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Reclaiming the witch: Processes and heroic outcomes of consumer mythopoesis

ABSTRACT

Although previous research has investigated consumer mythopoesis (consumers' identity work using marketplace myths), little is known about its enactment involving ambiguous myths. Here, we investigate the myth of the witch (predominantly depicted by dominant mythmakers as a villain but recently repositioned more positively) and describe how consumers reclaim the empowering and heroic aspects of the ambiguous witch myth. Based on a qualitative study using archival data and in-depth interviews with self-proclaimed witches, we argue that the witch's ambiguity originates in different mythopoetic cycles. Then, we describe the following processes through which consumers reclaim positive cycles: incarnating the myth, coming out to selected others, and practising myth-related craft. Finally, we show that reclaiming results in new forms of heroic agency that amplify the myth's ambiguity and identity value. Our results reveal that consumers cope with market-wide paradoxical injunctions, stressful situations, and marginalisation by transforming these pressures into acts of self-heroism.

Keywords: Consumer mythopoesis, identity work, marketplace myths, witch, intersectionality, LGBTQIA+, consumer identity politics

A rich research tradition has studied the processes of market-mediated mythopoesis (from the Greek *poiein*, to create myths) by approaching marketplace myths as cultural resources that are created or re-interpreted by mythmakers, such as brands, the media, and other cultural intermediaries (Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Thompson, 2004). Consumers engage with, enact, and even inhabit these myths through various forms of mythopoetic identity work (what we call consumer mythopoesis) that frequently involve heroic processes (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Belk and Costa, 1998), whereby available myths are mobilised to create a coherent narrative of the self, in which consumption choices and life occurrences are reinterpreted as obstacles to be overcome, in pursuit of self-transformation or social change (Brunk et al., 2018; Luedicke et al., 2010).

However, the myths that convey heroic narratives have tended to focus on masculine (Frisk, 2020), white (Thomas, 2013), and predominantly heterosexual (Eichert and Luedicke, 2022) figures, marginalising or villainising other identities. In addition, historically speaking, some myths have been constituted in a confusing or contradictory manner, resulting in their ambiguity (Brown et al., 2013). The marginalisation of certain identities and a specific type of heroic-villainous ambiguity lie at the core of one of the most iconic myths: that of the witch.

Traditionally, dominant mythopoesis (Munford and Waters, 2014; Zeitlin, 1978) framed witches as popular culture's ultimate villains, marginalised minorities' spiritualities as 'witchcraft', and pejoratively described powerful women pejoratively as 'witches' (Hutton, 2017). However, various (usually feminist-inspired) reinterpretations have contributed to the increasing popularity of the witch (Grossman, 2020), opening up avenues for a growing number of people – women, LGBTQIA+ consumers, people of colour, and other marginalised groups – to identify themselves as witches (Bosker 2020). On social media, more than 8.8 million

Instagram posts appear under the hashtag #witchesofinstagram, and content under #WitchTok has more than 29 billion visualisations.

The recent popularity of the witch seems to indicate that marginalised consumers may find ambiguous myths valuable for empowering, if not heroic, identity work. But how do consumers *reclaim* the empowering and heroic aspects of ambiguous myths? How do consumers become heroes of their own lives when there are both positive and negative myth meanings? What are the outcomes of the reclaiming process for marginalised consumers and the myth itself?

In this article, we first examine successive mythopoetic cycles that produce the ambiguity of the witch. We identified these cycles while analysing archival sources (academic, literary, and accounts of self-proclaimed witches) and found that they are based on elements of spirituality, intersectional feminist identity politics, and popular culture. Second, we investigate how consumers articulate the witch myth to create their own heroic identities based on 19 in-depth interviews with consumers who identify as witches or incorporate the witch's aesthetics, supplemented by an extended analysis of witchcraft handbooks and online content.

We find that consumers' reclaiming of the ambiguous witch myth consists of the following three interrelated processes: incarnating the myth, coming out to selected others, and practising the myth-related craft. The main outcome of the reclaiming processes is the creation of a type of heroic agency that both empowers marginalised consumers and enriches the myth by expanding its ambiguity through nuances, new villains, and more dialogue. In sum, reclaiming is dynamic, transformative, and performative.

In terms of contributions, first, our article introduces the notion of mythopoetic cycles, which, unlike previous semiotic-based approaches that emphasise the dominant versions of

marketplace myths, acknowledges that the formation of myth meanings potentially involves multiple versions. Consequently, we can explore the disjunctions and connections between different cycles, thus better explaining the ambiguity of myths. Moreover, using the notion of mythopoetic cycles, we contribute to the literature on identity work through market-mediated mythopoesis (e.g. Luedicke et al., 2010) by showing that non-dominant versions of a myth, or problematisations of the dominant versions of a myth, are crucial for consumer mythopoesis. Indeed, such versions not only provide paths for navigating complex sociohistorical scenarios (Brunk et al., 2018) but also open up avenues for reclaiming identities previously villainised by dominant mythopoetic practices.

Second, we identify the reclaiming of ambiguous myths as a type of consumer mythopoesis that enables both heroic agency and identity politics (Thompson, 2014). Reclaiming allows consumers to go through an empowering transformation by drawing on spiritual connections with the myth - literally or figuratively (Muñiz and Schau, 2001). However, reclaiming also involves performing (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015) and queering (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022) the myth, two well-known tactics in identity politics that disrupt established categories, narratives, and ways of doing. As intended by emancipatory identity politics performed by oppressed minorities, reclaiming confounds the personal and the political, thus furthering ambiguities of the reclaimed myths.

THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Marketplace mythopoesis, mythopoetic cycles, and myth ambiguity

A rich body of research has examined the ways in which marketplace myths play multiple important roles in consumers' lives (Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Bradford and Sherry, 2017;

Holt and Thompson, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010; Thompson, 2004) and has explored the role of mythmakers in creating their own myths (Holt, 2004) or (re)writing classical myths to create iconic heroes and anti-heroes, such as the Bad Boy (Gopaldas and Molander, 2020) and the Mountain Man (Belk and Costa, 1998).

