The online marketplace Etsy.com is best known for the clothing, accessories, and art available for direct purchase from its retailers. However, its digital stalls also offer a variety of religious objects, including products sold by a number of witches. Purveyors such as “PsychicSpirit,” “MysticCoventry,” “druidshaven,” and “WhiteMountainMagick” set up shop on the site and might sell anywhere from a handful to a few hundred different spells to anyone willing to pay. With prices ranging from twenty cents to two hundred thousand dollars, there is no shortage of possibilities for any budget. Studying Etsy witchcraft provides some telling answers to questions about religious mediation, commodification, and internet spirituality. The specificity of medium is central to this study, whether “medium” refers to the forms of spells for sale, the globalized market made possible by the internet, or the power dynamics of Etsy itself. I argue that witches, aware of their position in a culture already saturated with medical cures for a customer’s problems, are attuned to the types of remedies most desired by the modern consumer. They take advantage of the internet’s power to create global communities, seeing promise in an expanded market and web-based religious community while debating the potential dangers of commodification to their religion.

Identifying Spell Categories and Protocols

I begin with a brief explanation of contemporary witchcraft and summary of the spells available in the Etsy marketplace before diving in to the main themes of this paper. In her study on witchcraft and Neopaganism (the religious movement with which Etsy witches can be most closely identified) in present-day North America, Helen Berger explains that many of today’s witches participate in “an earth-based religion, in which the goddess or goddesses and the god force or gods are venerated, nature’s yearly cycle of seasons is celebrated, and magic is practiced.”¹ Demographically, the religion is most appealing to “white, middle class, well-educated individuals,” with an unusually high portion of women, at 65 to 66 percent of participants.² Neopaganism emerged in England in the 1950s, coming to North America in the following decade and spreading initially through covens and other personal interactions. However, access to the internet has allowed for a more rapid growth of the religion,³ and a site such as Etsy provides an example of both this online spread and the impact of commercialization on spiritual practice in a web-based marketplace.

Etsy offers a vast array of spells, and to attempt to discuss every type would be impossible in the space of this study. For the purposes of my analysis, I will break the types of spells into a few key groups, of which the largest by far are love and sex spells. It is difficult to measure the exact number of each type, but a search for “love,” “sex,” “passion,” and related terms turns up more than thirteen thousand results, nearly a third of all spells sold on Etsy.⁴ Most love spells are intended for the buyer to make another person fall in love with them, but there are also those that

²Ibid.
³Ibid., 31-37
work to reunite with an ex-lover, answer questions about a current or future partner, or ensure the strength of a relationship. Sex spells range from ones meant to increase sexual pleasure, help one become “more sexually liberated,” or prevent a partner from cheating (the first of which is the most common variety).

The next most popular category of spells is what I term “economic spells,” which number over five thousand on Etsy and typically claim to bring the purchaser increased wealth or improve their luck at gambling or the lottery. In addition, a small number of spells intend to bring employment or improved job prospects, though these are vastly outnumbered by those making a more general promise of wealth. Numbering five thousand, health spells make up the third of the major categories. I could find no spells set up to treat a specific ailment; instead, the products for sale promise to improve the general physical and/or mental health of the purchaser. Together, the love, sex, wealth, and healing spells that I found in my search make up about half of what Etsy has on sale. Those not included in this number are a mixture of miscellaneous smaller categories of spells, as well as those that might fit into a major category but did not appear with any of the search terms I used. No systematic survey of Etsy spells has been conducted, so these estimates present no more than a rough picture.

Despite the great variety of spells, most follow a fairly standard protocol – the purchaser buys the spell and then gives the spellcaster a certain amount of information (usually the names and birthdates of themselves and anyone else involved in the spell) as well as a description of the purchaser’s problem and desired solution, after which the spell can be cast. No physical contact is needed between purchaser and spellcaster. Certain objects are also sold to be used as spells. Candles and pieces of jewelry show up under wealth and money spells, while healing spells are often sold as candles or “kits” containing the necessary ingredients for spellcasting. The selling of physical objects in the form of spellcasting components is not distributed uniformly across all categories — almost no love spells are sold as such, and such objects comprise only a small portion of wealth spells. Somewhat more sex spells are sold in candle or herbal form, but it is only among healing spells that such objects dominate the market.

