Strategies of action and marginalised identities in

Pop Culture Paganism and Magic.

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Abstract

In this thesis I will argue that marginalised individuals are highly represented in the Pop Culture Paganism and Magic community, because it is a religious movement which encourages participants to use the cultural symbols that populate the media for religious meaning-making. The availability of media symbols for this purpose is important for marginalised individuals, who do not access the same 'traditional' religious resources or symbols as other individuals in society due to the sense of exclusion which arises from their marginality, but still seek religious meaning-making.

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1 Aim, Methodology, Argument

1.1.1 Aim of this Thesis

This thesis asks the research question, 'Why are individuals with marginalised identities statistically over-represented in the Pop Culture Paganism and Magic community, present on the social media site Tumblr.com?' The aim of this thesis is to advance an argument which answers this research question.

1.1.2 Methodology

I will investigate the above research question using a methodology inspired by "grounded theory" methodology. This means I will be developing an answer to my research question which is grounded in data I have collected. I will use both qualitative and quantitative data, in the form of:

1. A demographic profile of three religious communities on my focus site, Tumblr.com;

2. Qualitative ethnographic research on Pop Culture Pagans and Magic users, including interviews and text-based research.

I will also utilise some general theories of contemporary religious movements in order to contextualise Pop Culture Paganism and Magic in the wider religious environment of the post-modern West. I will provide further details on my methods in Chapter 2.

1.1.3 Proposed Argument

I will argue that marginalised individuals are highly represented in the Pop Culture Paganism and Magic community, because it is a religious movement which encourages participants to use the cultural symbols that populate the media for religious purposes. By 'religious purposes', I mean religious meaning-making.

The availability of media symbols for this purpose is important for marginalised individuals, who do not access the same 'traditional' religious resources or symbols as other individuals in society, but still seek religious meaning-making systems.

1.2 Background Information

In 1.2.1, I will provide a short summary of the history of Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic. In 1.2.2 I will describe its position in the online environment, with specific focus on the site Tumblr.com. In 1.2.3, I will a present a review of the literature on Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic in order highlight the contribution this thesis makes to that literature.

1.2.1 History of PCP/M

Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic, henceforth referred to as PCP/M, is a new religious movement in which participants deliberately use media symbols religiously. They use media symbols in this way because participants consider them appropriate for religious use.

No academic study documents the origins of PCP/M, although many participants accept that the movement has its origins in Chaos Magic, during the 1970's.[1] The first branch of the movement which emerged in its current form was Pop Culture Magic, with a book on the topic, entitled *Pop Culture Magick,* published by Pop Culture Magician Taylor Ellwood.[2] This work provided guidance on how to incorporate popular culture into 'magical practice'. Pop Culture Paganism was not a topic addressed in this publication.

In 2008, Elwood published *The Pop Culture Grimoire,*[3] followed in 2015 by *Pop Culture Magic 2.0.*[4] These titles included information on Pop Culture Magic and Pop Culture Paganism. Pop Culture Magic 2.0 was written by Ellwood, but *The Pop Culture Grimoire* contained multiple accounts of Pop Culture Magic and Pop Culture Pagan 'systems', written by individuals who had experimented with Pop Culture Magic and/or Pop Culture Paganism for themselves. Ellwood edited the publication with Emily Carlin. *The Pop Culture Grimoire 2.0*[5] was also published in 2015, following the same compilation format as *The Pop Culture Grimoire*.

1.2.2 PCP/M Online

In the years separating Ellwood's publications, particularly *Pop Culture Magick* and *The Pop Culture Grimoire,* both Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic began to gain popularity on social networking websites. In the Introduction to *The Pop Culture Grimoire,*

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[1] Ellwood, Taylor. "Introduction", in *Pop Culture Grimoire 2.0,* Emily Carlin and Taylor Ellwood Eds. (Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2015) 7.
[2] Ellwood, Taylor. *Pop Culture Magick.* (1st ed.) Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2004.
[3] Ellwood, Taylor. *The Pop Culture Grimoire: A Pop Culture Magic Anthology*. Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2008.
[4] Ellwood, Taylor. *Pop Culture Magic 2.0.* Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2015.
[5] Ellwood, Taylor, and Emily Carlin eds. *The Pop Culture Grimoire 2.0.* Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2015.

Ellwood states that he was able to find significant population of Pop Culture Magic users and Pop Culture Pagans had emerged on the microblogging site Tumblr.com.[6] By analysing archived blogs and resources that are still available on the site, it is possible to estimate that Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic became popular on Tumblr in 2013, coming to the attention of the wider Pagan and Magical community later that same year. It received a mixed-to-negative response from this community.

Although the furore surrounding early Pop Culture Paganism and Magic has subsided, it has had a lasting impact on the modern Pagan and Magical community.[7] Notably, it has seen many popular websites, blogs and podcasts specializing in modern Paganism and Magic to acknowledge or even promote the existence of Pop Culture Paganism and Magic to their audiences.[8]

Pop Culture Pagans and Pop Culture Magic practitioners also still produce and circulate materials about PCP/M on Tumblr today, as well as on other social networking sites such as Facebook and Blogger. PCP/M communities also utilise online platforms for communication, particularly Skype and Discord, and real-life meetings between participants in order to share, develop, and practice their 'systems'[9] are not uncommon.

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[6] Ellwood, *Pop Culture Grimoire 2.0*, 8.
[7] Ellwood describes a strong backlash towards Pop Culture Pagans and Magic users during 2013, particularly from polytheists who considered applying principles and practices of polytheism to Popular Culture a threat to their traditions. Ellwood, *Pop Culture Grimoire 2.0,* 8.
[8] For example, the websites witchesandpagans.com and wildhunt.org host information about PCP/M. PCP/M has even been the subject of articles posted on journalistic sites, such as *Vice*.
[9] PCP/M Systems are the unique collection of elements, organised in relation to one another, specific to each individual participant. They will be the subject of further discussion in chapters four and five.

1.2.3 Literature review

To date, there is no academic research which has focused solely on PCP/M.

There are a number of recent publications addressing related phenomenon, however. These publications cover topics such as 'Otherkin,'[10] 'Soulbonders,'[11] and specific popular-culture based religious movements like Jedaiism.[12] These studies provide useful insight into parallel traditions, and often it is possible to apply these insights to PCP/M. In this work, I have used scholarship on popular-culture based religions, particularly the books *Imagination, Fiction, Faith,* by Carole Cusack[13] and *Religion and Popular Culture,* by Adam Possamai,[14] as comparators for the data I have collected using ethnographic methods. These works tend to consider popular-culture religious movements as a consequence of consumerism in post-modernity, and to some extent highlight the consumerist dimensions of PCP/M as well.

The framework of 'consumerism', however, is insufficient for answering my research question. Although it may provide a general explanation for popular culture bleeding into religious practice, it does not provide a detailed explanation of what may motivate an individual to use media content in their religious systems, and hence why a marginalised individual in particular would be motivated to do so. For this reason, I have also drawn upon the ethnographic analysis of religious identity development and media spectatorship, which

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[10] *See* Kirby, Danielle. *Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures.* London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.
[11] *See* Alderton, Zoe. "'Snapewives' and 'Snapeism': A Fiction-Based Religion within the Harry Potter Fandom." *Religions* 5, no. 1 (2014): 219-67. *And* Robertson, Venetia. "Salvation and Animation: Religion, fandom and identity in the romantic narratives of mystics and soulbonders," in *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality: From Popular Culture to Religion.* Carole M. Cusack, and Pavol Kosnác eds. London: Routledge, 2016.
[12] *See* Cusack, Carole M. *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, Faith.* Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010. *And* Possamai, Adam. *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament.* Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007. *And* Davidsen, Markus Altena. "The religious affordance of fiction: a semiotic approach," *Religion* 46, no. 4 (2016): 521-549.
[13] Cusack, Carole M. *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, Faith.* Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010.
[14] Possamai, Adam. *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament.* Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007.

Lynn Schofield Clarke discusses in *From Angels to Aliens.*[15] Schofield Clarke used a framework suggested by Ann Swidler in this work, entitled 'strategies of action',[16] and I will be utilising this same framework in my own.

This 'strategy of action' approach will help me differentiate my argument from the theories advanced by Cusack and Possamai, and provide a lens through which I can examine the relationship between individual religious motivations and media resources. Insight into this relationship, along with ethnographic data on PCP/M as an independent movement is the contribution to the academic literature made by this thesis.

1.3 Definitions

In this section, I will provide short definitions of some key terms, and explain why I have used these terms in this thesis. In 1.3.1 I will lay out my definition of PCP/M. In 1.3.2 I will describe what I mean by 'Marginalised Identities'. In 1.3.3 I will provide a short note on the use of 'them' and 'they' as a gender neutral pronoun in this work. A definition for Tumblr is provided in Section 2.2 of the next chapter.

1.3.1 Pop Culture Paganism and Magic

In 1.2.1 I have already defined PCP/M as a new religious movement in which participants use media symbols religiously. This behaviour implies that participants use media symbols in this way because they consider them appropriate for religious use.

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[15] Clark, Lynn Schofield. *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
[16] Swidler, Ann. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," In *American Sociological Review* 51, No. 2 (1986) 273-286.

At this time, there is no other formal academic definition of PCP/M. There are a number of non-academic definitions of PCP/M, however, and I have modelled my definition on them. Some examples of these definitions are as follows:

Pop culture Magic(k) and paganism uses characters, setting and imagery from books, movies, television, cartoons, comics and other creative media as a basis for worship and witchcraft.[17]

Pop Culture Magic is the application of the process and principles of magic to change reality, using pop culture as a creative and expressive medium.[18]

Pop Culture Magick (PCM) is the use of pop culture stories, characters, images, music, toys, etc. as magickal mechanisms – the tools and techniques you use to bring your magick into being... Pop Culture Paganism (PCP) is the use of pop culture characters and stories as either an approachable face for traditional Pagan deities and powers, or as a substitute for more traditional powers and mythologies.[19]

By looking at these definitions, we can see that there is a great deal of variation amongst individual PCP/M users. There are two parts of the definitions which are fairly consistent, however. The first is the significance of 'popular culture' in the practice (example

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[17]Creatrix Tiara, "The Pop Culture Pagans who draw power from Tumblr," *Motherboard,* 2015. Accessed October 2017. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/d73q3x/the-pop-culture-pagans-who-draw-power-from-tumblr
[18] Ellwood, Taylor. *Pop Culture Magic 2.0.* (Stafford: Megalithica Books, 2015) 19.
[19] Carlin, Emily. "Pop Culture Magick vs. Pop Culture Paganism" *Witchesandpagans,* 2015. http://witchesandpagans.com/pagan-paths-blogs/exoteric-magick/pop-culture-magick-vs-pop-culture-paganism.html

one, two and three). The second is the distinction between PC Paganism, and PC Magic,

despite both sharing the feature of 'popular culture'. (example three)

Some PCP/M participants may also define PCP/M as a part of a larger social or

cultural system they belong to rather than seeing PCP/M in terms of the features indicated

above. For example, participants who identify as Otherkin or Fictionkin may consider PCP/M

to be a product of being Otherkin.[20] This is because they practice the same religious system

as their 'kintype', which necessarily has origins in the same popular culture source as that

kintype.[21] Participants who belong to cultural reconstruction organizations, meanwhile, may

perceive PCP/M as a potential dimension of the entire culture they were engaged in

reconstructing.[22] These individuals do not represent the majority of PCP/M participants,

however, and ultimately I set aside these variations in order to conduct a focused study of

PCP/M as an independent phenomenon.

In the interest of strengthening the focus of my research, I have refined the definitions

used by participants in order to focus on 'media symbols' rather than 'popular culture', and I

have not made a point of distinguishing between Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture

Magic. I will now lay out the reasons that I insist upon these changes, against the common

ways of talking in the practitioner community.

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[20] Otherkin, Kirby explains in *Fantasy and Belief* are "A loosely affiliated network of individuals who believe they are to some degree non-human". (p.1)
[21] That is, the kind of kin identity that an individual claims to have. Kintypes can include, but are not limited to, Vampires, Angels, specific characters from media sources, and more.
[22] Cultural Reconstructive Organizations, specifically the organisation called "The Gallifreyan Tradition Society" were described to me as *"an organization devoted to cultural, ethical, and spiritual reconstruction of Gallifreyan society in a way that's practical for human life. Essentially it's the sci-fi version of the Society for Creative Anachronism, with some pop culture pagan elements sprinkled in for those who are into that."* Gallifreyan society is the society of the planet Gallifrey, of the Doctor Who universe. "The Society for Creative Anachronism" is a group which describes itself as "an international organization dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts and skills of pre-17th-century Europe." (Accessed March 25, 2017. http://www.sca.org/)

Why am I using 'media symbols' instead of 'popular culture'?