However, most previous studies have focused on the relationships through which mythic elements (e.g. characters and storyline) form a coherent whole (Thompson, 2004). This approach usually relies on semiotic squares to articulate tensions between the mythic elements underpinning myths (Brunk et al., 2018; Thompson, 2004). Although this approach produces a cohesive analysis by emphasising the oppositional dynamics through which myths are rewritten, it ignores the facts that (1) different versions of the same myth, based on multiple cultural and historical developments, can co-exist and be connected to one another and yet, (2) some versions can be obscured by dominant mythmaking practices.

We extend the existing perspective by introducing the concept of mythopoetic cycles – that is, historically rooted narrative patterns centred on the same mythic figure that build on one another while remaining distinct and sometimes even being opposed. This concept allows us to explore how myths are rewritten over time, through multiple rewritings occurring simultaneously or intermittently, some of which may dominate over others. By acknowledging that mythopoetic cycles potentially co-occur, our perspective emphasises not only the disjunctions between cycles but also their interconnections. Moreover, analysing mythopoesis as a cyclical process provides a new lens on the ambiguity of myths (Brown et al., 2013) and how this ambiguity contributes to their durability. More specifically, the identification of multiple mythopoetic cycles emphasises the fact that the meanings of myths can vary across the many voices that compose a sociocultural context (i.e. dominant vs. marginalised voices).

Oppressive versus empowering mythopoetic cycles

Dominant mythmaking practices have been problematised as marginalising certain identities, especially female ones (Nicholson, 2011; Zeitlin, 1978). For example, Zeitlin mapped the misogyny in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and the process by which Greek tragedies created a new patriarchal symbolic order through creative mythmaking: 'Aeschylus placed Olympian over chthonic on the divine level, Greek over barbarian at the cultural level, and male above female on the social level' (Zeitlin, 1978: 149). Dominant mythmaking was also at play in fairy tales. The genre owes its beginnings to late-17th-century French female writers (*conteuses*), who were defiant of the oppressive social structures in their folk-tradition inspired writings (Seifert and Stanton, 2010). However, male authors, such as Charles Perrault (heavily influenced by the *conteuses*) and the Grimm brothers, whose works represent patriarchal values (Zipes, 1983), are the ones credited for the genre. Nowadays, different research streams have shown how misogynistic mythopoesis contributes to reproducing stereotypical gender roles (Munford and Waters, 2014; Nicholson, 2011) and excludes female (and other minorities') identities from processes of heroisation (Frisk, 2020).

Many dominant heroic mythmaking practices follow a structure inherited from Campbell (2004[1949]), in which a (usually male) hero overcomes a challenge and undergoes self-transformation with the aid of magical (usually female) helpers. Campbell's work, which structured the main narrative arch of the hero, has been reproduced in brand storytelling manuals (Rodriguez, 2020). Dominant mythmakers' quintessentially male heroes can be found, for example, in the rewriting of sperm donation as a heroic act (Sobande et al., 2020) or in the idea of the hero's journey as a commitment to oneself (Thompson, 1998).

Nonetheless, some mythmakers, historically but mostly recently, have created (usually feminist) revisions of patriarchal myths, challenging previously exalted female virtues, such as passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice. Popular heroines from the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Munford and Waters, 2014) and *Mulan*, are independent and adventurous. Moreover, old-school villains, such as vampires, as in Rice's (1976) *Interview with the Vampire* universe, or fairies-witches, as in the retold *Maleficent* (2014), are being portrayed as ambiguous, given a voice, and recognised for their almost-but-not-too-human fallibility. In many senses, these figures have turned from villains to heroes, having undergone journeys of adventure, mentorship, revelation, transformation, and return.

To conclude, we suggest that the simultaneous coexistence of dominant versions and empowering revisions of myths may influence consumer mythopoesis based on ambiguous myths. However, to better understand such mythopoetic processes, we must investigate the cycles through which different versions of the same myths emerge. By exploring these cycles and examining the details of different myth aspects, we can better understand how consumers select the positive meanings of myths, despite such meanings being concealed by dominant mythmaking practices.

METHOD

Our context is witchcraft. The three authors have different levels of knowledge of and involvement in witchcraft. One of the authors, a native researcher, has studied witchcraft for 15 years, another has some knowledge of witchcraft practices and acquaintances who identify as witches, and yet another author did not have any background knowledge before this study. We

frequently triangulated our perspectives to maintain reflexivity and respect towards our informants throughout the study (2018–2022), as indicated by Rinallo et al. (2016).

To become familiar with field discourses (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and to establish boundaries vis-à-vis related myths, we collected extensive witchcraft-related historical and archival material. We used archival data to identify the mythopoetic cycles of the witch myth and triangulated the interview findings. Inspired by netnography (Kozinets, 2019), we spent four years engaging with social media posts by self-identified witches. Due to space limitations, the archival references can be found in Online Appendix 1.

We also conducted 19 in-depth interviews with informants who self-identified as witches. Given that the term ‘witch’ can have different meanings (see the following section), we did not impose a definition on the interviewees, who were simply informed that we wanted to interview ‘witches’ for our research project. Therefore, some of our informants practiced witchcraft, while others were attracted to the figure of the witch in other ways. Some practiced witchcraft professionally or semi-professionally, being what Hutton (2017) called ‘service magicians’. Some had massive online followings and could be considered influencers (Abidin, 2016). Those who did practice witchcraft mentioned a plethora of background. In Table 1, we provide a brief description of each participant.

The interviews were conducted online, lasted on average 60 minutes, and resulted in 480 pages of verbatim transcripts. We purposely sampled witches of diverse backgrounds (see Table 1; pseudonyms used for anonymity) and identified informants via our private networks, social media profiles, and snowball sampling. We asked the informants how they became witches, what meanings they attributed to this identity, and what their witchcraft-related practices were (e.g. activities, objects, and community involvement).

We analysed macro-level articulations of the myth using secondary data and micro-level consumer narratives from interviews and online user-generated content. Following a hermeneutical approach (Thompson, 1997), our interpretations emerged while we switched back and forth between data and theory: after initial open coding, we refined our dictionary based on the emerging themes and triangulated our interpretations across the data sources. Following Ozanne and Appau's (2019) call to engage respectfully with consumers' alternative metaphysical assumptions, we considered the participants' belief in magic – that is, in 'the art of sensing, and shaping, the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational' (Starhawk, 1979: 37) – to be a narrative of the self in the broader socio-historical context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) that has led to the emergence of contemporary witchcraft.