The differences in spell forms appear to follow a pattern: the greater the physicality of effects — from a love spell that operates only on the mind of the one influenced, to a healing spell meant to cure a bodily ailment, or a sex spell that works on both the mind and body — the greater the portion of spells sold as physical objects to be used. It is tricky to come to an easy conclusion about why this would be the case, but a possible explanation is inspired by Caroline Walker Bynum’s work on materiality in late medieval Christianity. She explains that medieval thinkers “understood ‘body’ to mean ‘changeable thing’: gem, tree, log, or cadaver, as well as living human being.” As Bynum describes, these thinkers understood the human body to be continuous with other external matter.\(^5\) I do not wish to argue that a simple equivalence can be made between this historical Christian perspective and that held by Etsy witches. Rather, by asking us to avoid an assumption that “the body” is always understood in separation from the rest of the physical world, Bynum suggests how material ailments and material cures may be linked. Spells that work on the body call for a more material medium (here in the form of candles or herbal kits), attuned to the physicality of that which they are attempting to change, while those that operate on the human mind are sold as simply the spellcasting act itself. In studying the market medium of Etsy, it is critical to keep in mind that a “spell” may encompass many different products, each of which is sold with an understanding of how its material (or immaterial) form mediates between the caster and the subject of the spell’s effects.

Belief and Modern Religiosity on Etsy

Delineating these main categories of Etsy spells is crucial to understanding their intended audience and purpose. The types of spells for sale exhibit a certain amount of ambiguity in process and/or intention. Whether the desired result is finding love or acquiring money, most witches explain that spells may take days, weeks, or even months for effects to be noticed. One could read this as an attempt to obscure the effectiveness of a given spell by allowing the purchaser to ascribe any number of events to the casting’s influence. However, witches appear to genuinely believe in the power of their work, which such a cynical interpretation would not allow. Diana Capstick, who runs the Etsy store “Trulymagick,” explains the long line of witches in her lineage and tells of how her own mother called her back from a near-death experience. For her, witchcraft is proven fact, and the sorts of spells she sells online have been impactful in her own life. Perhaps even more revealing than statements about witchcraft’s effectiveness are the comments made by Victoria Zasikowski of the store “The Enchanted Land” and Gill (no last name given) of “Faerygill” about the limits of witchcraft. Both women explain that requests for specific body modifications are “just ridiculous,” or that those presenting cases of serious mental illness are encouraged to receive psychiatric treatment instead of spiritual cures. Given this reluctance to intervene in situations where medical care would be most appropriate, it is clear that witches are quite cognizant of how their work is limited in power, and may avoid going too far in claiming to solve any one of a purchaser’s problems.

Since Etsy witches appear to trust in their work while understanding its limits, the flexibility allowed for in spell descriptions may speak to the uncertainties of the craft itself. Witches seem to be aware of the difficulty of casting an exact spell, and suggest that the spiritual realm cannot be so easily influenced as to predict a specific time for a spell to take effect. Similarly, none of the major categories identified above contains spells that act with a great amount of specificity. Wealth spells make vague claims about providing riches or luck, but shy away from specific dollar amounts or even what type of wealth is being granted. By their very nature, sex and love spells do not attempt to perform a specific action — “falling in love” is as exact as they come, but how such love is to be made apparent is left unclear. Though they seem to be addressing specific ailments, health spells avoid claiming effectiveness against any given disease, and instead provide more general improvements in physical well-being. Again, while the cynic may view these claims of ambiguity as clever tricks to avoid charges of fraud, a full understanding of Etsy witchcraft will only be possible if we understand the phenomenon on the terms of those buying and selling spells.