There are two problems with using the category of 'popular culture' when defining PCP/M. The first problem is that the 'popularity' of 'popular culture' is not actually relevant to PCP/M. The second is that claiming PCP/M is a religious system which draws on general 'culture' as opposed to 'popular culture' does not provide any interesting insight into PCP/M, because of the ubiquitous nature of the culture around us. I am understanding culture as ubiquitous, because I have selected to take a Geertzian approach to culture, and characterise it as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms," which constitutes the environment in which the individual exists.[23]

The problems I have identified are obvious in the 'popular culture' examples provided by PCP/M participants. Some participants use the term simply to denote the characters, ideas, and images taken from TV shows, books, and movies. (See example one above.) By contrast, *Pop Culture Magic 2.0* characterises 'popular culture' as "an extension and expression of mainstream culture, but also of subcultures which [do not] overtly fit into mainstream cultures."[24] This definition is far more general. In the same book, Ellwood also indicates that because popular culture is all around us, even on a structural level, PC magic (or paganism) can theoretically draw upon *every* aspect of contemporary culture – even corporations and other organizational structures.[25]

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[23] Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Edited by Clifford Geertz, 87-125. (London: Fontana Press, 1993) 89.
[24] Ellwood, *Pop Culture Magic 2.0,* 16.
[25] Ibid., 19.

In order to narrow my scope and create a definition which is more useful for my research, I have chosen to immediately disregard the idea that material used in PCP/M must be 'popular'. This is because the 'popularity' of the cultural symbols in PCP/M appears to be redundant in actual PCP/M practice. *Pop Culture Magic 2.0* describes 'popular' culture as 'anything which is meaningful to someone', because anything which has meaning can have the potential for magical use. [26] This potential is not limited by how much attention or belief a certain media source enjoys amongst the population at large, i.e. its 'popularity'. The book describes how developing a PC Magic system incorporating elements of the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which has waned in popularity since its premiere in the 1990s, is still viable if the show has meaning for the participant.[27] In my research, it was clear that participants considered anything which worked for the individual as suitable for PCP/M – the material they were drawing on did *not* have to be statistically 'popular' at all. For this reason, I understand that the 'popular' element in PCP/M is not significant and can therefore be disregarded.

This then leaves me with the 'culture' aspect of 'popular culture'. This remainder is not useful, particularly in light of my chosen definition of culture, because obviously the 'symbolic forms' (or 'symbols') which populate the cultural environment are always going to be used in the construction of cultural systems, including religious ones. This is because 'culture' comprises the entire environment in which an individual exists. Thus, if we extend the definition of PCP/M to include *all* cultural symbols, we reduce the definition to an uninteresting truism. For present purposes, it is vital for me to consider how participants are

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[26] Ellwood, *Pop Culture Magic 2.0,* 17.
[27] Ibid.

using *specific* cultural symbols in PCP/M, namely, the symbols taken from media sources which are not traditionally used religiously.

I am therefore using 'media symbols' in lieu of 'popular culture' in my definition of PCP/M. The term 'media' usually relates to 'communication media', either the institutions which produce products such as television shows, films, or books, or the products themselves.[28] I will be using it in reference to these products, as it is mostly from these products that PCP/M participants draw the symbols they are using in their religious systems. I will discuss media symbols further, in Section 5.2 of Chapter 5.

For the reasons presented above, I am equating 'popular culture' to the body of media symbols available to audiences. These symbols could comprise details as small as a piece of jewellery worn by a particular character, or elements of the media in question as large as a whole theme expressed through a narrative arc in a book.

Why am I grouping Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic together?

PCP Practitioners are careful to distinguish between PC Paganism, and PC Magic. In academia also, 'Paganism' and 'Magic' are frequently characterised as distinct, although the debates over how to define or distinguish them is ongoing.

By contrast, I have grouped Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic together as a single movement, because for participants in these practices they both function religiously in the same way. I defer further discussion of this aspect of my definition to Chapter 4, where

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[28] Lister, Martin. *New Media: A Critical Introduction.* (London: Routledge, 2010) 9.

I will provide a more detailed breakdown of how I am approaching the idea of 'religion', and I will show that on a functional level, both PCP and PCM operate in the same way for those who participate in them.

Concluding Remarks

As I have stated, my chosen definition of PCP/M characterises it as a religious movement in which participants incorporate media symbols into their religious practice. I have chosen to refer to 'media symbols' as opposed to 'popular culture' in my definition, because 'popular culture' is too broad of a category to aid my research. I have also chosen to group Pop Culture Paganism and Pop Culture Magic under the umbrella movement PCP/M, because both systems serve the same religious function according to the definition of religion I will apply in Chapter 4, Section 2.

1.3.2 Marginalised Identities

'Marginalised individuals' is a term which refers to people who are more likely to experience exclusion from society. 'Marginalised groups' are groups of individuals who are more likely to experience exclusion from society.[29] Being identified as a part of a marginalised group, either consensually or non-consensually, means that an individual has a 'marginalised identity'.

I have focused on three types of marginalised identity in my research. These are marginalised gender identity, marginalised sexuality, and mental or physical illness or

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[29] Shen, Winny, and Soner Dumani. "The Complexity of Marginalized Identities: The Social Construction of Identities, Multiple Identities, and the Experience of Exclusion." In *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 6, no. 01 (2013): 86.

disability which results in marginalisation for the individual. I will be discussing my chosen categories of marginalised identities further in Section 2.3 of Chapter 2.

1.3.3. 'They' and 'them' and gender-neutral terminology

Throughout this thesis, most notably in section 3.3.2 and Chapters 4 and 5, I have used the words 'they' and 'them' in singular form in order to refer to individuals, instead of 'he/she' or 'him/her'. I have done this for one of two reasons - either because the individual in question is anonymous, and I have chosen to not-specify their gender identity, or because that individual identifies with a non-binary gender and the pronouns 'he/she' or 'his/hers' are therefore not applicable.

In this instance, the need for an appropriate pronoun to refer to non-gendered individuals is greater than the need to satisfy grammatical custom. Without such usage, it would be impossible for me to discuss a significant portion of my research findings.

1.4 Outline

I will be develop my argument in four steps, over four chapters.

In Chapter 2, I will begin by specifying the methods I used to collect my ethnographic data. These methods are:

1) A random convenience sample in order to generate a demographic profile.
2) Text-based research, in conjunction with ethical fabrication of composite accounts.

3) Structured key informant interviews.

In Chapter 3, I will describe my findings using each of the above three methods.

In Chapter 4, I will argue that PCP/M is religious, because it provides a framework for religious meaning–making through emphasis on various types of 'transcendence'. PCP/M can thus be considered 'religious', even though it is inconsistent with classical definitions of 'religion'. The classical definition I will be referring to in order to show this is Emile Durkheim's, which characterises religion as something which is socially institutionalised, or 'churched'.[30]

In Chapter 5 I will argue that in PCP/M, individuals use certain media symbols not solely because they are choosing to as consumers, but because those symbols are perceived as more accessible to them for religious meaning-making in their cultural environment. This is in lieu of or in addition to using more 'traditional' religious symbols, which they may not perceive as being accessible to the same degree due to their marginalised position in society. I will use Ann Swidler's 'strategy of action' theory in order to argue this.

1.5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I will advance the argument that marginalised individuals are well represented in PCP/M because it allows them to use symbols which they feel are more accessible to them due to being marginalised for religious meaning-making. I will do this

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[30] Durkheim, Émile, "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them", *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press, 1995, 44.

through ethnographic research on PCP/M, and through applying a 'strategy of action'

framework to analyse my findings.

CHAPTER TWO: Methods and Limitations

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the three methods I used to collect my data, and explain what each method has contributed to my work. I will not discuss the findings of my research in this chapter – this information will instead be presented in detail in Chapter 3.

I required a considerable amount of thick data, in order to answer my research question satisfactorily. With this in mind, I utilised three approaches to collecting both quantitative and qualitative data for this thesis. Each approach was selected in order to contribute information to my research on three levels. These levels were quantitative, synoptic, and in-depth. I undertook each of these approaches in three separate phases, and each one built upon the data I had gathered in the previous phase.

Before I describe my methods, I will provide an overview in section 2.2 of the social networking and microblogging website Tumblr.com, here on referred to only as 'Tumblr'. This is important because my choice to use Tumblr as a key source of data requires me to provide an explanation of the tools available to me during this entire process.

In Section 2.3, I will explain the method I followed during my first quantitative phase of research. This was an anonymous convenience sample of PCP/M participants on Tumblr, which illustrated that marginalised individuals were more statistically significant in PCP/M than in comparable groups on the same site.

Next, in Section 2.4, I will discuss my second phase of research. This was a process of text-based research, in conjunction with 'ethical fabrication', in order to develop both a synoptic overview of PCP/M, and a set of composite accounts which serve to illustrate PCP/M and the individuals involved in the movement.

Finally, in Section 2.5, I will discuss the method I selected to use in my third phase of research: the 'structured key informant' interview technique. These findings were used to develop the answer to my research question.

Overall, this chapter will show that although my time and resources were limited, I have carefully selected and applied particular methods to maximise my capacity for drawing a conclusion about my research question.

2.2 What is Tumblr.com?

In this section, I will provide a short description of the website Tumblr.com, as Tumblr and the tools which it provides have been vital in developing the methods I used for this research. I will begin with a brief overview of Tumblr, before going into further detail about some of the key features I have utilised during the research process.

2.2.1 Overview

Tumblr is a multimedia social networking and 'microblogging' site, founded in 2007 and now owned by web services provider Yahoo.[31] Tumblr is a platform which enables users

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[31] Mayer, Marissa "Tumblr. + Yahoo! – It's Officially Official". *Yahoo!,* 2013. Accessed March 2017. https://yahoo.tumblr.com/post/53441093826/tumblr-yahoo-its-officially-official

to "share anything", including "text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos", and these can

be shared "from your browser, phone, desktop, email or wherever you happen to be."[32] At the

time of writing, Tumblr is available in 18 languages, and hosts 350.3 million blogs. It claims

to be a hybrid of profile based social networking sites, such as Facebook, and a blogging

site, on which users can make (post) and share (reblog) content with an audience.[33]

Social networking sites are best described as "web-based services, that allow

individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)

articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse

their list of connections and those made by others within the system."[34] Microblogging sites,

meanwhile, are a type of social network, wherein users are able to share short

pieces of information, such as text or an image.[35] Unlike other popular microblogging sites,

such as Twitter, Tumblr also allows users to share large pieces of information.

By default, material posted on Tumblr is public, and it is not usually necessary to

have an account in order to see information shared there by users. Posts made by Tumblr

users are visible on uniquely named blog pages, and these pages and their contents can be

returned in Google search results. The standard URL format for these pages follows the

pattern 'example-user.tumblr.com', wherein the 'example-username' would be replaced with

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[32] Tumblr, "About", 2017. Retrieved June 2017. https://www.tumblr.com/about
[33] Oakley, Abigail. "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary and Sexual Orientation Labelling on Tumblr" in *Social Media + Society,* July-September 2016: 2.
[34] Boyd, D.M., & Ellison, N.B. "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (2008): 211.
[35] Chandler, Daniel and Rod Munday. *A Dictionary of Social Media,* Online edition. "Microblog." Oxford University Press, 2016. http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191803093.001.0001/acref-9780191803093

a unique and personalised name or title. Despite being public by default, there is also an

option for users to turn this public setting off if they choose. The degree of privacy afforded

by this option can range from only allowing signed in users with accounts to see an individual

blog, to only allowing users who also have passwords to access an individual blog. Users can

block other users from accessing their blog on a case-by case basis, but cannot block

individuals who are not Tumblr users from accessing their blog if their blog is still on the

default setting and accessible via an internet search.

2.2.2 Features

Despite being able to access Tumblr content without an account, many individuals do

still make Tumblr accounts in order to access the tools and services Tumblr provides them

with. The most important features, and the features I have used in my research, are outlined

here.