Table 1. Participant information

Participants	Personal background	Witchcraft background
Aria	Italian, cis white woman, 33	Identifies politically and aesthetically with the figure of the witch. Does not practice witchcraft.
Arabella	Italian, cis white woman, 32	Self-identified practicing witch (follower of Wicca).
Bernard	French, cis white bisexual man, 19	Self-identified practicing witch.
Brianna	Brazilian, cis woman of colour, 27	Self-identified practicing witch (focus on African-Brazilian traditions). Service magician and influencer (57k followers on Instagram).
Delphine	French, cis white woman, 31	Self-identified practicing witch (focus on plants and minerals). Author of a book on the subject, reviews books on Instagram.
Ellie	French, cis white woman, 28	Identifies politically and aesthetically with the figure of the witch, does not practice witchcraft.
Giulia	Italian (living in the UK), cis white bisexual woman, 42	Self-identified practicing witch (follower of Wicca).
Jonathan	French, cis white man, 21	Self-identified practicing witch. Sells artefacts online.
Marcello	Italian, cis white gay man, 33	Self-identified practicing witch (follower of Wicca).
Maya	North American, queer trans white woman, 32	Self-identified practicing witch. Service magician.
Penelope	Brazilian, cis white woman, 28	Self-identified practicing witch (focused on Sacred Feminine). Service magician and influencer (183k followers on Instagram).
Perseus	North American, cis white gay man, 28	Self-identified practicing witch. Sells artefacts online.

Pierre	French, cis gay man of colour, 19	Self-identified practicing witch.
Pollux	Italian, cis gay man, 23	Self-identified practicing witch.
Roland	North American, cis white gay man, 34	Self-identified practicing witch. Sells artefacts online.
Samodiva	French, non-binary, white, 29	Self-identified practicing witch. Speaks about witchcraft on local radio.
Tina	Spanish (living in France), cis white straight woman, 30	Self-identified practicing witch. Service magician.
Tom	Italian (living in the UK), cis white straight man, 39	Self-identified practicing witch (follower of Wicca).
Valerie	Canadian, cis white woman, 30	Practices Chaos magic, a postmodern deconstructivist magical current. Self-identified as witch in the past. Service magician.

MYTHOPOETIC CYCLES UNDERPINNING THE AMBIGUOUS WITCH MYTH¹

Who used to be witches, then, and who call themselves witches today? Hutton (2017) highlighted the ambiguity of the current understanding of the term witch, which can refer to the following groups: people who use magic for malevolent means; people who use magic for whatever means, including healers (i.e. ‘white’ witches) and service magicians (e.g. astrologers and tarot readers); followers of nature-based religions (e.g. Wicca); and independent women who resist the patriarchal order. Such contemporary polysemy is the result of a cultural stratification produced by distinct mythopoetic cycles that have made the witch myth ambiguous.

Figure 1 summarises the main mythopoetic cycles by highlighting key representations of the witch and their impacts on popular culture, starting from the 15th century, when the first oppressive cycle began (Hutton, 2017). For each cycle, we show the origins and periods of resurgence. New cycles did not substitute the previous ones; rather, they enriched the reservoir of meanings, furthering the ambiguity of the witch myth. Following other works on myths (Campbell, 2004[1949]; Holt and Thompson, 2004), we did not distinguish between historical facts about witches and the stories told about them. Although the mythopoetic activities

¹ The references to the historical material used for identifying the mythopoetic cycles in this section, as well as the printed and online materials published by witches used in the next section, are provided in the Appendix.

described here were predominantly developed in the West, the witch myth reflects spiritual and religious influences from non-Western cultures (Hutton, 1999), and its constitutive mythopoetic cycles have been diffused globally through colonialism, religious proselyting, feminist identity politics, and global popular culture (Cordovil and Castro, 2015). In its different versions, the witch myth has travelled extensively and has been glocalised, sometimes in cultures that were already syncretic (e.g. Brazil; see Rodner and Preece, 2019).

---- Insert Figure 1 around here ---

Since the 15th century, three oppressive mythopoetic cycles have unfolded, framing the witch as, respectively, Wicked, Self-deluded, or Charlatan. The first cycle, which characterised witches as Wicked and evil, started when Pope Innocent VIII issued the bull *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* (1484), authorising the punishment of devil worshippers, and Kramer and Sprenger published the infamously misogynistic *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), an influential inquisitorial treatise. *Malleus* advocated torture to obtain confession and burning suspected witches, women who gained magical powers via sexually sanctioned pacts with the devil and used these powers in rituals involving orgies and infanticide. The Wicked witch, then, emerged under the belief that magic is real and Satanic. The myth of the Wicked witch influenced witchcraft trials in Europe and elsewhere (15th–18th centuries), with estimated consequential killings varying from several million to 20–50,000 in more recent and accurate accounts (Hutton, 2017). The victims were mainly women of low social status, although, in some areas and at certain times, men and upper-class persons were also prosecuted, sometimes under accusations

linked to sodomy and extreme sexual pleasure during sexual intercourse with devils (Herzig, 2003).

In this oppressive mythopoetic cycle, witches were considered the ultimate villains, endowed by the devil with powers to damage individuals and subvert the social order. Being a witch was not a self-chosen identity but an accusation, a forceful imposition based on suspicion, interrogation, and torture until confession. The enactment of the myth occurred against the will of the accused witches, resulting in social ostracism, imprisonment, loss of property, and possibly death. The Wicked witch myth survived long after the end of the witch trials through the representations of witches as villains in fairy tales, children's books, movies, and TV shows, which still occasionally resurface in Western societies – for example, in the conspiracy theories about satanic cults conducting mass child abuse in North America in the 1980s. In many parts of the world, witchcraft accusations and persecutions still take place today, targeting women, children, the elderly, and people with albinism and disabilities, which has recently led the UN Human Rights Council to pass a long-awaited condemnation resolution.

