

The Rambling Reflections of an Anthropologist: A Look Back at The Educational Journey and Research Development Through the Covid-19 Pandemic

Emily Christine Lloyd-Evans
Goldsmiths, University of London.

Abstract

This piece provides the opportunity to reflect upon the period of my master's studies, undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the first part, it highlights a project on 'WitchTok' that emerged through my engagement with the TikTok Ethnography Collective and through an exploration of my prior interest in Witches. In the second part, it reflects on my engagement with the TikTok Ethnography Collective and what it offered for my research.

Key words: Witch, Witchcraft, TikTok, Reflection, Digital.

Introduction.

Witches and witchcraft are often represented in popular culture as old, hunched over women who threaten harm through the use of poisons, curses, hexes, or foods. The other common representation is that of beautiful and seductive young women, who also threaten and cause harm but using slightly different methodologies. Witches have been featured in myths and folktales in some form for many years, and witchcraft has been an important focus of anthropological inquiry since the inception of the discipline. Classical representations of witches from folk and fairy tales include the evil stepmother who transforms into a helpless, elderly woman with harmful intentions, or the sinister seductress who lurks in the forest to tempt the unsuspecting public. Stories of witches have been retold so often that the reality of witchcraft practices are often obscure and unknown.

As a witchcraft researcher, I am drawn more to the '*traditional*' images elicited by witches. I grew up watching the classic Disney movies and reading Grimm Fairy Tales. However, during my teen years I encountered the popular series *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch*, which offered an alternative representation that not all witches were '*evil*'. The series offered up a playful and entertaining representation that anyone could be a witch, possessing magical powers and simply unaware. Combined with a lighter aesthetic, a modern and trendy 1990's home, two eccentric and kooky aunts that are loving and caring in their own ways and a teenager who has a fairly normal life, taking part in extracurricular activities, having a social life and love life, further portraying the façade of normality. This more positive, playful reframing of witchcraft had a continuous effect, also being apparent in the hugely popular Harry Potter books and later the film franchise.

This reflective piece is a combination of my anthropological engagements with witchcraft and the WitchTok community, with my experience of studying anthropology during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as my involvement with the TikTok Ethnography Collective. I am going to reflect upon the ways in which anthropology has offered the tools to allow researchers to thoughtfully engage with witches and witchcraft beyond the representations that popular culture provides.

Anthropological Research: Asking *What If?*

The notion of 'what if' lies at the heart of many of the TV shows about witches that I watched growing up. Pondering on 'what if' was the prelude to enter a fantastical world in these shows. The fantastical wonders of *what if* I went to Canada right now, I could go to the mountains and explore the wilderness. *What if* the political rebellion of the French Revolution never happened? The act of daydreaming and spending our time wondering

and speculating are closely related to feelings of curiosity. Curiosity drives most anthropological research, a drive to understand something which seems distant from what we ourselves understand. Asking *what if* can lead to transformation. When faced with the prospect of either studying anthropology online or deferring, a transformative decision for myself was the realisation that a digital study of witchcraft was both viable and respected, and it is here this reflective journey begins.

Asking *what if* not only shapes the world of anthropological research, but the individual. It drove me forward, embarking upon my master's degree in 2020 in an entirely new field of study in the midst of a global pandemic. *What if* I had chosen to defer? *What if* I had begun in 2021, would my research have been different? Would I have been able to do a "real-world" ethnography that enabled me to truly immerse myself into the community I am so bewitched by? Would I have ethnographically explored WitchTok?

This piece is an opportunity to reflect upon that period and the outcomes that emerged from this decision. It was an immense challenge coping with studying a social discipline in a socially distanced world. Being a newcomer to anthropology, I had to also familiarise myself with the literature and terminologies alongside the methodological approaches and procedures. I recall many late nights and a fair few tears from the overbearing stress of constantly questioning my belonging and capabilities within the field I had chosen. All exacerbated by the disruption of the pandemic. There is little consolidation in knowing I was not, and am still not, alone in the pandemic's aftermath, however, I am grateful for the guidance I did receive. I had a very attentive supervisor and my colleagues within the TikTok Ethnography Collective (TEC), without whom, I do not believe my graduation day would have been so joyous.

Digital Magic

The dissertation title I settled on, mere moments before submission, was *'Digital Magic: An Ethnographic Exploration of WitchTok.'* It was the culmination of approximately a year and a half of digital ethnographic research. Originally, I had planned a more 'traditional' ethnographic approach, conducting participant observation and engrossing myself into the modern world of my topic. However, the global situation changed and so did my research.

In an unprecedented time of isolation, many turned to their phones as a safe haven, and social media specifically, as a source of support (Bear et. Al, 2021: 40). Over the course of 2020 TikTok grew to be a prominent feature of the social media landscape. TikTok was downloaded an estimated 693 million times in 2019, and an estimated 850 million times in 2020 - a steep rise of 157 million (Iqbal, 2023). The need to connect became evident for all generations, especially during this time, and it seems many found this through their use of TikTok, more specifically through TikTok communities, this is often label by using a defining feature and then adding 'Tok' on the end, Wichtok, BookTok, FoodTok and so on.