Dashboard

Having an account gives users access to a 'dashboard' interface, which makes

interacting directly with other users and publishing their own content possible. This is on two

counts. The first is that the Tumblr 'dashboard' compiles the posts and reblogs of other users

whom the individual has chosen to 'follow', along with a search bar so they are able to search

for posts and blogs beyond those they already follow. The second is that the Tumblr

dashboard has a number of settings and tools that aid the individual in editing the appearance

of their blog page, messaging other users directly or via the mail tool, or posting their own

original content relating to a wide range of topics. This content can include text, images,

music, video, or URL links to other sites.
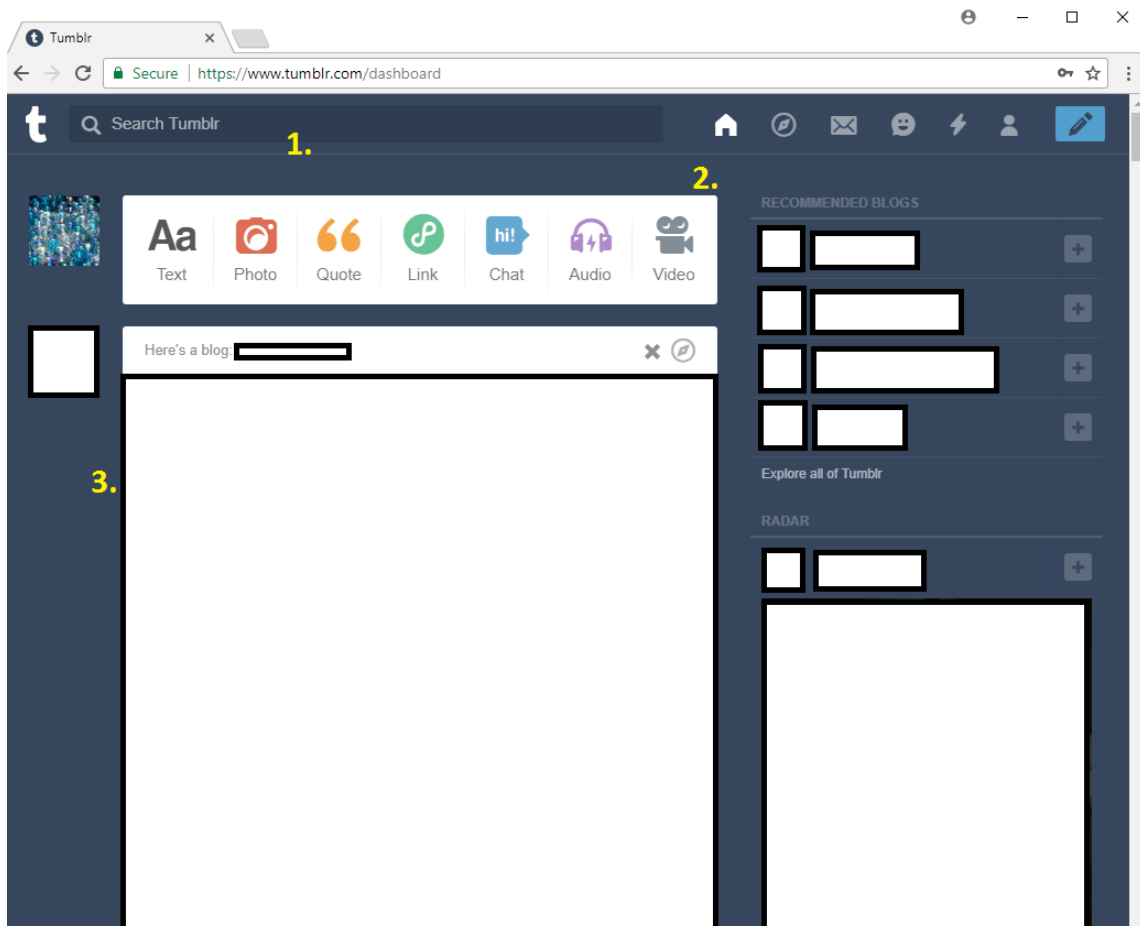
IMAGE A: A Tumblr Dashboard interface. Users can search for content using the Search

bar (1), post their own content using the post content interface (2) or interact directly with

posts from people they follow through the dashboard (3).

Tagging and 'Create a Post'

Users can create content on Tumblr using the 'create post' function, and catalogue

their content using 'tags' (*IMAGE A.2* and *B*). Tags enable users to search for posts by other

users from their dashboards, using specific terms. For example, a post made by a user who applies the tag 'Pop Culture Pagan' can be found by another user, if they run a search using this term. (*IMAGE C*) Tags therefore collate posts made by users across multiple blogs, which share common tags. It is possible to attach multiple tags to a single post, and when searching for posts and blogs using tags, it is possible to see results in order of 'Most Recently posted', or 'Most Popular'.
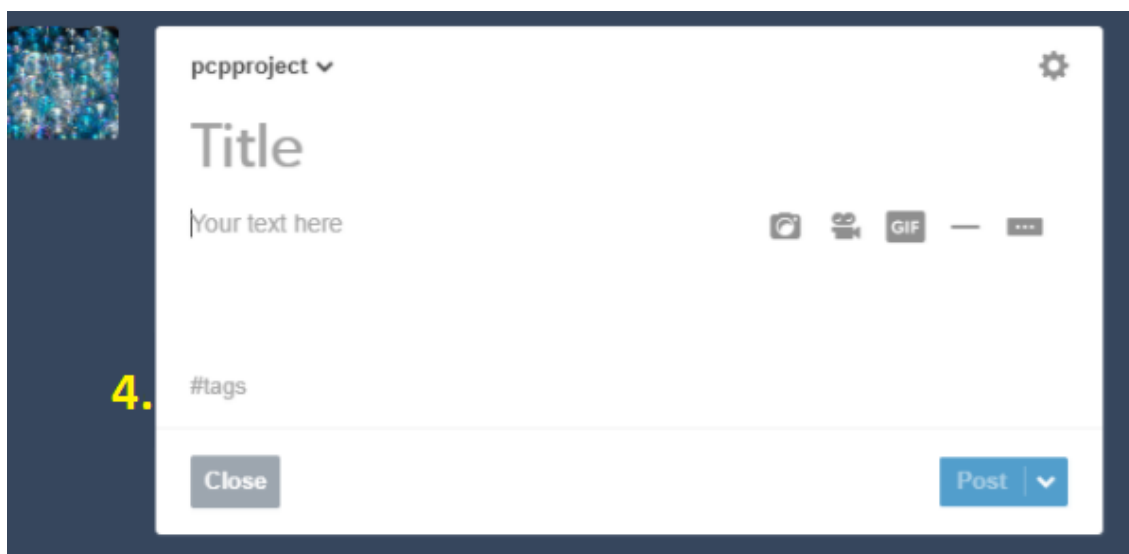
IMAGE B: A Tumblr posting interface. Users are able to write or add what they like, and tag their post using the tagging system (4) so others are able to find it using the search function.
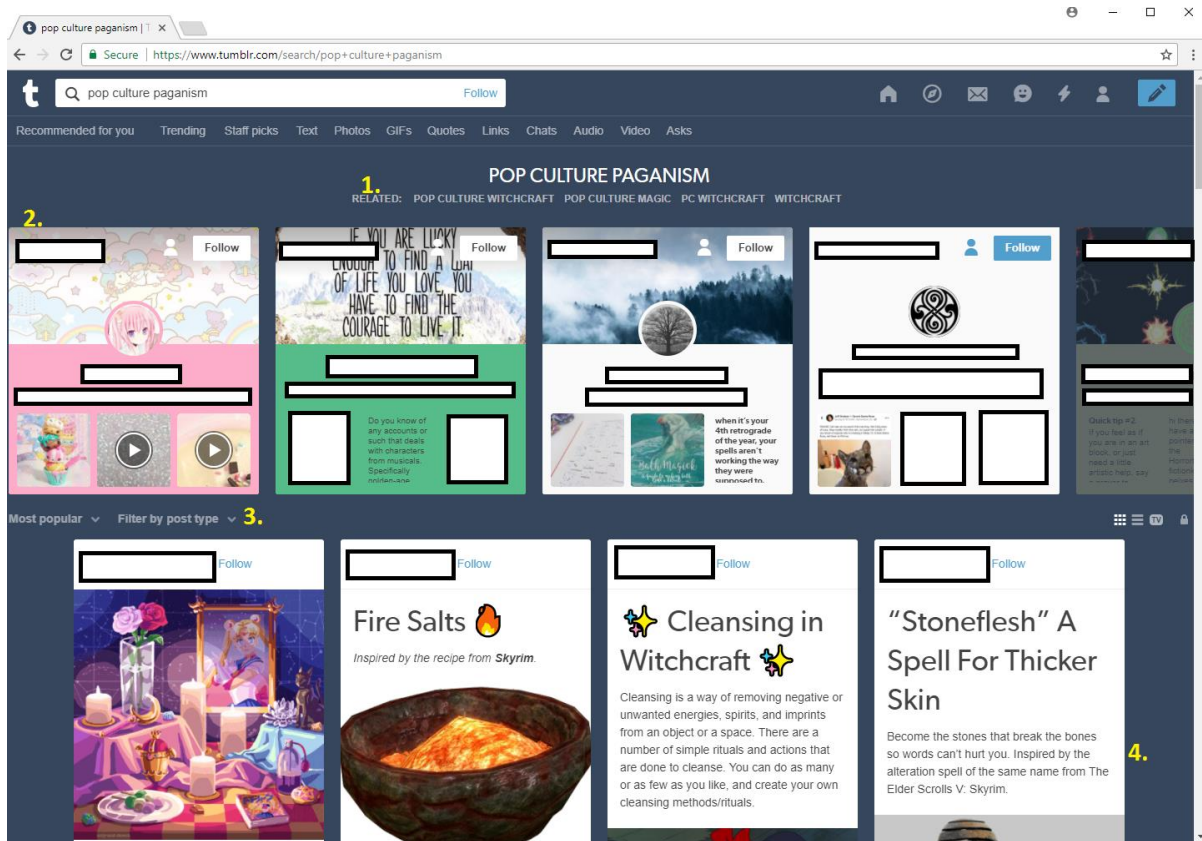
IMAGE C: The Tumblr Search results page, using example search 'Pop Culture

Paganism'. Information which could identify users, such as Usernames, has been removed.

The search page includes features such as related search terms (1), suggested blogs which

post often using the searched tag (2), filters to refine the search (3) and content published

with the searched tag attached (4).

Profiles and 'About Me' pages

Sometimes, users may use the Tumblr settings to personalise their blog profiles

through use of user information, or 'About me' pages. 'About me' pages are pages separate

from the main blog, usually denoted by a unique URL address. (*example format: example-*

user.tumblr.com/about-me) These pages typically provide personal details, such as the age,

gender, and interests of the user responsible for curating the blog. Blog descriptions are

similar to 'About me' pages, but rather than being on separate pages with specific URL

addresses, they are attached to the main home page of the blog.

Not all users use 'About me' pages or blog descriptions to provide personal

information. Some users prefer to use these as places to summarise the kind of content they

curate, as permanent places to share quotes they find meaningful, or as spaces in which to

make a joke or express humour. Some users do not provide profiles or information about their

personal identity at all.
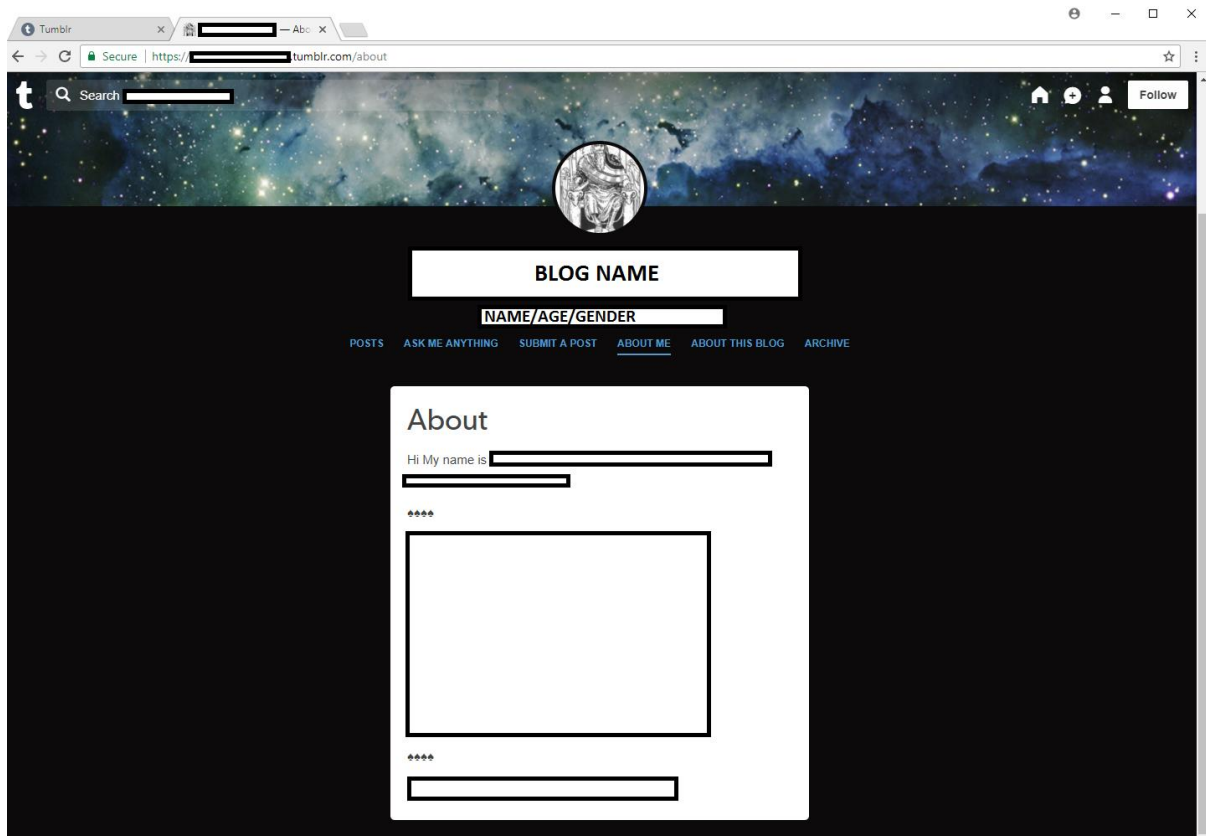
IMAGE D: A Sample 'About' page. The user discloses details about themselves in a permanent page with a unique URL (example-user.tumblr.com/about), separate from the main blog content or posts (example-user.tumblr.com)

2.2.3 Why Tumblr?

I have chosen to focus on Tumblr for my research, for two reasons. The first reason is that Tumblr has a large population of PCP/M users and therefore, there is a large amount of information on the topic available on this site.[36] The second reason is that the tools that Tumblr offers makes it an ideal platform for me to use in conducting and structuring my research. Mostly, I have used Tumblr to collect my demographic sample and recruit participants for interviews, but Tumblr has also played an important role in providing textual resources about PCP/M for me to analyse. On Tumblr, users share links to information, publish details about their own understanding and experiences of PCP/M, and engage in peer discussion about beliefs, practices and other aspects of PCP/M. These shared resources have proven invaluable to me throughout the course of this work.