The spread of Enlightenment ideas in the late 17th century discredited the belief in witchcraft, giving origin to two new co-occurring mythopoetic cycles in which witches were connected with superstition. Civil authorities prohibited witch hunts, denied the existence of their powers, and criminalised magic for commercial purposes, which was considered deceitful charlatanry. Previous confessions of witchcraft were deemed delusions, results of torture, or psychological frailty. During the 19th century, anthropologists described magical thinking as a feature of 'primitive' societies, while psychologists during the 20th century (notably Freud and Piaget) noticed that magical thinking was widespread in children aged 7–8 years, considering it pathological in adults. People who believed in witchcraft started being considered Self-Deluded,

and service magicians, who had existed in all societies and throughout time (Stanmore, 2021), were classified as Charlatans, mere con artists basing their offers on inexistent occult powers or worthless knowledge to take financial advantage of their clients. This new representation of witches influenced consumer protection regulation, such as the *English Witchcraft Act (1735)*, which punished the feigning of witchcraft with fines and imprisonment and remained in vigour until 1951, when it was replaced by the *Fraudulent Medium Act*.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two new mythopoetic cycles emerged: the first cycle represented witches as Spiritual priestesses/priests of pre-Christian religions, unjustly accused of devil worship and in touch with Nature and their inner power, and the second cycle represented witches as Rebels against patriarchal and capitalist forces disempowering that disempower women and members of marginalised groups.

Heroic representations of witches started to appear between the 19th and 20th centuries. Michelet (1862) presented witchcraft as a medieval underground resistance movement led by women of the lower classes against the elites. In the UK, Murray (1921) spread the idea that witch trials were the Church's attempt to suppress what remained of an ancient pagan fertility cult. Starting in the 1950s, new mythmakers linked witchcraft with spirituality, providing, for the first time, both women and men with the possibility of positively identifying as witches. In 1954, Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, in which he revealed he was part of an initiatory witch cult whose members were the priestesses and priests of the ancient Gods of the British Isles, whose religion had survived the dark ages of persecution.

This public 'coming out' triggered a wave of initiations into witch covens, laying the foundations for the popularisations of what became known as the Wicca religion and the legitimisation of other Neopagan religions and spiritualities (Hutton, 1999) characterised by both male and female

priesthood and the prominence of the divine feminine principle. As a result, witchcraft became particularly appealing to feminism, whose first wave (1880–1920) considered women accused of witchcraft to be blameless victims of patriarchal violence and misogynistic mythmaking. In 1971, Zsuzsanna Budapest founded the first feminist, women-only coven of Dianic Wicca. Her texts (1975) enabled a growing number of women to identify themselves as witches and practice the witches' craft. At the same time, Starhawk wrote her bestseller *Spiral Dance* (1979), which is still considered a classic in contemporary witchcraft and spiritual feminism.

These revised Spiritual versions of the witch myth were intertwined with *Rebellion*. From the good witch of the *Wizard of Oz*, inspired by activist Matilda Joselyn Gage, to positive tropes created by writers and campaigners at the core of feminism's so-called second wave (1960–1970), the spiritually empowered figure of the witch was introduced into the political arena. Witchcraft rituals were interpreted as techniques of self-transformation and empowerment for those who identified as witches, with empowerment framed as rebellion against patriarchy. Activists from Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.) became famous for their witch-themed street performances, such as their first act during Halloween 1968, when they went with black dresses, brooms, and pointed hats to publicly curse Wall Street.

With the spread of the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997) from the mid-1990s onwards, women and men of all sexualities and ethnicities belonging to different marginalised social groups started to identify themselves as witches, seeing in this figure a symbol of power and rebellion against the status quo. The expansion of the witch identity entailed a series of mythopoetic activities that forcefully asserted that gay men, trans people, and non-white persons could be witches, too. Evans's (1978) *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, which linked paganism and witchcraft to sexual freedom and gender transgression, paved the way in the 2000s

for practical handbooks on how to make witchcraft theology, rituals, and spells more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. Various ethnic groups have also reclaimed precolonial religions and traditional witchcraft practices as sources of empowerment. More positive representations of the witch resulting from the spiritual and rebellious mythopoetic cycles reached popular culture through pieces such as the musical *Wicked* (2003) and the remakes of *Charmed* (2018–2020) and *Sabrina* (2018–2020), which feature witches of different ethnicities and sexualities. Elements of the spiritual and rebellious myths abound in online witch forums (popular in '90s), Facebook groups, YouTube channels, Instagram, and TikTok.

These online activities have provided further exposure to the witch as an empowering identity, facilitating consumers' self-identification as witches. However, negative perceptions of the witch as Wicked, Self-Deluded, or a Charlatan still exist, troubling the identity work of contemporary witches, who need to defend themselves from these negative connotations.

CONSUMERS' RECLAIMING OF THE WITCH MYTH

Reclaiming an ambiguous myth is a type of consumer mythopoesis that mobilises positive and empowering representations as a remedy against dominant and negative mythopoesis. In this section, we report the processes through which consumers reclaim the witch myth (incarnating the myth, coming out to selected others, and practising the myth-related craft) and the main outcomes of reclaiming (heroic agency, furthering the myth's ambiguity, and increasing its identity value).

Incarnating the myth

The witch myth is manifested in the flesh of the consumers who reclaim it through a form of embodiment that we call *incarnation*. We borrow the term from the field of religion, where it is used to refer to the material manifestations of spiritual entities, such as the incarnation of Jesus in Christianity, to show how myths become flesh and blood through individuals.

Diversifying the bodies of the witch

The witch myth becomes flesh in distinct bodies, especially stigmatised ones, marking a connection between consumer mythopoesis and intersectional identity politics (Crenshaw, 1997; Maclaran, 2015). Witches' online communities assert that witches can be of all genders (cis and trans), sexualities, races, religions, and body types. Through such multiplicity of bodies, witches perform (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015) resistant identities, reinforcing positive representations (Spiritual and Rebellious) as well as pushing some of these representations' boundaries.

More specifically, some witches criticise the supposed heteronormativity of traditional Wiccan and Wiccan-inspired theology and practices that invalidates gay and trans witches. One participant, Samodiva, a non-binary French witch, said that witchcraft 'should be open to everybody' and resented the presence of trans-excluding radical feminist witches. Samodiva's stance is aligned with the identity work inspired by fourth-wave feminism (Maclaran, 2015), which problematises de-politicised post-feminist narratives of choice (Budgeon, 2015) and raises concerns about the reproduction of society's structures of oppression within witches' communities. By problematising incarnation and actively diversifying the bodies of witches, consumers leverage cultural resources provided by positive mythopoesis cycles with feminist roots to broaden the witch identity.