Information on the motivations of spell buyers is difficult to find, as interviews with those in the community tend to focus on the supply side. Zasikowski estimates that about ninety-five percent of her customers are female, and come to her because “They want spells for situations in life that most of us face.” Hence the wide variety of spells for sale, though the over-representation of love spells within the market suggests a particular interest in the cures not offered in the mainstream medical sphere. While doctors and counselors can provide support for many of life’s problems, they cannot promise love, better sex, or a cure for financial difficulties, so the contemporary “spiritual consumer” in search of such help must turn elsewhere. The relative dominance of these categories (and witches’ own understanding of the importance of modern, western medicine) suggests an

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7All interviews that I could find were with female-identifying witches.
9Ibid.
10To borrow Carrette and King’s analysis of current trends in the commodification of religion, discussed in more detail below.
awareness of the role of witchcraft in the modern marketplace. If witches were attempting to sell their craft as a cure-all, we would likely see spells for cancer, heart disease, or depression. Instead, the individual being marketed to is not one who sees the medical establishment and spellcasting as necessarily in conflict with each other; within the private sphere of personal health and emotional well-being, scientific and magical remedies may work side-by-side.

The Online Spiritual Marketplace: Dangers and Opportunities

Etsy’s use of the internet as a medium is particularly important if we wish to come to terms with the site’s role in contemporary witchcraft. Readily apparent is how witches may make use of the globalized network of which the site is a part, selling their products to a public vastly expanded beyond the local consumers who could frequent a brick-and-mortar store in the pre-internet age. However, Etsy cannot be understood as simply the numeric expansion of witchcraft’s reach. The internet in general, and Etsy in particular, raises a number of challenges and additional opportunities for the contemporary witch, such as the new world of digital mediation.

David Chidester explores this intersection of online platforms, consumerism, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment in the digital age. He argues that “[e]lectronic media, as multisensory, self-involving mediations of desire, are engaged in a kind of religious work by mediating the gaps between contemporary economic relations that are based on the manipulation of desire and the desire for sacred values.”11 Taking this analysis as a starting point, we can begin to look at the internet marketplace’s unique role in answering consumers’ desires as they search for spiritual answers to their romantic or monetary concerns. Spells make up only a small portion of the goods for sale on Etsy, competing with vintage clothing, homemade pottery, and crafting supplies for attention on the site. Religious goods are not relegated to their own market and are instead sold in the same place as any other consumer item, allowing for the conflation of religious desire with more materialistic desires. Etsy thus serves a complex role in contemporary witchcraft, furnishing the spells to respond to consumers’ desire for “sacred value” while simultaneously blurring the distinction between religious and secular commodities. Taking into account the market expansion provided by digital globalization, this demand for sacred value presents an opportunity for growth and greater relevance for a religious community situated at the nexus of spirituality and the market. However, the commodification of religion that this encourages is seen as potentially dangerous by some outside and within contemporary witchcraft.

In their book Selling Spirituality, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King problematize the appropriation of religious traditions as commodities to be bought and sold. As they argue,

The emergence of the modern notion of ‘spirituality’ as a private, introspective experience, feeling, or sentiment...coincided in the West with the rise of ‘Man’ and the emergence of the ‘modern’ consciousness of an atomistic and autonomous self, increasingly the key organization principle and unit of western liberal democracies. Religion entered the marketplace of human choice and experimentation.12

This statement suggests that, as “Modern Man” took shape as the individualized self, spirituality became something newly for sale to the private consumer. Similarly, some within the witch community find an ethical issue with what they perceive as a recent commercialization of their craft.13

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However, other witches argue that worrying about the sale of spells is hypocritical: “There is a belief among some that ‘spiritual’ gifts should be given free of charge, because they are spiritual... Time and effort spent should apparently be given free of charge, whereas if you are a hairdresser or nurse, etc, it is your right to be paid.” Fully adopting the language of the liberal marketplace, witchcraft is understood as a marketable skill to be bought and sold in an economy where no service comes free of charge. Witches that welcome the mass commodification of their work that Etsy provides see it not as a recent aberration, but in continuum with a long history of witchcraft as one of the few outlets for women’s paid employment in centuries past. Where most jobs outside the home would have been off-limits, casting spells for charge provided a way for women to earn some money. If witches are to continue to put time and energy into their craft, selling it as a monetized commodity seems the only way to operate within the contemporary economy without the support of a religious institution behind them.