With this brief description of Tumblr complete, I am able to move on to describing and discussing my selected methods in detail. Each of the methods I selected utilised Tumblr and its tools to some degree. I have made a note of where this has happened, and why, in each of the following sections of this chapter.

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[36] This is compared to other social media sites. Although I do not have any means of confirming this, as there is no data on the exact number of PCP/M users on either Tumblr or other sites available, both my background research and my informants in my interviews indicate that most PCP/M participants see Tumblr as having the highest PCP/M population.

2.3 Phase One: Anonymous Convenience Sample

In this section, I will describe my method during my first phase of research, conducting an anonymous convenience sample of PCP/M users on Tumblr in order to provide a demographic profile of the PCP/M community on the site.

I will begin in 2.3.1 by describing the method I have followed in order to collect this sample. In 2.3.2 I will go on to discuss the limitations of this method, before concluding in 2.3.3.

This first phase of my research is important, because it provides support for the key claim of my research question, that the PCP/M community on Tumblr has a high rate of individuals with a marginalised identity. A demographic profile is an effective way of showing that the percentage of PCP/M participants who claim to have some form of marginalised identity is significant on Tumblr.

2.3.1 Method

There were two main steps in my approach. First, I used the Tumblr tag search function in order to locate the blogs of PCP/M participants who were over eighteen and had actively contributed original content to the site. These criteria were chosen to ensure that I was only collecting data on adult participants who were actively engaged in PCP/M. I did this by using the Tumblr tools Illustrated in IMAGE A.1 and C.

Once I had done this, I manually looked through the first one hundred blogs which had posted in the tags, in order to access publicly available data about three key types of identity marker which would indicate the blog owner had a marginalised identity. These markers were a marginalised gender identity, marginalised sexuality, and mental or physical disability or illness which resulted in marginalisation for the individual. This data was located on blog summaries or 'About' pages. (IMAGE D). I took the claimed identities of individuals, based on the markers which appeared in their 'about me' pages and blog summaries, at face value.

I repeated this process twice, using the Tumblr search function to locate the blogs of two control groups instead of PCP/M, once again who were over eighteen and had actively contributed content to the site. The two control groups I used were the 'Christian' community and the 'Wiccan/Witch/Pagan' community. I did this in order to compare these groups to PCP/M.

My choice of comparable groups was different for each one. Arguably, the Witch/Wiccan/Pagan group has more in common with PCP/M, and so comparing these two would be a good way to show the difference between PCP/M and a similar community. Meanwhile, the 'Christian' group is a good for comparison due to the fact that Christianity acts as the 'standard' or default religion in the contemporary West. By comparing the PCP/M community to the Christian community I hoped to illustrate the difference in demographic makeup between the PCP/M community and the 'standard' religious Tumblr community.

It is important for me to point out that considering the Witch/Wiccan/Pagan demographic as unified, despite the fact that in most cases (particularly academic) they would

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be considered distinct, is because these distinctions are not so clear on Tumblr and the groups often tend to overlap. The same is true of Christianity – I found that Christians who were using the same tags I selected to represent the community ranged in affiliation, from Roman Catholic to Baptist, and everything in between.

Stage One

In the first stage of conducting my samples for each group, I needed to locate PCP/M users, Witches/Wiccans/Pagans, and Christians on Tumblr. I did this through using a set of community defined tags. In order to search tags for blogs and posts which identify the user as a part of the target groups, I selected five tags which were commonly used amongst the target group when authoring posts.

This method is very similar to the one used by Abigail Oakley, in her Article "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse".[37] Unlike Oakley, however, I have collected, stored, and analysed my survey data manually rather than using research assistance programs.[38] I also did not use any analysis of inbox/askbox responses in my analysis, as Oakley did.

I have chosen English only search terms, limiting my research to English speaking users. Often, the specific locations of users were not disclosed.

The tags I selected for each group are as follows:

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[37] Oakley, Abigail. "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary and Sexual Orientation Labelling on Tumblr" In *Social Media + Society,* July-September 2016: 1-12.
[38] Oakley used *Zotero* and *Nvivo* to collate and analyse her data.

CHRISTIAN: Christian, Faith, Christianity, Jesussaves, testimony

PAGAN/WITCH/WICCAN: Wiccan, Pagan, Witchcraft, Magic, Paganism

PCP/M: PC Pagan, Pop Culture Pagan, Pop Culture Magick, Pop Culture Witchcraft,

Pop

Culture Witch

Stage Two

Upon locating blogs via the tagging function, I was able to begin the second step of

Phase One. I manually collected data from the first 20 blogs that had posted using that

specific tag, which were not excluded by a specific list of criteria that I will return to shortly.

This data was collated, to create a database of 100 blogs per group. All information collected

in this way was used anonymously, and no individual in the sample is identifiable.

The markers I selected were based on the most frequently cited in "about me" pages

or blog descriptions across all three of the samples. As I have mentioned, these are gender

identity, sexual orientation, and mental or physical illness/disability. I acknowledge that these

categories are vastly simplified, and by no means the sole aspects of identity that constitute

any one individual who participates in PCP/M. Certainly, there are many other identity

markers which I might have considered in this research, such as social-economic status or the

level of education of the individuals sampled. As identity is complex, however, it is necessary

to have some concrete and immediately accessible categories of identity available for

reference. In addition to being the markers most frequently cited by my participants, my

findings also suggest there may be a relationship between these *particular* markers and

PCP/M. (See Chapter 3, section 3.2.)

In order to keep my data as consistent and relevant as possible, I used the following list of exclusionary criteria in order to establish what data I would or would not include in my demographic snapshot. Blogs were excluded from my sample based on the criteria as follows:

- **Users under 18, or age not cited:** This was in order to avoid complications during the ethics application process.

- **Duplicate blogs:** Blogs which appeared in the tags more than once, under different search terms, were only used once. For example, a post shared by a specific blog, that showed up in the search for 'Pop Culture Magic' AND 'Pop Culture Witch' would only be included once in my sample.

- **Duplicate categories:** Users who identified as both PCP/M and another category as well are automatically counted as a part of the PCP/M demographic, and were not counted as a part of the demographic of another group. This is because some participants use PCP/M in conjunction with other religious practices, but to some degree share the PCP/M ideology about the use of media symbols which is of interest to my research.

- **Not a personal blog:** Blogs run by moderators or multiple users, as opposed to just one, were not included.

- **One blog per user:** In the case of users with multiple blogs, only one blog per user would be counted. In some cases, cross-referencing across multiple blogs of a single user was used to secure relevant data.

- **Anti-blogs:** Blogs which used the tags in question in order to express criticism of or against the target group would not be counted.

- **Posts unrelated to the target group:** Posts which shared tags with, but were unrelated to, the groups in question were excluded. For example, an individual user making a

post about the basketball team Orlando Magic, and had chosen to use the 'Magic' tag, would not be included as they were not using the term in the same sense as the Witch/Wiccan/Pagan community.

I was then able to calculate the percentage of participants who claimed each type of marginalised identity in each group. These percentages could then be compared, in order to illustrate my key claim about the presence of marginalised identities in PCP/M.

2.3.2 Limitations

Although I have designed this demographic sample in a way which ensures it best suits my needs, the sample is still limited in some ways. Acknowledging the limitations of my survey will make it easier to see how and where my findings can be applied.

Sample design limitations

First of all, demographic data on the proportion of marginalised identities in PCP/M and comparative groups outside of Tumblr is unavailable. As such, my findings can only relate to this particular platform.

In addition to this, the demographics presented here are not representative of young users under 18, of those or who did not state their age, who may also participate in each community. This may cause some inaccuracies in my findings, as some users not included in the data may indeed have been above the cut-off age. As such, the findings described here are specific to the users in each group over 18 years who state their age in their Tumblr blog descriptions or 'About' pages.

For the purpose of this survey, I have also had to vastly simplify the key categories I have used to organise my data. In surveying users, I found multiple gender labels which did *not* fall under either the 'traditional' binary, or male and female, umbrella.[39] I also came across many micro-labelled or composite sexualities,[40] and multiple instances of composite disabilities.[41]

In order to overcome this challenge, I created short-hand categories which generalised clusters of terms that share a common trait. This common trait across all categories was divergence from the 'standard' form of the category being examined. Gender categories were separated into (cisgendered) male, (cisgendered) female, or those who did not fall into either category. Sexuality categories were separated into heterosexual (male or female, attracted to the opposite gender), or those who did not fall into the category of heterosexual. Disability/illness categories were separated into those who cited some form of disability/illness either mentally or physically, and those who did not. I also included a percentage of those surveyed who did *not* provide information on how they identified in relation to the key categories examined. Simplifying categories of marginalised identity in this way meant it was possible for me to see the makeup of each group, in relation to key categories in very general terms, however it also means my research is limited in that it does not provide a detailed breakdown into the types of labels marginalised individuals in PCP/M (and other groups) might use to refer to themselves.

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[39] For example, individuals who identified as 'gendervoid', 'bigender' or 'non-binary'.
[40] For example, individuals who identified as 'grey-asexual lesbian', or 'saphic'
[41] For example, individuals who identified as having depression and chronic fatigue.

Platform limitations

Some limitations were posed by the platform of Tumblr itself.

First and foremost, the 'popular' post function on Tumblr, which decides which posts appear first in the tag search, meant that old posts with high levels of interaction were appearing in my tag search despite being made a year or more ago. Therefore, the demographic profile which I have generated using the tag search is not necessarily current, but rather represents the demographic of users between 2013-2017.

Second, the ability of any user to post in and interact with the community tags, regardless of the degree of commitment that user has to the group they are a part of, also has had an impact on the applicability of my sample. It has meant that the degree of commitment included in my demographic profiles was varied. Some blogs included were dedicated entirely to the user's religious identity and relevant group membership, while other blogs consisted of varied content and 'religious' content was only a part of this. Hence, this sample cannot provide a measure of commitment of individuals in the PCP/M community.

Finally, as previously mentioned, using English tags has meant that my demographic snapshots constitute only the English-speaking communities on this site. Tumblr does not publish data on what proportion of the site is English-speaking, and so I am unable to specify the exact percentage of PCP/M Tumblr users my research is applicable to.

2.3.3 Concluding remarks

The method described here has provided a way to quantify the percentage of marginalised individuals amongst the PCP/M community, and compare it to the Christian and Wiccan/Witch/pagan communities on the same site. This helps to support the underlying claim of my research question.

With the underlying assumption of the research question supported by quantitative evidence, I was able to go on to use more qualitative methods in order to consider why the proportion of marginalised individuals in PCP/M might be so high.

2.4 Phase Two: Text based research

In this section, I will describe my method during my second phase of research, where I undertook text-based research in order to develop a synoptic understanding of PCP/M, collect examples of PCP/M behaviour, and to develop a set of 'composite accounts' which also served to exemplify PCP/M participants and systems holistically.

I will begin in 2.4.1 by describing my methods. In 2.4.2 I will outline the limitations of these methods. I will then provide a short summary in 2.4.3.