Looking the part and embodying Nature and the Divine

Consumers embody the witch myth by looking the part. Some consumers incarnate the witch only aesthetically, in a playful manner (Seregina and Weijo, 2017), not engaging with magic or rituals, and often drawing upon the iconography of the Wicked witch (e.g. all-black goth attire and ritual knives). For example, Arabella is an actress who does not practice witchcraft but strongly identifies with the Wicked witch aesthetics. Her goth attire and dark makeup coupled with witchy items creates a compelling public persona that helped advance her career. Many of our informants sell such merchandise (e.g. Bernard sold handwritten grimoire pages, and Perseus sold magic wands). Although a market for ritual attire and witchcraft-related goods existed for a long time (Rinallo et al., 2016), the internet has further expanded this market, with witches buying and selling artefacts not only for witchcraft rituals but also due to their aesthetic value.

Such (re)appropriation of witch aesthetics without proper political or spiritual context has prompted criticism inside the community. Older practitioners oppose the playful adoption of the witch aesthetic decoupled from witchcraft practice, claiming that such behaviour commodifies and banalises witchcraft. Others criticise it for promoting ‘cisgender white women, temporarily able-bodied, thin, and traditionally beautiful by Western standards’ (Witches rise, 2017). This widespread discussion was amplified by Sephora’s 2018 launch of a starter witch kit, dismissed as ‘witchwashing’ by Tina, an interviewee. Such criticisms reflect the tensions between the historical roots of each mythopoetic cycle (the Spiritual and the Rebel) and the myth’s contemporary, sometimes de-politicised and de-spiritualised, consumer culture enactments. Superficial enactments are considered misguided and shallow identity politics (Thompson, 2014), leading to the commodification of political activism (Budgeon, 2015) and religion (Rinallo et al., 2012).

Also, aestheticisation has been said to harm incarnation and the connection with Nature, which is considered the source of witches' power, a manifestation of the immanent divinity (Reclaiming, 2021) that resides in and is released through witches' bodies (Gardner, 1954). Witches use various bodily techniques to negotiate their bodies' boundaries with Nature and to tap into the 'rich, vibrant source that reaches deep into the centre of the earth, far out into the celestial, and to the core of (one's) soul' (NightMare, 1998). Examples of bodily techniques abound: Penelope's uses herbal baths to switch on physical and spiritual awareness, Brianna experiences physical sensations of connection to different spiritual entities, and Delphine incorporates Nature's energies in the body (e.g. absinthe 'makes everything hotter' because it is inhabited by the 'energy from the fire, from the sun'). The connection with Nature not only leads to euphoric bodily experiences (Goulding et al., 2009) but is also part of mythopoetic identity work through the lived experience of what it means to be a witch. The lack of a true embodied experience (Cova and Cova, 2019), therefore, is controversial because it de-territorialises the roots of the myth.

Coming out to selected others

Sometimes, witches come out of the 'broom' closet, revealing their identity to the world and furthering their process of reclaiming the witch myth. As in the case of LGBTQIA+ individuals, the process of coming out may lead to stigmatisation experiences (Eichert and Luedicke, 2022). Although for some witches coming out is a form of empowered identity performativity, others experience discrimination from significant others, acquaintances, or social media audiences due to negative representations of witches as Wicked, Self-deluded, or Charlatans.

Coming out to oneself

The first step of coming out is to recognise oneself as a witch. Social media posts and the interviewees' narratives often featured personal stories of beginnings, whereby selected aspects of the Spiritual or Rebel witch myth were woven into personal narratives of the self. Most participants first realised they were witches (or wanted to become one) by identifying with fairy tale, movie, or TV show characters. For example, as a child, Perseus watched *Scooby-Doo! and the Witch Ghost* (1999), in which a Wiccan-inspired good witch helped the Scooby gang defeat a wicked witch. Perseus later found a textbook for practising witchcraft on his own, realising that witches were not just fictional characters, which finally led to his self-identification as a witch. The self-identification process is a significant part of identity work that involves drawing on mythopoetic cycles that reveal the witch as an ambiguous figure rather than solely a villainous one.

Finding the 'proper' witch identity, however, involves unbecoming (Cheded and Liu, 2022) the old self and testing one's identification with different witch identities, through both embodied experience and reflexivity. Bernard, for example, navigated the ambiguity of the myth by comparing the myth's different meanings to his own incarnation process. He said,

Ever since I can remember, even at the age of three, I did not recognise myself in it [Christianity]. For me, it is not logical that there is only one God... Instead, I started worshipping Mother Nature ... So, when I was little, I always went into Nature. I talked to plants and to animals ... and after I started . . . to manifest the gift of divination.

Bernard felt he was a spiritual witch long before revealing it to others, but it was by confronting his incarnation with different myths that he reached the moment of truth when he, similar to other consumers, disclosed his witch identity in public and faced the struggles and benefits of this process.

Coming out to others and dealing with negative witch representations

Publicly coming out as a witch often triggers negative reactions:

The word ‘witch’ is a very powerful word. Witches have chosen to use it, even though we realise that it sometimes causes misunderstanding ... most people will say they do not believe in witches. Yet they react strongly, even fearfully, when they learn that someone is a witch. (Reclaiming blog, no date)

Coming out as a witch is not always safe and can entail stigmatisation, coming both from those who deny the existence of magic and consider witches Charlatans or Self-deluded individuals and those who, relying on the Wicked witch myth, associate witches with Satanism. Witches face fragmented levels of stigma (Eichert and Luedicke, 2022) and select the audiences to whom they come out: other witches, partners, and friends rather than, for example, family and co-workers; social media audiences using a pseudonym; or coming out fully.

Such fragmented stigmatisation is considerably affected by the positionality of witches. Being black, Briana, a Brazilian witch with a strong Instagram presence, struggles with her public witch identity. Although in Brazil religious syncretism prevails (Rodner and Preece, 2019), Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda and Candomblé, are still considered (wicked) witchcraft by those whose opinions resonate with dominant mythmaking practices. Growing up as a ‘respectable’ black person (Crockett, 2017), Brianna was told by her family to avoid contact with such religions. She is also misjudged by ‘white straight witches’, who assume that she does ‘trabalhos’ (a term that refers to Candomblé rituals assumed to interfere with other people’s free will): ‘I know that this is a perception that comes from ingrained racism. Because if she is a witch and she is black, that must mean that she does this type of magic’. Brianna thus faces stigmatisation from both dominant myth believers and witches questioning her non-Western

spiritual practices. Faced with such intersectional stigmatisation (Creenshaw, 1997), Brianna, and many witches drawing on pantheons of marginalised, othered spiritualities see themselves as being in a position in which they must defy prevailing mythmaking practices: she must queer (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022) the witch myth to perform her coming out.

