressive apparatus provides us with an early illustration of capitalism's blobjective relationship with the witch – a premodern figure who was invoked to justify state violence in securing the primacy of marketplace ideology. Blobjectivity was secured through market-mediated texts such as the demonological guide *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") – which remained an

218

exceptionally popular book for more than two hundred years after its publication – anti-witch pamphlets, fine art, and pornified woodcuts, depicting witches and the devil engaging in foreplay (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993). All of these market offerings reproduced witches as demonic and forbidden seductresses to be hunted and suppressed.

Middle Modernity: Provocation

With the de-criminalisation of witchcraft, images of the witch as reconfigured throughout the Victorian period and into the 20th century provide us with insights into an evolving form of blobjectivity. Night-time economy workers such as burlesque dancers who borrowed from occultist imagery coincided with burgeoning consumer interest in neopagan 'Goddess' spiritualities via nature-based witchcraft. "Wicca" sought to employ the mythology of witch-hunts, signifying female discrimination "drawing on these images of rebellion… as a way of changing patriarchal thought forms of 'power over' and domination" (Greenwood, 1996, p. 120). In the post-WWII decades, groups such as "Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy" from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.) organization further drew inspiration from the witch's historic persecution to promote their politics. However, without any discernible impetus for durable change outside of the market, the witch soon became assimilated into commodifiable discourse "aimed at the consumerist mass market" (Ezzy, 2006, p. 17). Towards the latter part of the 20th century, the witch provoked a more glamourized "girl power" discourse, evidencing a type of neopagan feminism that was more marketable, celebrating women's sexual appeal over socio-political change, and assimilating the witch's mythos further into market system dynamics via mass-market TV and film productions.

Late Modernity: Reclamation

Contemporary interest in witches reflects the total victory of the "the blob". The witch continues to haunt liberal market capitalism but her re-appearances have been made to appear fully benign. Magical thinking and consumer spirituality are firmly assimilated into amorphous multibillion-dollar wellness movements. Synonymous with what Maclaran and Scott (2009) call "sacred shopping" and "mystical merchandise", many self-identifying witches count themselves a part of the digital cultural movement of "WitchTok", with its short-form video content receiving over 25 billion views. Having increased in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, with all of its associated disturbances to market societies' assumptive frameworks and ways of living, digital witchcraft is often invoked as an accessible way for

consumers to reclaim their "inner power". Through highly consumerised activities including divination, potion-making, and spell casting, witches are able to challenge patriarchy through virtual "hexings" of political figures and conjure protection enchantments for social justice movements.

Discussion

Addressing our research questions we have firstly, provided three interrelated, temporal features of what we call the "marketplace revenant" in its *expropriation, provocation, and reclamation* and have illustrated how the witch – as an exemplar of this figure – is made to constantly integrate and assimilate with capitalist interests. Secondly, the continuous re-working of witches and their meanings through a complex shaping of legal, socio-cultural, and political structures into the circuitry of capitalism, exposes the marketplace revenant's conflicting double trope; both in its power to haunt the present with reminders of a dark past, bringing hopes of a more "just" future - but its ability to do so can only seemingly exist through market co-optation offered through a range of cultural objects, practices, texts, and media. The marketplace revenant although ideologically antithetical to capitalism paradoxically remains hostage to and valuable for blobjective market system dynamics.

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8.9 Appendix 9: Hauntology of the Witch's Re-Enchantment, Enchantment In The History of Capitalism 2023 Workshop Abstract

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A Hauntology of the Witch's Re-Enchantment

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Abstract

Although the living present remains entrenched in a deep sense of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) whereby it is largely impossible to envisage a liveable reality without capitalism, an eerie filtrate of long forgotten and alternative belief systems, abandoned ideologies, and foreclosed fantasies linger as a ghostly structure of feeling; a collective sense that what once 'was' perhaps might be again. The culture industries have long poached upon this gnawing backward-lookingness and engaged in a form of "cultural necrophilia" whereby historic wonders, dramas, and curiosities – such as 'the witch' – are resuscitated, repackaged, and remarketed to re-enchant consumption and perpetuate consumer capitalism in the present (Ahlberg *et al*., 2021; Brown, 2001; Belk *et al*., 202l).

In this paper, we interpret recurring periods of cultural fascination with the ancient pre-capitalist figure of the witch as illustrative of a market project of commodifying "generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us" (Derrida, 2006, p. xviii). The witch – as one of these 'ghosts' – is never entirely present (if she ever was) though continually 'haunts' the present with reminders that once upon a time, long before the rational market-fundamentalist hegemony of modern secular life displaced all alternatives, there were genuinely different modes of living available to us based upon magical thinking and enchantment. By adapting Derrida's work on hauntology, we discuss how ghosts such as the witch have been – and continue to be – reconfigured by agents of capital to afford consumers the opportunity "to recover a sense of magic, myth, specialness… in other words, (re-)enchantment" (Hartmann and Brunk, 2019, p.

675; Ritzer, 1999); while remaining placated with shallow consumptive pleasures and commercial simulacra of what moderno-capitalist rationalism has effaced.