A synoptic understanding of PCP/M was necessary for me for two reasons. First, it provided a context for the information I would collect later, in my third phase of research, and second, it ensured that I would have the knowledge necessary to conduct useful directed interviews during this same phase. Examples of PCP/M behaviours and composite accounts of participants, meanwhile, ensured that I could provide a clear illustration of PCP/M users

and systems, and show that PCP/M participants do see media symbols as suitable for religious use.

2.4.1 Method

I utilised publically available primary sources for this research. This is because the lack of academic research on the topic meant that I needed to turn to primary sources, in order to collect this information.

I developed my synoptic understanding of PCP/M using information which had been published in physical form, such as essays and books by PCP/M users for PCP/M users, tracking down community made podcasts dealing with the topic, and reading information shared online via sites like Facebook and Tumblr. I also found myself reading work by non-PCP/M community members, such as blog posts and pages on general witchcraft and pagan sites. Collecting data in this way order to develop a general knowledge of PCP/M was a straight-forward process, as was drawing upon these reference sources for specific examples of PCP/M behaviors. It became more complicated, however, when it came to developing my accounts of individual PCP/M users and systems.

This is because using information which was explicitly public, and intended as a resource of information on PCP/M, did not raise ethical concerns over privacy of the author. Due to the nature of using the internet as a tool for accessing personal accounts of PCP/M, however, I did encounter the problem of how I should maintain the privacy of individuals who had shared information about PCP/M online, but had not intended this information to be used for academic analysis. This was important as I did not want to behave unethically towards members of the PCP/M community while conducting my research.

In order to overcome this problem, I decided to follow a set of specific guidelines for 'Ethical fabrication', set out by Annette Markham in the article "Fabrication as ethical practice", in order to develop my examples of 'composite accounts' of PCP/M.[42]

Ethical Fabrication in creating composite accounts

Using posts on Tumblr or other sites in order to illustrate what PCP/M users and systems are like raises a question unique to online environments and social network sites. This is the question of whether information that is published on online personal blogs should be considered public, or private. [43] It was particularly relevant in cases where individuals disclosed personal information alongside more general information about PCP/M.

Markham explains that users of online platforms may maintain expectations of privacy despite the public nature of the internet.[44] Research can still be ethical when information taken from the internet is used in a way which does not explicitly identify the individual, for example in a survey designed to show overall trends such as my demographic analysis above, but it may cause a sense of 'violation' for an individual if their identifiable personal data is used for analysis.[45] In other words, it is likely that an individual publishing content about their personal experiences with PCP/M on an online blog would be uneasy to have that content examined academically, and the short time frame I had to conduct my research meant that I was unable to apply for ethical approval to ask them.

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[42] Markham, Annette. "Fabrication as ethical practice," In *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3 (2012): 334-353.
[43] Ibid., 335.
[44] Ibid., 336-7.
[45] Ibid., 337.

In the past, researchers have not had any issues with considering information
shared publicly as 'freely available', provided the source is anonymised. In online spaces,
however, where quotations and data are archived and searchable,[46] and specialist research is
no longer only accessible to people in small academic circles, this is no longer ethical
because the ease of tracing data from online sources could easily compromise the privacy and
safety of the person being cited.[47] Markahm's 'ethical fabrication' ensured that my use of
these sources in my description of PCP/M was ethical, and personal data on PCP/M users
would not be identifiable to outsiders.

I used ethical fabrication while creating 'composite accounts' of individuals and
experiences with PCP/M. Composite accounts are carefully selected and compiled elements
of representative data, where no aspect of the data collected is traceable.[48] These accounts
exemplify the ideas conveyed by PCP/M participants on Tumblr, without singling out any
one user. My composite accounts, like the interviews I will discuss later, were used to support
my argument as to why there were so many individuals with marginalised identities in
PCP/M.

I did not use ethical fabrication in cases where the user is only describing non-
personal dimensions of PCP/M, such as a definition intended to educate other users. This is
because these kinds of definitions are published with the assumption that a wide audience
will see and apply them, and use them as reference sources.

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[46] For example, via Google
[47] Markham, "Fabrication as Ethical Practice," 336.
[48] Ibid., 342.

2.4.2 Limitations

On account of the negative sense in which 'fabrication' is used in academia, an ethical fabrication method would certainly appear to be limited in its application. Preempting this concern, Markham notes that in describing the principles of this technique, that she uses the term 'fabrication' intentionally, to 'destabilize the mistaken and often unspoken assumption that invention necessarily represents a lack of integrity and likewise, that 'good' research includes no trace of fabrication.'[49] Markham argues that only when fabrication is used deliberately for negative purposes should it be used pejoratively, as fabrication in itself is not 'value laden'.[50]

She goes on to critique the attitudes and assumptions which underlie the contemporary social scientific orthodox, stating that they make it difficult for qualitative research to innovate in evolving environments.[51] This is particularly relevant to the emergence of online spaces, which differ from 'real world' spaces in that they constitute a searchable archive of content shared by individuals, and that therefore compromises the privacy of the individual should they be cited in an academic work. Defining fabrication as misconduct assumes that in fabricating a narrative as a vehicle for facts, the researcher is transmitting an inaccurate report of reality, when in fact it is possible to describe a reality using composite accounts which are thematically and conceptually accurate.[52] I agree with Markham on these points. I hold that concealing the identity of individuals by composing a

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[49] Ibid., 336.
[50] Ibid., 338.
[51] Ibid., 339.
[52] Ibid., 340-341.

composite narrative of real-life personal details individuals share online does not undermine the reality of the ideas being examined.

Although ethical fabrication does not limit the applicability of my work by undermining its accuracy, it does somewhat limit the applicability of my findings. My choice to use ethical fabrication instead of describing particular individuals in detail means that it is only possible for me to state that these examples are only useful on "the level of the generalised".[53] Making my argument using only composite studies would mean that I would not be able to quote specific details, in order to support it.

2.4.3 Concluding remarks

In developing a synoptic understanding of PCP/M, and a set of composite accounts which serve to exemplify PCP/M users and systems, I have used text-based research and analysis of primary sources. In order to overcome the ethical issues with using personal data which was shared online, I used a process of ethical fabrication to develop 'composite accounts' as examples of PCP/M.

The limitations of using an ethical fabrication method, however, means that this data can only constitute a general idea of PCP/M. This means I must build my pool of data in a way which enables me to provide details to support my argument. I did this by using one-on-one interviews with a few key informants, in Phase Three.

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[53] Weiss, Robert Stuart. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. (New York: Free Press, 1994) 152.

2.5 Phase Three: 'Structured key informant' Interviews

In this final section, I will provide a description of how I have conducted my interviews with a number of PCP/M participants.

I will go over my method in 2.5.1.. I will then consider some of the limitations of this process in 2.5.2, before summarizing in 2.5.3.

This phase of my research was important because once I had gained sufficient background knowledge about PCP/M from my text-based research, I needed data with a higher degree of detail in order to collect detailed information in order to answer my research question, and develop my argument.

2.5.1 Method

In Phase Three, I conducted a number of interviews using a method based on the 'structured key informant' technique suggested in Marc Tremblay's article, "The Key Informant Technique: a Nonethnographic Application."[54] The information I gathered in this way used the knowledge I had collected in Phase Two, in order to direct my interviews toward answering my research question.

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[54] Tremblay, Marc-Adélard. "The Key Informant Technique: a Nonethnographic Application," In *American Anthropologist* 59, no. 4, (August 1957): 688-701.

Interview Technique

The structured key informant technique is an interview technique which is half way between ethnographic (unstructured) interviewing, and interviews which follow a survey style of question and answer.[55] It is useful for gaining a thick description on a focused topic area. It differs from sample surveying as it does not use a set schedule (or survey) for interviews, and participants are not selected according to random sampling. It differs from ethnographic (or 'unstructured') interviewing in that it is still very structured, and focused on answering particular questions about a topic area.[56]

My interviews used an approach similar to the structured ethnographic approach because I did not use a strict survey-style schedule for my interviews, although I did use a loose question guide to guide my interview questions (Appendix I).[57] This guide was developed using the knowledge I had already gathered about PCP/M, and sought to fill in gaps I had in that knowledge.

During interviews, I was free to follow up any 'clues' about PCP/M that interviewees provided, and if necessary I was able to request clarification on points raised.[58] Participants were given information about the study and invited to ask any question about my work at any time. Participants were not required to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering.

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[55] Ibid., 689.
[56] Ibid., 690.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

I conducted my interviews via three different mediums, and participants were able to select their preferred medium through which to be interviewed. These mediums were a voice interview using skype video calling, instant messaging, or email. I provided these options for two reasons. The first reason was for the accessibility and security of informants - for some, conducting video interviews would have compromised the privacy or the comfort required by some individuals to discuss these topics. The second reason behind this choice was because geographical distance required it. As many of my informants were not located near me geographically, I was unable to conduct interviews face to face and coordinating differences between time zones was not always straight forward due to availability. Instant messaging or email interviews therefore added a degree of flexibility to the process, as both the respondent and I were able to participate on an availability basis.

Participant Selection

Like Tremblay, I did not use random sampling to select my interview participants. Unlike Tremblay I did not strategically select participants myself. Instead, I requested participants self-select, or volunteer to participate in this research.[59] I found my participants by using Tumblr, publishing a post requesting participants in an interview about PCP/M. I was careful to state the sorts of respondents I was looking for. My selection criteria were as follows:

- Had to be a PCP/M user
- Had to be using Tumblr
- Had to be over the age of 18

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[59] Ibid., 689.

Participants were also required to sign a consent form to participate, and so the other unspecified pre-requisites for participation were a willingness to participate and the physical, mental or emotional ability to communicate with me about PCP/M.

As a result of this method of participant selection, I was able to interview individuals from all places on the spectrum of experience in this community. My informants ranged from individuals who drew on assorted sources for their practice, of varied religious and national background, and of expertise in particular areas of the PCP/M community. Amongst my respondents, I was able to speak to community organizers and facilitators, published authors in the field of PC Magic, and PC Pagans, Witches or Magicians who had personal stories of experience, both of themselves and of the community as a whole. Further details on the group I was able to interview will be provided alongside my findings in Chapter 3.

2.5.2 Limitations

Although I selected my interview method in order to gather details which would support my argument about my research question, the question still remains as to the value of my interviews as an accurate representation of the wider PCP/M community on Tumblr.

First of all, there is the problem of my small sample size. Although I received between 15-20 expressions of interest from individuals wanting to participate, not all who inquired did eventually participate in an interview. In total, I interviewed eight people, which is short of what I would have liked to generate a 'rich' description of PCP/M and the people who participate in it, although the exact number required in order to generate a 'rich'

description is debated. A 'rich' description is one in which the data I have collected is saturated, and no new data has arisen from further interviews.

Cresswell, in *Qualitative inquiry and research design,* suggests 20-30 interviews would be necessary to achieve saturation.[60] In "Are we there yet?", however, Fusch and Ness indicate that often choosing a sample size is not done in the hopes that the sample will reach saturation, but instead chosen for 'some other reason'.[61] This reason may vary from scholar to scholar. This made me question whether I ought to aim for the 20-30 interviews Creswell advises. It was important for me to avoid under or over interviewing – because I was hoping to achieve a 'rich' description of PCP/M on Tumblr in order to develop my argument, I needed to come as close to saturation about that particular topic as possible with the available time and resources of my research project.

Being aware of how important it was for me to reach saturation was what prompted me to undertake structured key informant interviews. Unlike key informant interviews, wherein specific individuals are interviewed on a wide range of topics repeatedly and without structure, structured key informant interviews enabled me to gain detailed descriptions of individual experiences, during just one phase of research. My guideline questions ensured that interviews were consistent in terms of areas covered. This subsequently made it much easier for me to reach a point where I had enough information to develop an argument.

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[60] Creswell, John W. Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998) 64.
[61] Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. "Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research" In *The Qualitative Report* 20, no. 9. (2015): 1409.

At eight interviews, I found that there were very few new themes arising in relation to the specific topic areas I was asking about. Comparing my interview data to the primary resources I already had was also helpful in filling in areas in which data was not as plentiful, and interestingly there were no new or different themes which arose when comparing my interviews to the primary sources. For these reasons, I am satisfied that my interviews, in conjunction with my extended research, present a saturated sample to address my research question.[62] I do doubt that my research would be sufficient to generalise about the relationship between PCP/M and marginalised identities, in the case of marginalised individuals outside of the categories I have selected.