In sum, coming out is not only a transformation of oneself but also a statement about the existence and struggles of consumer mythopoesis. The personal and the public aspects of coming out contribute to the myth's ambiguity, as different witches emerge and rewrite the myth itself. Coming out is another step in the reclaiming journey, which starts with incarnation and culminates in practice.

Practising myth-related craft

Witches practise the witch's craft, which enables them to be at one with Nature, embody the Divine, and/or fight social injustice. Their rituals occur at moments of special significance (e.g. solstices and Beltane), in connection with the moon cycles, or when spellwork is needed to achieve specific individual or collective goals (Magliocco, 2004). Practising the witch's craft is the final process of reclaiming the myth and the culmination of one's mythopoetic identity work.

'Celebrating, dancing, eating, and drinking in the woods around a bonfire, in some periods of the year, lets you understand what neither tales nor books can let you understand. It puts you in contact with the cold, with the dark, with an environment (that of a wood and that of the night) which is mostly unusual and lets you feel, still today, the fear of being "discovered"' (Cronos, 2007: 9).

In addition, it is through practice that the witch acts and moves energies to change the world.

Learning (and teaching) the craft

Becoming a witch requires theoretical knowledge and an articulated set of ritual skills. Witches belonging to traditions that require a formal initiatory ritual learn from more experienced witches who pass on rituals and practices. For example, Aria leads a two-year study group that enables participants to ‘learn the basis of Wicca’. In initiatory traditions, some knowledge is ‘oath-bound’ – that is, revealed only after initiation. Aria explains that study groups allow established practitioners to distinguish between seekers with the commitment deemed necessary for the initiatory path and those who ‘come to one meeting and then disappear’.

Solitary practitioners, by contrast, often mix and match practices from different spiritual traditions, learning from personal experimentation, books, and, increasingly, social media, which has produced a market-mediated mainstreaming of once-arcane knowledge. Therefore, practitioners draw from sources related to all mythopoetic cycles to learn their craft. Penelope, a professional witch with over 100,000 Instagram followers, learned folk magic with her grandmother, but she also engaged with Greek deities, Sacred Feminine circles, and herbalism. On Instagram, she ‘demystifies’ witchcraft by proposing easy spells and rituals ‘for everyone’. She said,

I decided to post my cleansing ritual on the blog ... and it was great. People who followed me on the blog did not have any idea that doing a ritual could be easy. Because my readers had this occultist imaginary, they thought, ‘Oh no, you need a sacred circle’, they were into ceremonial magic.

Learning and teaching involve navigating and articulating witches’ different and ambiguous facets: the public, the private, the secret, the democratic, the solitary, and the collective. The figure of the witch that each consumer reclaims, then, has ambiguous powers and changes the world differently. Again, there are parallels with activism and intersectional feminist identity work (Maclaran, 2015): reclaiming requires a balance between learning and embodying, reading and acting, and transitioning from one’s community to general society.

Craft dilemmas

Penelope's emphasis on demystifying witchcraft also shows that one's power of transforming oneself and the world can follow different, and even conflicting, paths. Some of the old guard believe that social media encourages a 'lack of seriousness' (Marcello) and a short-term consumerist orientation that cannot activate the power found in traditional training. Social media witches who disseminate knowledge online to promote their products and services have also been criticised for their commercial orientation, revealing another source of tension in spiritual entrepreneurship (Rinallo et al., 2012) and echoing the trope of charlatanism. For instance, on TikTok, Perseus receives more questions about the practice of witchcraft than he could possibly answer and has, therefore, set up a Patreon account that allows his subscribers to ask him a varying number of monthly questions, depending on the fee paid. However, the marketisation of witchcraft also benefits initiatory traditions, as more people become aware of and interested in such traditions (Rinallo et al., 2016).

In sum, the contemporary reclaiming of the witch myth through market-related practices is a complex phenomenon that produces contradictory results. On the one hand, practising collectively – and for an audience – helps spread the witch's craft, fomenting collective atmospheres (Hill et al., 2021) that benefit transformations through magic. On the other, the same process de-sacralises some of the foundations of the myth, resulting in a new type of perceived Charlatanism, this time connected to the distrust of social media performances for gaining attention and audience (Abidin, 2016).

Nonetheless, some witches' practices enable them to incarnate the Spiritual witch, while others enable Rebellion. For example, astrological, tarot, and other oracular readings for

understanding political events, rituals of protection for participants of the Black Lives Matter protests, and even spells to bind (i.e. impede from doing harm) former president Donald Trump were amongst the rituals mentioned by the interviewees and described on witches' online accounts. As we write, witches are mobilising to hex Vladimir Putin in the hope of affecting the results of the invasion of Ukraine and protecting civilians from harm. These collective rituals turn Wickedness (the power to disrupt society) into collective political action against the dominant order, making witches heroes for themselves and for the world.

Heroic agency: Who is the reclaimed witch?

We have shown that the ambiguity of the witch myth, due to its multiple mythopoetic cycles, requires consumers to engage in the process of reclaiming to perform mythopoesis. During such processes, consumers *become* witches by incarnating, coming out, and practicing the craft. However, being linked to intersectional identity politics (Thompson, 2014) and spirituality (Rinallo et al., 2012), reclaiming requires considerable efforts (similar to Seregina and Weijo's [2017] cosplayers), as consumers must prepare their bodies to connect with the mythic characterisations of witches, negotiate the secret and the forbidden with the socially presentable (similar to Goulding et al.'s [2009] clubbers' subculture), and work through the constant discussions around who can be a witch and the proper ways of becoming one. We now explore the main outcome of reclaiming, the creation of heroic agency, and how this affects the myth's ambiguity and identity value.

Heroic agency refers to the consumer transformation process and the antagonistic social forces against which consumers must defend themselves. Heroic agency entails a journey of

inhabiting the myth and subverting its meaning and goes beyond the blurring of reality and fantasy to create a realm of possibilities – what St. James et al. (2011) called chimerical agency.