The practice of digital magic is not an entirely new phenomenon. Berger and Ezzy (2009), focus on the use of 'visual media in creation, maintenance and legitimation' of one's religious identity. Berger and Ezzy interviewed ninety young witches who had used visual media of one kind or another as a way to connect to the 'framework' (Berger and Ezzy, 2009: 503) for their practice and thus contributed to the formation of their individual and subjective identities. These young witches, despite using visual media to set practice into motion, disagreed with the inaccurate media representations of witches alongside the witchcraft community as a whole. They felt that it was something to speak out about and respond to. This feeling is echoed on WitchTok. There is a strong sense of individualism and identification. Perspectives in WitchTok vary from witch to witch, some find connection and identity through the recreation of more 'traditional' rituals, such as Paganists or Wiccans. These do not appear 'traditional' to others, but such practices are engaged with in the community. Still, others feel that 'traditional' is more akin to the work of Circe in ancient Greece, this is the beauty of the individualistic nature of the craft and community, it is for everyone.

When I first encountered WitchTok it was fascinating to see witchcraft practices being communicated through short-form video, presenting an endless supply of visual media that was targeted to my research interests. The TikTok landing page or For You Page (FYP) feeds the user an endless stream of algorithmically curated content. This presents the ethnographic research with a methodological challenge - how might one anthropologically engage with this digital space? A term coined by members of the TEC is the 'ethnographic scroll' (Rodgers and Lloyd-Evans, 2021), the act of scrolling with an anthropological lens. Employing this methodology, my research

was spread across the span of a year, approximately. That now sounds like an incredibly short time, but I do recall during the early stages of the ethnography it felt like a lifetime.

Reflections of the TikTok Collective

I joined the collective in the first few months of my master's course. My supervisor recommended that I speak with Elena Liber and Yathukulan Yogarajah as they were beginning the process of founding the TEC and I was embarking on a TikTok research journey. We arrive at now, approximately three years later and I am still an active member of the TEC. One reflective piece would not be enough to cover all the work the TEC has done, we have done numerous workshops in a multitude of different locations and ranging in age group and ability.

The Collective has enabled its members to publish research and has supplied support throughout the process of having work published in peer-reviewed journals, shared at film festivals, presented at conferences, and included in methods seminars. This support is helping new anthropologists begin to find their feet and share their research. The methodologies we have developed in conversation and collaboration with each other have now contributed to the teaching of digital methods, and works published by the collective are being increasingly cited in publications that engage with the social worlds of TikTok.

A personal reflection is that The Collective has been a guide for me. Beginning a course is daunting, the start of my course was laborious, I was struggling to even comprehend some of the basic theorists and the methodology. The Collective is not just a group of like-minded people, but a group of individuals, with their own opinions, ideas, and personalities. The Collective supports and has allowed each person to express themselves, during isolation this was a valued time, meeting once a fortnight to discuss our ideas as researchers, recent articles we had read or seen, exhibits, and so much more. The Collective has enabled me to feel like an anthropologist, not an armchair anthropologist - an actual anthropologist. Digital ethnography was something I had not heard of before and now it is a vital component of my research. I cannot speak for all members of the Collective, however, based on feedback, engagement, and participation, it is clear that the Collective has been a valued experience for many involved.

My research topic of choice, WitchTok, felt asinine when I had first thought of it, but meeting with The Collective each week from the very start of my project helped me realise how feasible and engaging the research could be. TikTok is a new, rapidly growing platform and our collective shows that it can be a great research tool, with many using it as a form of expression or for education. It provides the ability to speak with other academics and learn from more than just your tutors, lecturers, and professors. Such a collaborative space has opened up new avenues in digital ethnographic research and teaching, allowing our research and interests to develop through conversations and learning from one another.

The avenues that have been opened for myself have spread across the entirety of the group, members have a unit of contacts that enable them to reach further and further, meet others who perhaps share similar interests and research fields; on top of that, one thing that I felt has resonated within the Collective is the act of celebration. I mentioned previously the socially distanced world that was thrust upon us all. I found that during a time where so few things were celebrated or viewed positively, the Collective offered the opportunity to celebrate your academic victories and your personal ones. Fostering connections and encouraging academics to be confident in their abilities and knowledge.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Collective for encouraging me to put my experience into words and providing comments on an early draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Bear, L., Simpson, N., Bazambanza, C., Bowers, R. E., Kamal, A., Gheewala Lohiya, A., Pearson, A., Vieira, J., Watt, C., Wuerth, M. (2021). *Social infrastructures for the post-Covid recovery in the UK*. Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Berger, Helen A., and Douglas Ezzy. (2009). Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (3): 501–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01462.x>.

Iqbal, M. (2023). TikTok Revenue and Usage Statistics. *Business of Apps*. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/>. [Accessed: 10th April 2023]

Rodgers, H., and Lloyd-Evans, E. (2021). Intimate Snapshots: TikTok, Algorithm, and the Recreation of Identity. *Anthways*. <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/anthways/archive/pandemic-issue-2021/intimate-snapshots-tiktok-algorithm-and-the-recreation-of-identity/>.