There are, of course, some other more general problems with qualitative interviewing which may undermine the value of my findings. For example, I have no way to gauge how objectively accurate the information I collected in my interviews may be. This is because information is sometimes slanted or distorted by participants, perhaps to render the self in a positive light, on account of forgetting details, or due to lack of trust of the interviewer.[63] There are many different reasons that interviews may not always provide an accurate representation of the truth, but in *Learning from Strangers* Weiss states that for the most part, richly detailed reports are trustworthy.[64] He suggests that one cross-compare interviews as well, to confirm general trends, and that is precisely what I have done in this

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[62] With that said, time and resource limitations meant that the coding of my interviews was not as detailed and in depth as I would have liked it to be. Certainly, there is room for further, more detailed qualitative studies of my research question in future. Perhaps doing so would bring more nuance to my concluding points, in terms of what types of media marginalised individuals are more drawn to, what other factors are involved, and what sorts of marginalisation lead to individuals being more likely to participate in PCP/M.

[63] Weiss, *Learning from Strangers,* 148-9.

[64] Ibid., 150.

work. The coherence of the many accounts I collected lead me to conclude that on this count, my research data is valuable.

2.5.3 Concluding remarks

In Phase Three of my research, I conducted interviews using a structured key informant technique in order to gain detailed information I can use to answer my research question. This phase builds upon the knowledge I have already collected in the previous phases, because I used this previous knowledge in order to guide my interviews. I have taken care to use an interview technique that ensures I am able to reach saturation, and ultimately develop an accurate argument.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given an account of each of my chosen methods for collecting data on PCP/M.

In section 2.2 I provided a summary of Tumblr, and a description of the tools I used in order to conduct my research on this site. In 2.3 I outlined how I conducted my demographic sample, and in 2.4 I described my text-based research process along with a summary of the ethical fabrication framework I used to develop composite accounts of PCP/M users and systems. Finally, in 2.5, I described my interview process and the structured key informant technique I used in order to collect detailed data which would help answer my research question.

Despite the limitations of my chosen methods, the three phases of my research together constitute a thick description of PCP/M on Tumblr, and of the individuals involved. In the following chapter I will provide a detailed description of PCP/M and identities on Tumblr, based on my findings.

CHAPTER THREE: Findings

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the data collected using the methods outlined in Chapter 3.

I will begin in section 3.2 by presenting the demographic profiles generated by my anonymous convenience sample of Christians, Pagans/Witches/Wiccans, and PCP/M users on Tumblr. In section 3.3, I will provide examples of PCP/M practices from the text-based research I conducted, alongside some composite accounts of individual PCP/M users. Finally, in section 3.4, I will provide a summary of the material I collected during my structured key informant interviews. This summary will place emphasis on the general insight these interviews provided me, and the insight as to why individuals are inclined to take up PCP/M. I will conclude this chapter in 3.5 by pointing out the implications of my findings.

3.2 Demographic Profile, using Anonymous Convenience sampling

In this section I will present the findings I made during Phase One of my research. This was an anonymous convenience sample of Christians, Witches/Wiccans/Pagans, and PCP/M users on Tumblr. These findings will be in the form of a demographic profile for each group, shown in 3.2.1. In 3.2.2 I will provide a brief discussion of these findings, then summarise in 3.2.3.

The data I collected in my sample is presented in table form. Each individual demographic profile is composed of three tables, with one aspect of marginalised identity

being examined per table. I have presented the profiles of Christians,

Witches/Wiccans/Pagans, and PCP/M users on Tumblr, in that order. This section is intended

to illustrate that there is indeed a significant percentage of individuals with marginalised

identities in PCP/M.

3.2.1 Data

Christian

Gender

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Other	2%
Male only	6%
Female only	13%
Not Stated	79%
	100%

Sexuality

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Heterosexual	2%
Other	7%
Not Specified	91%
	100%

Disability/Illness/Mental Illness

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS

Yes	5%
No (Not specified)	95%
	100%

According to this profile, 2% of Christians on Tumblr explicitly identified as having a non-traditional gender, or being non-heterosexual. 5% identified themselves as having some kind of physical or mental disability or illness. The majority of the sample did not explicitly state whether or not they identified with the markers I was looking for in my research.

Pagan/Witch/Wiccan

Gender

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Other	23%
Male only	1%
Female only	23%
Not Stated	53%
	100%

Sexuality

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Heterosexual	0%
Other	22%
Not Specified	78%
	100%

Disability/Illness/Mental Illness

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Yes	12%
No (Not specified)	88%
	100%

According to this profile, 23% of PWW on Tumblr explicitly identified as having a

non-traditional gender, and 22% explicitly identified as being non-heterosexual. 12%

identified themselves as having some kind of physical or mental disability or illness. Again,

the majority of the sample did not explicitly state whether or not they identified with the

markers I was looking for in my research.

Pop Culture Pagan/Magic

Gender

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Other	53%
Male only	3%
Female only	29%
Not Stated	15%
	100%

Sexuality

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Heterosexual	0%
Other	47%
Not Specified	53%
	100%

Disability/Illness/Mental Illness

	PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS
Yes	21%
No (Not specified)	79%
	100%

According to this profile, 53% of PCP/M on Tumblr explicitly identified as having a

non-traditional gender, and 47% explicitly identified as being non-heterosexual. 21%

identified themselves as having some kind of physical or mental disability or illness. Unlike in the other profiles, the majority of the PCP/M sample did explicitly state some gender orientation, although once more the majority of the sample did not disclose their sexuality or whether or not they have a disability, illness or mental illness.

3.2.2 Discussion

The demographic profiles in section 3.2.1 show that the PCP/M community on Tumblr has a significantly higher percentage of individuals with marginalised gender identities, marginalised sexualities, and who are disabled or unwell, compared to the other two groups I collected data on.

Looking at these findings in comparison to UCLA data on gender identities, it might also be suggested that in fact, the PCP/M community even has a higher proportion of transgender or gender non-conforming individuals than the national US statistic in 2011. 53 percent, as opposed to the 0.3 percent of the population found to be transgender by the UCLA research.[65] The PCP/M community also has a higher proportion of non-heterosexual individuals than the general population, at 47 percent against 3.5 percent, although the UCLA study cited excludes persons identifying as pansexual, asexual, or persons with composite/micro-labelled sexualities (e.g. Polyamorous Sapphic Demi-sexual).[66] PCP/M also has a higher incident of disability or Illness amongst its members, 21 percent opposed to the 15 percent cited in the World Health Organisation report 2011.[67]

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[65] Gates, Gary J. "How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?" *The Williams Institute:* April 2011. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf Accessed May 2, 2017. Notably, this research only focused on individuals who identified as 'Transgender', but whether or not that category extended to include non-binary, bi-gender, or other gender identities is not specified.
[66] Ibid.
[67] World Health Organisation, "*World Report on Disability",* 2011. http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/ Accessed May 2, 2017.

It is interesting that all three groups surveyed seem to have a higher rate of non-traditional, non-heteronormative, and disabled or unwell identities compared to the data presented in the UCLA and World Health Organisation Studies. This point may be worth considering in terms of the overall demographic of Tumblr users, and the percentage of these users who fall into these categories compared to the wider population. As I do not have access to the demographic data of Tumblr users as a whole, I am unable to address this matter here. Certainly, it would be an interesting opportunity for further research.

Finally, it is significant that 'not stating' one's gender or sexuality, or whether or not one has a disability or illness, does not necessarily indicate that users do not have these identity markers. It is possible that these markers are simply not as significant in their Tumblr identity, or the religious identity they express using this platform. Alternatively, the individual may have chosen to keep this information private due to the public nature of the blogs on this site. For that reason, I cannot argue that these demographics reflect a precise reality about the number of marginalised people in each group. Instead, I support the claim that PCP/M has a higher rate of claimed marginalised identities than comparative groups on the same site.

This point of 'claimed' identity raises the question of why the number of individuals who choose to disclose these details are much higher in both the PCP/M and witch/wiccan pagan groups than in the Christian group. Speculatively, I could correlate this to a greater acceptance of, and even the active encouragement of, individual identity diversity in PCP/M. This diversity includes, but is not limited to, the identity markers I have examined here. This would therefore make it more appealing and appropriate for individuals to specify which

unique identity category they belong to. Again, I think it would be an interesting area for further research, but it is not a question I will be addressing here.

3.2.3 Conclusion

The data shown above indicates that about half of PCP/M participants claim to fall into one or more marginalised category, and that the proportion of PCP/M users who do so is higher than wither the Christian or Pagan/Witch/Wiccan groups on the same site.

Quantitative data such as these profiles, however, do not provide a very good idea of what PCP/M actually is, nor give us insight into the reason why there are so many claimed marginalised identities in this group. Data which would help me develop this insight is what I turn to now.

3.3 Text-based research and ethical fabrication of composite accounts

In this section, I will present the findings I made during Phase Two of my research. This was text-based research, in order to generate background knowledge of the topic, and to generate composite accounts which can act as examples of PCP/M users and their behaviour. These composite accounts were generated using ethical fabrication.

A significant amount of my synoptic knowledge, generated by conducting textual research, has already been presented in Chapter 1, wherein I defined PCP/M and provided a short history of the movement. For this reason, I will not repeat myself by defining it again here. Instead, in 3.3.1, I will provide some specific examples of PCP/M practices shared on

Tumblr as public resources, and in 3.3.2 I will provide composite accounts of four PCP/M

users and their systems. I will briefly summarise my findings in 3.3.3.

This section is intended to aid the reader in visualising PCP/M practices, behaviours

and users, and to highlight how despite being varied in form all PCP/M participants share the

idea that media symbols are appropriate for religious use.

3.3.1. Examples of PCP/M

Here I will provide and annotate some images taken from Tumblr, which provide

some examples PCP/M behaviour. These behaviours aid in visualising what PCP/M

behaviour is, and highlights that these symbols are being used religiously because they are

considered suitable for that purpose.

These individual examples are also representative of the kinds of religious practice

which might occur in the systems described in section 3.2.2, although by no means are the

five examples provided here the only kinds of practices which exist in the PCP/M movement.

Further research developing a typology of religious forms which appear in PCP/M (i.e.

divination, devotional worship, wisdom literature, and others,) would certainly be an

interesting field of further study, however this research is ultimately unrelated to my research

question.

These representative examples also do not constitute the only media symbols that

appear in PCP/M. Unlike a typology of behaviours in PCP/M, however, a typology of

symbols would be difficult, or even impossible to develop. Despite attempts to explain why

certain media resources feature in more structured religious contexts in terms of semiotics,[68] PCP/M defies the boundaries of media genre by emphasizing the role of personal interpretation of symbols, meaning that that any media source becomes viable in PCP/M and subsequently, focusing on the types of materials used in PCP/M would be pointless. Overall, it is the idea which is of greatest significance to my work is the idea that media symbols, whatever symbols they may be, can be used religiously.

Please note that I have *not* used ethical fabrication for these examples, as they have been shared on Tumblr as resources for others to access and use. References to the origins of these images are cited in footnotes.

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[68] See Davidsen, "The religious affordance of fiction".

Figure 1: "A spell to attract a lover."[69]
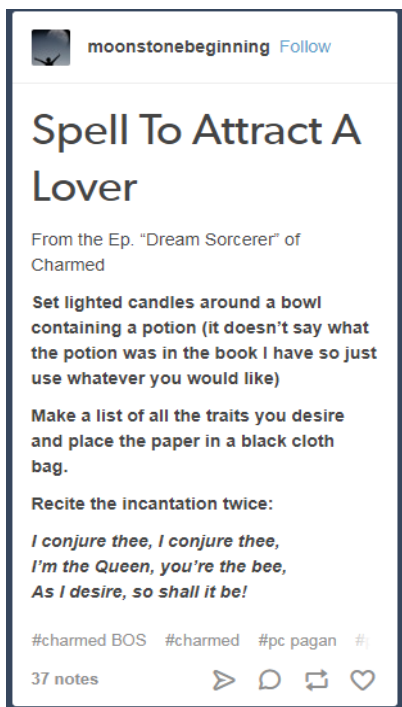
The practitioner sharing this post indicates that this spell is directly taken from the show, *Charmed* (1998-2006).[70] It provides instructions on how to perform a 'spell to attract a lover', using a ritual and spoken incantation.

This is an example of the direct appropriation of content from a media source. Although participants more often prefer to alter media symbols to better reflect their own interpretation and intention, it still shows that the author perceives the spoken and ritual components of this spell as transferable to 'real-world' magical practice. It is a media symbol which is considered appropriate for religious use.

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[69] Moonstonebegining. (2015) *A Spell to attract a lover.* Retrieved 12th February 2018, from http://moonstonebeginning.tumblr.com/post/83238143775/spell-to-attract-a-lover. Screenshot by Author.
[70] The show *Charmed* follows the story of three modern day 'witches' with supernatural abilities, who fight 'demons' and evil forces using these abilities.