For example, Ellie uses the Rebel witch to subvert the myth of the Wicked witch: she reasoned that the witch is considered wicked because she has been oppressed and silenced. When Ellie problematised and understood the witch myth and embraced its aesthetics, she became a witch that ‘imposes her right to exist, her opinion and expresses it because her opinion is as valuable as a man’s’. Ellie created a villain, namely patriarchy, subverting the figure of the witch to become a heroine that changes reality by expressing herself: ‘At the moment in which we are all fighting [against misogyny] and trying to make people understand that gender does not matter (...) the witch conveys this strong image, which speaks to me.’ Patriarchy, racism, and capitalism, those who destroy Nature and those who claim that the witch is deluded or that magic is charlatanism are all antagonists to be confronted usually collectively, by the heroic (usually minority or subaltern) witches who are the subject and not the helper as in Campbell’s model.

However, new antagonists also emerge among the witches’ ranks. If the witch’s knowledge is valuable – contrary to those who believe witches are Charlatans or Self-deluded – then those who merely embrace the myth’s aesthetics or political functions may face backlash from practising witches. Although connecting to one’s body is valued by spiritual witches, radical feminist discourse and identity work may problematise the notion of ‘Nature’ (as related to cisgendered bodies and some Sacred Feminine traditions). In the end, the mythopoetic identity work processes lead witches to constantly enquire about the real witch in a process that both uses and contests the term, further queering the witch myth (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022) instead of solving its ambiguity.

Heroic agency amplifies such ambiguity. Reclaiming a figure that is built through different mythopoetic cycles involves constant problematisations, similar to the clashes that are seen in different social movements, such as within the feminist movement itself, in which different stances and fragmentations exist regarding controversial topics (e.g. pornography; see McVey et al., 2021; Daskalopoulou and Zanette, 2020). In such a fragmented environment, some consumers may find that others reproduce a type of oppressive mythopoesis. The community and the online witch-sphere become spaces amplifying the witch myth's ambiguity through the conflicting expressions of aesthetic, political, and spiritual witches who inhabit these digital zones.

Nonetheless, reclaiming the witch 'amplifies the voice of resistance in its own cone of power' (Grossman, 2020: 224). Old and new antagonists are confronted by witches that, after reclaiming the myth, have heroic agency over their own identities. Therefore, heroic agency is a form of agency negotiated at the boundaries between myth and materiality that helps marginalised consumers self-actualise, thus enriching the identity value of myth itself.

Through heroic agency, consumers can achieve a sense of control over their lives by blurring the political and the magical to deal with their disempowering situations. Therefore, heroic agency shares certain features with chimerical agency (St. James et al., 2011) but goes further because heroic agency enables consumers to transform their journeys, reclaim the identity value of oppressed myths, and find new forms of empowerment against antagonising forces.

Final considerations

We visually summarised our findings in Figure 2. Unlike the Campbellian's hero's journey, which is typically represented as a circle, we used spirals – a popular symbol in women's

spirituality – to emphasise the dynamism and transformative power of reclaiming ambiguous myths: ‘When you make a spiral you always come over the same point where you have been before, but never really the same, it is above or below, inside, outside, so it means growth’ (Jung, 1929). Our choice of spirals is also a tribute to Starhawk’s (1979) influential *Spiral Dance*, whose title refers to a common practice in witches’ rituals, when a community dance is used to ecstatically produce power and direct it towards common goals.

---- Insert Figure 2 around here ---

In Figure 2, we used different spirals to represent individual and collective outcomes of consumers reclaiming ambiguous myths. The left-side spiral expands outwards, showing how the process of reclaiming empowers witches from the individual to the collective level, starting with incarnating the witch through bodily feelings, aesthetic enactments, and spiritual/political discussions on who can inhabit the myth. The process extends to coming out, which involves a more performative (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015) stance; consequently, the myth is defied and problematised, and the dominant mythmaking is contested in favour of more positive representations.

Finally, the process culminates in practicing the craft, which, in many aspects, is also a collective exercise. The right-side spiral is moving inwards, visually representing how heroic agency, ingrained in broader identity politics issues, conflicts, and aestheticisations, contributes to increasing the ambiguity of the myth. Individual heroic agency is empowering, and many aspects (especially the activist- and community-related ones) involved in the consumer mythopoesis that produces heroic agency increase the myth’s ambiguity, which, in consonance with previous research (Brown et al., 2013), strengthens the myth’s identity value and endurance.

Reclaiming, a particular type of mythopoesis, helps expand previous conceptualisations of consumer identity work through marketplace myths by showing that such myths are intertwined with identity politics that go beyond navigating and making sense of countervailing myths (Holt and Thompson, 2004) or moralising about opposite ideologies that surround a myth (Luedicke et al., 2010). Consumers who are marginalised by patriarchy (McVey et al., 2021) or whiteness (Thomas, 2013) may feel misrepresented by dominant myths and may, therefore, find solace in ambiguous mythical figures that, like them, do not follow the heroic models prescribed by the market (Frisk, 2020). In such situations, reclaiming ambiguous myths may offer these consumers an opportunity to lift themselves up – and, consequently, the myth itself – from the underdog or villain status.

Therefore, the reclaiming process also involves problematisation frames and resources that are vigorously disseminated on social media through fourth-wave feminist activism. As Maclaran (2015) summarised, this wave both rebirths the second-wave feminists' radical spirit of making change through both personal and political action and includes the issues discussed by feminists during the 1990s and the 2000s, such as intersectionality, gender identity, and one's ability to disrupt categories through embodied resistance and queering. As we saw, even the positive mythopoetic cycles, those of the Spiritual and the Rebel witch, while intersecting with feminism, have been problematised in relation to the aforementioned issues. In that sense, reclaiming a myth can also help minority consumers discover their own personal power when they feel silenced. Queering what is villainous and what is heroic by inverting roles is an important empowerment tool for marginalised individuals who want and need to find community and identity in secular and spiritual marketplace myths. Similar reclaiming processes can be found in other outcast groups, such as the 'nerd' consumers, who rebuild their status through the

playful and creative strategies of cosplay (Seregina and Weijs, 2017), or marginalised and racialised consumers who rework stereotypes of violence and overt sexualisation by finding positives mythical aspects in hip hop (Motley and Henderson, 2008) or Brazilian funk subcultures (Abdalla and Zambaldi, 2016). Reclaiming can also be applied to myths that are currently devalued for being connected to racist or radical groups, such as the Vikings (Södergren, 2022).