Through discussing market actors' appropriation of the witch over approximately a 500-year period, we reveal how Derridean ghosts are used to engender forms of enchantment and re-enchantment that are simultaneously oppositional to the contemporary rationalised world and the totalistic cynical realism it engenders, yet also corroborative of that world's hyper-consumerist and performative practices. From early modernity when the witch was invoked by mercantile classes to excite, galvanise, and monetise the persecution of those perceived to be a threat to inchoate capitalism; through to advanced modernity when the witch functioned as a libidinally thrilling aesthetic for burlesque dancers and other workers of the night-time economy; through to the late modern age of commodifiable online and offline neopagan leisure practices; we trace the market's predatory reliance on ghosts for its own projects of enchantment.

Consumer Culture Gothika

A reading of *consumption, markets, & capital* as possessed by a system of **ideological processes & fantasies** that *conceal* its *cruelty*: the language of *ghosts, witches, specters,* things that are 'spooky'...

Paper 02 (empirical)
"If You Like Your History Horrible": *The Obscene Supplementarity of Thanatourism*

✦ Examining the ideological role that **dark histories** fulfil for consumer culture. Ethnographic fieldwork = we explore thanatourism as a means for **'post-historical' consumer subjects** to conceive of wilder, pre-liberal, more *imaginative* worlds before **capitalist realism** extinguished **all** alternatives.
✦ It is not *schadenfreude* that motivates thanatourism (see Korstanje, 2017) but rather a quixotic pining to *escape* that reality.
✦ Thanatourism functions as an **'obscene supplement'** through *three processes*:

Managed Metempsychosis
Management of *'walking in the footsteps'* trails of those being **memorialised** at dark historic sites.

Governed Grotesquerie
Emphasis on the *fearful, degrading,* or *disgusting* to strip dark histories of **political content**.

Curated Kitschification
Reduction of dark **tragedy** into *souvenirs*, available to buy at museum gift shops & independent retailers.

Witches & *Witchcraft*

Witches pre-date biblical times, her origins are rooted in *Mesopotamian mythology* (Weber, 2021). No unifying definition or interpretation exists with historians continuing to debate her origins & meanings from early modernity to the present day (Hutton, 2004).

Context-of-Context — *Epistemology*
Critical — *Axiology*
Interpretivism — *Research Philosophy*

Paper 03 (empirical)
From Magical Thinking to 'Thinking Magically': *The Fetishistic Disavowal of Contemporary Witchcraft*

#WitchTok
50 billion + views

✦ The structure of **disavowal** allows us to *complicate* & move *beyond* "**magical thinking**", relied upon by **CCT researchers** (e.g. Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011) = *objectified*, material, meaningful cultural practice leading to transformation & empowerment.

#manifest
#moneyspell

Paper 01 (conceptual)
Revenants in The Marketplace: *A Hauntology of Retrocorporation*

✦ How modern capitalism is chronically **haunted** by *obstreperous vestiges* of what preceded it yet remains proficient in assimilating all that *returns to challenge it*.
✦ Market & state administrators' **co-optation** of the primeval witch & her **ideological trappings**.
✦ Derrida's (2006) *hauntology* in marketing scholarship = emphasise consumer culture's realisation that its 'best times' are behind it...

proactive — **Magical Thinking**
reactive — **Thinking Magically**

Symbolic = belief in a magical higher power where thoughts (aided by consumption) can lead to desirable outcomes.

Cynical = recognition of the objective *lack* of a magical higher power but nonetheless invoke it as a *means to an end*.

Retrocorporation
The *retroactive* reconfiguring of long foreclosed futures, desires & subjectivities as **depoliticising forces** for perpetuating *capitalist monoculture* in the present.

Terminal Marketing
Ultra-realist tradition, problematises the **transformative** potential of consumption & **utopian** assumption that consumers act *authentically* (Ahlberg et al., 2022).

Time is out of joint

Early Modernity
Expropriation

Middle Modernity
Provokation

Late Modernity
Calibration

PhD by publication
The Role of Archaisms in Post-Historical *Consumer Culture*

"**Modern capitalism** hates **anachronisms** unless they can be *monetised*" (Lezard, 2023: 43).

The Magical, Mystical & Profane...

Against a backdrop of consumers' *disappointment* with contemporary political, economic malaise of the present, how & why do things from *past worlds* find themselves preserving in the contemporary present; how have they been made palatable for extending market-based logics?

Critical Ethnography

Ethnography with a **political purpose**: "the importance of situating our work within the global economy" (Peñaloza, 1994: 35). Critical ethnography is well attuned to the **'context-of-context'** approach (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011) & is inspired by Van Maanen's (2011) 'critical tales'.
✦ 25 In-depth Interviews
✦ Historiography & *Digital History*
✦ Participant Observation
✦ Observational Netnography (Kozinets, 2020)

Capitalist Realism
A collective inability to **separate reality from capitalism;** a conflation that ensures the *market-dominant present* becomes the *de facto limit* to our social imaginaries (Fisher, 2009; also Jameson, 2003).

Cultural Critique

✦ **Mark Fisher (2009; 2014):** Capitalism's ability to obfuscate & distract from its own **contradictions & consequences;** absorbing all things that seek to challenge it using subjects' **cynicism** to *strengthen* its political phenomenology.
✦ **Jacques Derrida (1996; 2006):** Onto affective conceptualisation of the haunted status of our capitalist present. Hauntology = all that *is* can only exist against a backdrop of returning *Others*.
✦ **Slavoj Žižek (1997; 2006; 2008):** Critique of ideology as something above all objective intelligibility as our inescapable reality. Inconsistencies & contradictions within ideology reveals a glimmer of what is real.

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