Figure 2: 'A photograph of Bob Ross, overlaid with a model for a Tarot spread intended to shed light on a situation.'[71]
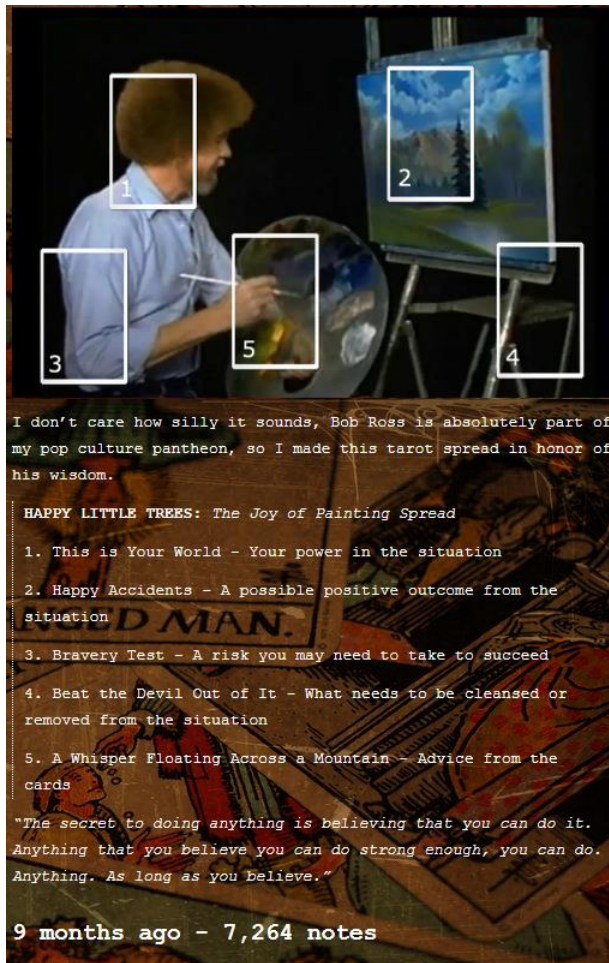
The original author of this spread indicates that the painter Bob Ross is a part of their Pop Culture pantheon, and that his wisdom was what inspired the author to create this spread.[72]

The use of this figure in this way is *not* a literal translation of the symbol (Bob Ross) from its original context. Rather, the use of the media symbol in this way illustrates that the

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[71] Blamethemoon. (2017) *A photograph of Bob Ross, overlaid with a model for a Tarot Card spread intended to shed light on a situation.* Retrieved 12th February 2018, from https://blamethemoon.tumblr.com/post/160038648279/i-dont-care-how-silly-it-sounds-bob-ross-is. Screenshot by Author.

[72] Bob Ross was an artist, known for hosting the TV art show *The Joy of Painting* during the 1980's.

author holds a strong emotional connection to the themes they perceive in relation to this symbol. By combing this figure with a contemporary Western divination technique, the author indicates that they believe that the use of this media symbol can provide personalised insight into a situation.

Figure 3: "Divination in Hyrule".[73]
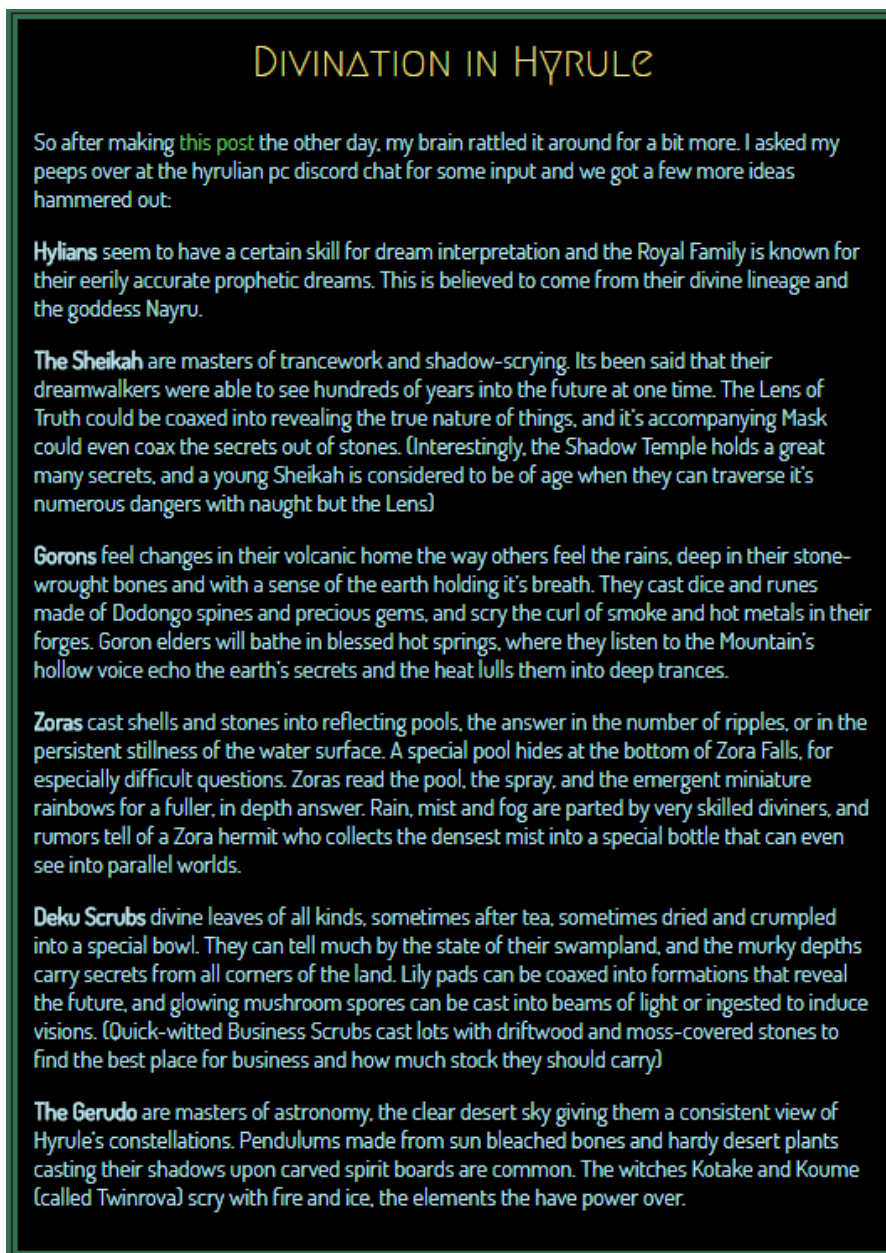
This text post describes the forms the author believes divination might take in the

Hylian society. Hylian society is the society of the Hylian race, which is a part of *The Legend*

[73] Hylianshrinemaiden. (2015) *Divination in Hyrule*. Retrieved 12th February 2018, from
http://hylianshrinemaiden.tumblr.com/post/157297798720/divination-in-hyrule. Screenshot by Author.

of Zelda videogame franchise.[74] The original author of this post is contemplating the types of

divination available for particular communities in the Hylian social and theological system.

They have done so in conjunction with their community, using the chat client Discord.[75] The

tags on this post (not included) indicate that this user has considered this information as an

addition to their 'grimoire', or as a resource for their own practice.

This example is a more complex example of the symbolic interpretation shown in

figure 3. It illustrates how the author reflects on the symbols that populate *The Legend of*

Zelda, in order to develop their own understanding of those symbols. The tags show that for

the author their understanding of these symbols may be relevant in their own religious lives.

The author therefore considers these symbols as appropriate for developing a religious

practice.

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[74] *The Legend of Zelda* is a fantasy adventure Game franchise, developed my Nintendo. Instalments from the franchise are available across multiple platforms and consoles.
[75] Discord is a voice and text chat application which can be used across mobile and PC platforms. It was originally designed for video game players, streamers and audiences, however not all people who use it do so for this reason.

Figure 4: "Small devotional acts for Naryu".[76]

This image shows a list of suggested devotional acts for Nayru, the Goddess of

Wisdom also from *The Legend of Zelda*.

Again, this post is an example of the interpretation of symbols – through reflecting on

the symbol of 'Naryu', the individual has developed an understanding of the symbol, and

subsequently has presented a list of suitable activities for devotion based on their

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[76] Auricwitch. (2017) "Small devotional acts for Naryu". Retrieved 12th February 2018, from
https://auricwitch.tumblr.com/post/166208859224/small-devotional-acts-for-nayru. Screenshot by Author.

understanding of what is suitable when making devotion to this symbol. This post indicates

that the author believes this Goddess figure is an appropriate focal point for devotional

activity, or religious use.

Figure 5: "Haruka Dysphoria Spell"[77]

Haruka Dysphoria Spell

Originally posted by themarinecathedral

To Aid Those Struggling with Their Sex and/or Gender

Haruka is very confident in who she is. In the manga, it is stated that she has the strengths of both men and women, which is why she even first appears as a Tuxedo, the male version of a Sailor Senshi. Since she can balance both energies, she should be right in asking for help with one's own.

What you will need:
- Salt (purification)
- Lavender (protection, healing, and calm)
- Chamomile (healing and calm)
- Cinnamon (success)
- Bay Leaf (strength)
- Jogging outfit

Grind everything together into a nice powder. Place into a jar or container. Whenever the dysphoria kicks in, sprinkle the powder on your jogging outfit, put it on, head out to the local track or jogging path and run. Hard. The wind will charge the spell and fill your heart.

Run away from your dysphoria.

Run towards who you truly are, who you've always been. They're waiting <3

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[77] Kakarikowitch. (2017). *Haruka Dysphoria Spell.* Retrieved 12th February 2018 from https://kakarikowitch.tumblr.com/post/161427628758/haruka-dysphoria-spell. Screenshot by Author.

This spell is inspired by the character Haruka, from Sailor Moon, and uses concepts which the author considers to be related to this character (running) in order to connect with a particular theme they believe this character represents (gender identity and gender dysphoria).[78]

Once again, this symbol is not taken directly from the source material and used 'as is'. It is constructed in the form of a particular Western occult format (a 'spell'), using symbols from a media source that the author considers as appropriate for conceptualising and expressing an idea in a religious context.

Concluding remarks

These examples show the variety of ways individuals may incorporate media symbols into their religious practice. Although the religious forms shown here range from magical spells to devotional activities, and vary in the sources from which these symbols are taken, they are all unified by the idea that media symbols *can* be used in religious practice, and as a result *are* used in religious practice by PCP/M participants.

Now, in 3.3.2, I will provide a more holistic description of PCP/M systems which might encompass these and other individual practices.

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[78] Haruka Tenou, of the Anime and Manga series *Sailor Moon*, is a gender-ambiguous character who is characterised as enjoying physical activities and track running.

3.3.2. Composite accounts of PCP/M users

In this subsection, I will provide four composite accounts of PCP/M users, their beliefs, practices and religious histories. These composite accounts provide examples of the kinds of individuals who practice PCP/M. Although these profiles are not necessarily representative of all individual PCP/M users, they are helpful in indicating the spectrum of beliefs and practices which fall under the PCP/M umbrella, and the diversity of individuals who identify with the movement as a whole. These profiles constitute examples of the context in which the practices illustrated in 3.3.1 may be located.

'Bird'

Bird is a 19-year-old Non-Binary individual from Canada, who identifies as 'Sapphic' instead of hetero- or homosexual. Bird uses gender-neutral pronouns to refer to themselves. They are a PC Pagan, and an eclectic witch. Bird works as a barista at a local cafe, and is studying at a school for animation and digital art. They are autistic, and suffer from anxiety and depression. Although they were born in Canada, their Mother is from England and their father is South Korean.

Bird uses Pokémon in their magical practice a lot, but also has an evolving and expanding pantheon of gods they worship based on a concept called 'sphere of influence'. 'The sphere of influence' is what aspects of the physical world an individual deity is capable or likely to have power over. For example, Bird would consider the character Dave from the webcomic *Homestuck,* who has control over time in the comic, to have time in his sphere of influence in this reality. Most of the deities in Bird's pantheon have a sphere of influence which means they can support Bird with their mental health. Bird believes that although

Magic and religion cannot act as an instant solution to illness and other problems, they are a good source of guidance during troubling times.

Bird sees magic as equivalent to casting 'spells'. They see spells as the performance of a particular ritual and/or recitation, in order to bring about an effect in the material world. Bird tends to cast spells to aid in expressing their gender identity, gaining strength in difficult situations, and to aid in getting good grades in school. However, Bird is not limited in the topic of spells, nor the number of spells, they may cast in any period of time. They cast spells as it feels necessary, in forms ranging from complex rituals to a simple spoken phrase intended to cause an effect. An example of a spell Bird might cast is shown in Figure 5 of 3.3.1.

Bird also prays, or makes ritual offerings to, characters to help with their anxiety. Bird does not have a particular deity they like to do this for – they change their target deity based on their needs and again, according to sphere of influence. Their worship behaviour, particularly prayer, was informed by their experience with Christianity in primary school. Bird attended a Catholic school as a young child.