We have not only theorised a particular type of identity work but have also offered an analysis of marketplace myths that, instead of trying to understand them semiotically, explores combinations and contradictions and embraces the myths' ambiguity (Brown et al., 2013). By theorising mythopoetic cycles, we have shown the cycles through which a myth's ambiguity emerges and how these cycles impact reclaiming work, as myths are materialised in consumers' lives through embodiment and negotiation, an idea previously mobilised by Palo et al. (2020) in organisation studies but not yet theorised at the consumer level.

We acknowledge, as we did in the body of the text, that the mythopoetic cycles we have analysed draw heavily on a Western, specifically British, depiction of the witch myth (Hutton, 1999, 2017), which was disseminated in Europe, North America, and South America by mythmakers. As we have shown, however, such processes may clash with traditional religious practices in different communities, from Candomblé in Brazil (Rodner and Preece, 2019) to Native American shamanism. In addition, there may be concerns about how Westerners themselves relate to such traditional magic (Dean, 2019). Although we have scratched the surface of such witch wars and craft dilemmas, future studies should study issues such as cultural appropriation and representation in the witch community. Second, we recognise that we have only dealt with one type of ambiguity (hero/villain), while ambiguity can encompass several

other meanings and contexts (Brown et al., 2013). Finally, we suggest that future research examine the aestheticisation of specific elements of the witch myth through consumption and marketplace processes (Dagalp and Hartmann, 2021) to understand whether and how such elements can also take part in the reclaiming process.

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Figure 1. The mythopoetic cycles of the witch myth

Representation: Witches are deluded individuals who engage in wishful thinking, falsely believing that their ideas, thoughts, actions, words, and use of symbols can influence the course of events in the material world.

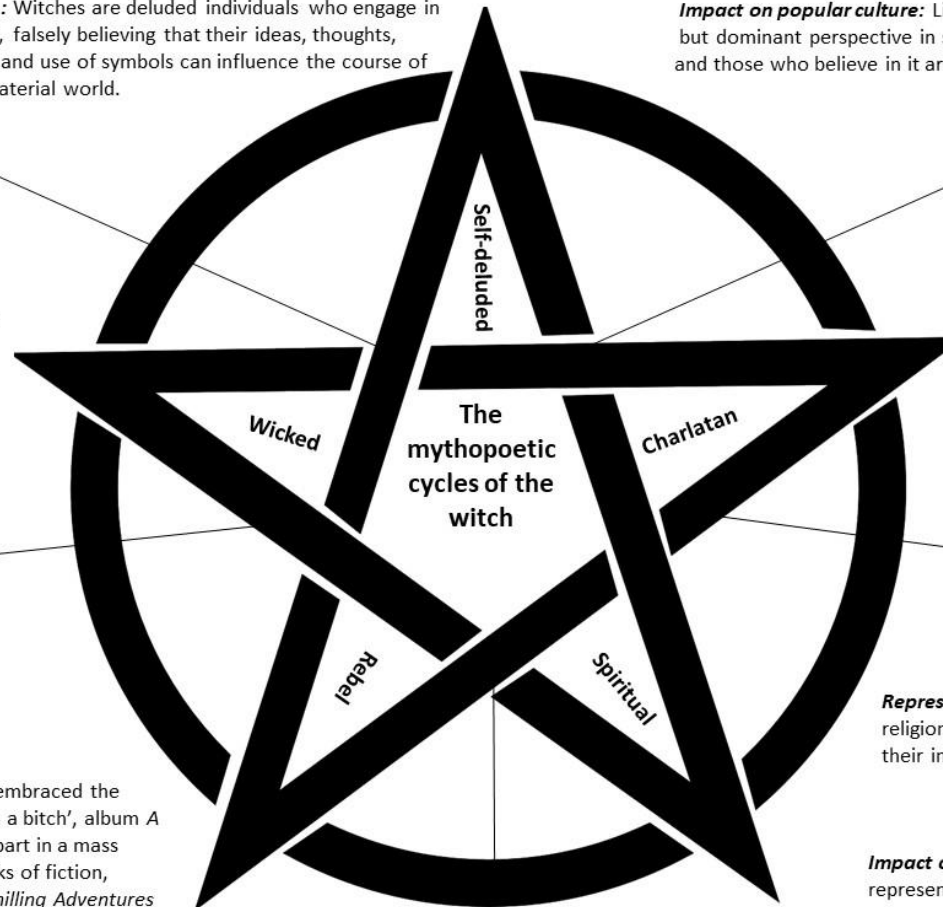
Impact on popular culture: Limited impact on fiction but dominant perspective in society (i.e. 'magic is not real, and those who believe in it are ignorant or superstitious').

Representation: Witches are evil people hiding in the midst of society, endowed by the Devil with malefic powers to commit hideous crimes and damage communities. Inquisitors' handbooks, such as the (in)famously misogynist *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) or Pico della Mirandola's *Stryx*, linked witchcraft to women's nature and male homosexuality.

Impact on popular culture: Witches as villains in fairy tales, children's books, movies and TV shows.

Representation: Witches are rebels who resist social injustice and environmental destruction through individual and collective action.

Impact on popular culture: Several celebrities have embraced the witch as a rebellious figure, from Yoko Ono ('Yes, I'm a bitch', album *A Story*, 1974) to Lana Del Rey, who confirmed taking part in a mass witchcraft act against President Trump in 2017. Works of fiction, including the musical *Wicked* (from 2003) and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–2020), represent witches as rebels fighting against social injustice.



Representation: Witches and other service magicians are con artists who base their offers on in-existent occult powers or worthless knowledge. They take financial advantage of their clients.

Impact on popular culture: Occasional representations of service magicians as con artists in fiction. Dominant perspective in society, considering that markets portray such services as illegitimate, casting a negative light to both buyers and sellers.

Representation: Witches are practitioners of a nature-based religion or spirituality that puts them in touch with Nature and their inner power.

Impact on popular culture: Growing market of how-to books representing witchcraft as a religion/spirituality. Movies (e.g. *The Craft*, 1996) and TV shows (e.g. *American Horror Story: Coven*, 2013–2014) influenced by Wiccan practices.

Figure 2. Processes and outcomes of reclaiming the myth