Authority and the Etsy Public Sphere

While commodification has brought witchcraft into the modern global marketplace, Etsy has also allowed it to create a semi-independent online community, one that can be understood in the context of Jurgen Habermas’ notion of the “public sphere.” Habermas argues that in contemporary society, “[b]ecause of the diffusion of press and propaganda... the public body lost not only its social exclusivity; it lost in addition the coherence created by bourgeois social institutions and a relatively high standard of education.” In fact, it “threatens to disintegrate with the structural transformation of the public sphere itself.” The mass proliferation of media allowed for an exclusive social sphere to expand beyond the bounds of the bourgeoisie, a change that simultaneously led to this sphere’s loss through re-integration into mass society. This article, written decades before the introduction of internet technology, prophesies the changes to religion in the public sphere brought about by the likes of Etsy. The site allows for the coming together of those interested in buying and selling a specific religious medium — the spell — in a way that would be impossible in a world before the internet. In the economic relationship between witch and purchaser is also the creation of what Joyce Smith identifies as a “sub-public,” one of the “collectivities that may have as their common thread gender, religion, socioeconomic class, or ethnic identity.” While those making use of Etsy’s religious marketplace acknowledge the role of mainstream medical remedies, they also make up a religious sub-public that accepts the power of witchcraft in influencing their lives. The general public sphere has neither been “dis-enlightened” nor “re-enlightened,” belief in magic neither totally devalued nor wholly valued in their eyes. The public sphere itself can only be understood as a collection of diverse publics, one of which is the Etsy marketplace “enchanted” by the power of witchcraft.

Within this public realm of Etsy witchcraft, questions of authority are complicated by working in an internet market, returning us once more to the centrality of medium. Much could be written about the roles of consumer and producer in the forces of supply and demand that shape the free market, but what I wish to focus on here is the unique role of external authorities. While witches appear to have leeway in the products they choose to sell, they are forced to contend with the consequences of operating on a third-party site. Almost all spell and store descriptions come attached with some form of disclaimer, usually explaining that the spell is “for entertainment

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 55.
purposes only,” may only be purchased by those over eighteen, and has not been “experimentally proven” to be effective. Given that witches appear not to doubt the power of their spells (discussed above), it would be unlikely that they would choose to attach such a statement to their products. Instead, this draws our attention to the power of authority coming from outside a given “sub-public” — by employing Etsy as a medium of exchange, witches are forced to contend with the demands of corporate leaders and legal doctrines. While they may more easily connect with interested buyers across the globe, those wishing to use the website must also recognize how their relationship with others in the community is mediated by those holding control over their marketplace.

Conclusions

Whether we look at the form of the spell itself, the relationship between witchcraft and traditional medicine, the challenges and opportunities of the internet marketplace, or notions of authority in the Etsy spiritual sub-public, we are reminded time and again of the surprising manifestations of mediation in religious practice. From adjusting products to the desires of a modern religious consumer to making use of the internet’s power to expand existing religious communities, Etsy witchcraft exemplifies the changes wrought by contemporary social and technological forces. This specific case of religion online demonstrates some of the ways the internet, in particular the unique space of online retail, is changing how people practice religion, both as individuals and in forming communities. Many of these changes, from the internet’s impact on subcultures and niche shopping, are already much-discussed in a host of other contexts. However, what I hope this paper makes clear are how such effects are playing out in 21st-century religious life as well.