Although they are close with their parents and extended family, they do not talk about their religious beliefs with family members. This is because although they were raised non-religious, their family believes that all magic and witchcraft is either 'evil' or not a real religious affiliation. Bird also does not talk about their religious belief with their friends offline either, for the same reasons, but they do have some friends in an online PCP/M community with whom they can discuss religious matters. Bird also discusses PCP/M with their partner, who is a PC Pagan and eclectic witch as well.

'Medivh'

Medivh is a 33-year-old Polyromantic Pansexual cisgender male. He works as a web developer, and lives in Germany with his two partners. Medivh works exclusively with the titan and demon lord Sargeras from the *Warcraft* series of videogames and novels. He is 'kin'[79] with the prophet Medivh from the same series, and his religious practice and behaviour is contextualised in a belief in the objective reality of *Warcraft* cosmology. He has a YouTube channel on which he discusses his religious practices and beliefs, alongside Game Guides and Walkthroughs for games from *Warcraft* and other videogame franchises.

Despite believing that the *Warcraft* cosmology is a reality, Medivh acknowledges that it exists in a separate plane of reality to the material world he is located in now. He believes that the writers at Blizzard Entertainment have channelled this knowledge of an alternate reality across universes, having been inspired to do so by the 'Naru', the messengers of the light force which permeates the *Warcraft* cosmos. As a servant of Sargaras, Medivh works with channelling demonic energy in order to manifest things for himself in this reality. He does so through formalised ritual practice, modelled off the formal ritual practices of *Goetia*. Although he was raised an atheist, Medivh experimented with Renaissance demonic magic as a teenager.

Although Medivh is a prophet of Sargaras exclusively, he does not work exclusively with demons from *Warcraft* (the Fel). He likes to work with demons that appear in many

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[79]In this context, 'kin' refers to 'fictionkin' – an expansion of the category 'otherkin' to include fictional characters. Otherkin, as I mentioned in my literature review, are individuals who do not identify as human, either in whole or in part. Fictionkin are individuals who may identify as human, but as a fictional human. Danielle Kirby writes extensively on otherkin in her book *Fantasy and Belief,* cited in my bibliography.

different videogames and books, both in and outside of the *Warcraft* franchise. Medivh

believes that all media is populated by expressions of multiple universes, separate from both

the one he is located in and the Universe of *Warcraft*. For this reason, he sees no problem in

accessing the power of these pan-universal demons and entities for his purposes.

Medivh is a part of a small online community who all share his belief in the reality of

the *Warcraft* universe. Together they discuss their beliefs and practices, in order to ensure

that they are both true to the source material, and that this material is adjusted appropriately

for the universe in which they are located. They also discuss other dimensions of their lives –

their families and work and other experiences. Not all members of this group work

exclusively with *Warcraft* as a source, but the community is open to anyone who identifies as

a Pop Culture Pagan or Magic user with an affinity for the *Warcraft* material. Although the

community is online, Medivh travels to meet with the group in person three or four times

every year. He originally met one of his partners through this community.

Medivh does not have many friends outside of his online community. His family is

aware of, and have no strong feelings about, his religious affiliation and practices.

'Luka'

Luka is a 26-year-old Transgender Heterosexual male. He lives in Australia with his

significant other and their two-year-old son. Luka works as a paramedic and does not disclose

whether or not he has any physical or mental disabilities/illnesses. He identifies himself as a

PC inspired Neopagan, who draws on Scandinavian mythology and media representations of

this mythology in his belief and practice.

Luka blurs the boundary between the worship of what he considers 'traditional'

deities, and the worship of modern, popular culture versions of these same deities. He

believes that contemporary media is an expression of ancient gods appearing in new forms,

which are more relatable to individuals in the contemporary cultural context. For example, he

sees the character Loki, who plays a key role in the Marvel Universe series of films, as a

contemporary and worldly manifestation of the 'true' Loki of Scandinavian mythology. This

character, Loki, is Luca's primary deity. He refers to this deity as his 'patron'.

Luka makes offerings to an altar dedicated to Loki when he would like his assistance

in a particular task, or in exchange for a blessing of some kind. He sometimes also makes

offerings to other gods in the Scandinavian pantheon as well, in exchange for their support or

blessing. Luka decides what deity to make an offering to on the basis of what he needs,

according to the same 'sphere of influence' concept used by Bird. Luka states that he is aware

of Loki's presence in his life during periods when he is not actively engaged in worship as

well, and that occasionally Loki will give him advice on something unprompted. He does not

specify how this advice is conveyed, but he indicates that the advice Loki provides him with

is not always helpful or welcome.

Although Luka has not consciously modelled his practice on anything, being on

Tumblr has informed his ideas about what constitutes 'worship' of a deity. Along with

celebrating the seasonal festivals of the Wiccan wheel of the year, by performing small

offerings to Loki and other gods, Luka celebrates the festivals (blóts) recognised by the

Heathen movement. He is careful to emphasise that he does not affiliate with the Heathen

movement, however. This is because he perceives himself as having different values and

beliefs than many of the Heathens he has interacted with on Tumblr. In the past, he and other

members of his Tumblr community have been criticised by members of this group.

Not all members of Luka's Tumblr community have the same pantheon, practices, or

beliefs, but he likes to use Tumblr to share ideas about how to practice, and to publish

pictures of his altars in the hopes of inspiring others. One or two members of his Tumblr

community also worship Loki, and with them Luka often discusses things such as Loki's

sphere of influence, their interpretations of this deity, and their experiences having Loki as

their patron.

Luka has discussed his religious belief with a small handful of close friends, including

his girlfriend. He expresses that he feels secure in his religious identity, and that he is

comfortable fielding questions from anyone who would like to know more about his own

system or PC Paganism in general. However, Luka does not mention his religion around his

family. This is because they are Anglican Christians, and they have not communicated since

Luka was a teenager.

Luka was a part of his family's Church when he was younger, and for a period

identified as a Christian. He found belonging to the Church difficult because he disagreed

with the Church's stance on issues such as LGBT rights. He indicates that he left the Church

the moment he moved out of his parents' house, although he had begun praying to Loki in

lieu of the Christian God during his later teenaged years. This is because he found himself

relating strongly to this character. He also experimented with secular witchcraft during this

period, but did not feel it was for him.

'Charlie'

Charlie is a 22-year-old cisgender heterosexual female. She is primarily a solo-Wiccan, but she also uses PC Magic often. Charlie has just graduated college, and gotten a job as a trainee archivist at a regional museum. Charlie can only work part time, as she has a condition which causes her chronic pain. She is single, and lives in a flat with two other young female college graduates. She was born in Costa Rica to American parents, but since she was 4 years old she has been living with her family in the USA.

Charlie likes to incorporate a lot of natural materials into her practice but believes strongly in the idea that the materials which an individual chooses to use in 'magic' are symbols. These are useful or meaningful for the individual because of their own unique understanding of these materials. She puts a lot of emphasis on 'Unverified Personal Gnosis' in her practice. For Charlie, unverified personal gnosis is an unverifiable personal insight into the meaning or reality of a particular thing. For that reason, Charlie likes to use a lot of anime in her magical practice, as anime carries a great deal of symbolic meaning for her. Like Bird, she sees magic as being the performance of a particular ritual and recitation, in order to bring about an effect in the material world.

An example of a spell which Charlie might perform would be the construction of a spell jar, to make her more kind towards her flatmates. She would collect some items which she associates with confidence and success in the workplace, including an image of the character Usagi Tsukino from the anime series *Sailor Moon.* This is because for Charlie, Usagi represents kindness and compassion for all living beings, and she believes that these are characteristics which she needs to help with her relationship with her flatmates. Similarly, Charlie has developed a method of divination using a deck of Clow cards, identical to those

featured in the anime series *Cardcaptor Sakura*. She assigns each card a meaning based on her own interpretation of the card, and uses these cards as a medium through which the Wiccan Goddess can guide her.

Charlie was raised in a non-religious family, and began dabbling in Wicca when she was a young teenager. She was drawn to the religion because of watching the witchcraft-orientated TV series of the early 2000's, particularly *Charmed,* as a young child. When she was in her mid-teens, she began to watch anime and read manga with her friends, and began to wonder if it were possible to incorporate some of the ideas explored in these series into her magical practice. Although she indicates that it felt strange to do so at first because she could not always reconcile the material taken from anime and manga with her Wiccan beliefs in the power of the natural world, she found that deep contemplation on the relationships between the two and their meaning for her as an individual helped overcome this difficulty.

Concluding remarks

These composite examples show not only the variety of forms PCP/M may take, but provide insight into why individual users believe that PCP/M is useful in religious contexts. These reasons may range from belief in the symbolic value of these PC resources (Charlie), to belief in the literal truth of these resources (Luka and Medivh), to a mixture of both (Bird). Overall, however, all users hold that PC resources have the necessary power to operate in a religious context.

3.3.3. Conclusion

In this section, I have illustrated the variety of practices and beliefs which come under the PCP/M rubric. This knowledge of the types of PCP/M which can exist has drawn

83

attention to the diversity of the group, but equally to the commonalities which exist across all participants. Looking at these examples, it is obvious that PCP/M users all use media symbols religiously because they are considered appropriate and fitting for such religious use.

As examples, however, this data does not provide much detailed information on why individuals were drawn to PCP/M. This is because often, explanations of why individuals began to engage in PCP/M were not given in-depth in textual resources. This required I also conduct more detailed research, in the form of structured key informant interviews. The results of these interviews are what I will discuss in the next section.

3.4 Structured Key Informant Interviews

In this section, I will present a summary of the findings I made during Phase Three of my research. This was a number of interviews, conducted using the Structured Key Informant technique.

First, in 3.4.1, I will provide an overview of the sample, and the context in which the attitudes and motivations of individual PCP/M users exist. In 3.4.2 I will provide a description of what attracted these particular individuals to PCP/M, their attitudes and motivations. I will conclude this section in 3.4.3. This section is intended to present more detailed insight into the attitudes and motivations of individuals who engage in PCP/M.

In my research, I was able to interview eight PCP/M participants, all from different backgrounds and with different values, beliefs and practices. The general overview of the sample is as follows. Quotes taken from these interviews will be used in Chapters 4 and 5 to

support my argument. I have not included data taken from Phase One or Two, ethically

fabricated or otherwise, in this section.

3.4.1 Overview of sample

This overview outlines the cultural context, religious histories, social backgrounds

and community roles of the PCP/M participants I interviewed. It goes on to describe the ideas

these individuals had about the role of the internet in their practice, and the position of their

community in the wider cultural context. I have also provided a brief summary of the PC

sources used by participants. The ages of my participants varied, but all were younger than 45

years of age

Cultural context

The majority of my sample was from a Western cultural context, predominantly North

America with one participant from Australia and one from Malaysia.

Six of eight credited Christianity as an important influencing factor in their early

religious lives in either a neutral or negative way. That is not to say that the majority of my

sample were formerly Christian, although five were. Rather, they expressed that they were

aware that they as individuals were living in a Western environment which had

a Christian history, and therefore that Christianity was more of an ambient factor in their

early religious development. One participant stated that growing up in a Western culture led

them to learn about Christianity through their environment even though they themselves were

not Christian. Another expressed a sense of defining themselves *against* Christianity, and the

normative cultural institutions of Western society such as the sciences:

(A)

I'm in opposition to many of my friends in the sciences – like I said they can't wrap their heads around that [the fact that this individual can both practice magic and value scientific knowledge] contradiction … it seems that I have inadvertently set myself up in opposition to just about everyone.

One participant in my research identified an ambient current of Taoist and Chinese folk religion underpinning their atheist upbringing.

Religious histories

The religious histories of my participants varied, although five members of my sample specifically stated they had been identified as Christian earlier in their lives. The denominations mentioned ranged from fundamentalist evangelical, to United Church (Canada), and Episcopalian.

The remainder of my participants, excluding one member who cited German Jewish ancestry but grew up Unitarian Universalist, grew up as atheists.

All of my sample expressed that they had actively participated in a religious community before pursuing a specific interest in Pop Culture Paganism or Magic. For those who were not active Christians, this took the form of Wiccan groups and online Magic and Witchcraft communities.

Two of the three participants who said they had practiced Wicca before PCP/M were also formerly Christians. Two other participants cited belonging to general Pagan communities, one with a specific interest in cultural reconstruction communities (see footnote

22) and the Kemetic gods of Ancient Egypt. One participant joined the Tumblr witchcraft community, and one participant, after leaving the Church they had previously belonged to, experienced a process of 'awakening' which lead them to identify as otherkin. This identification led them to undergo the reconstruction of a specific polytheism related to their otherkin identity, and to found the community to which they currently belong.

Social backgrounds

As with most other factors, my participants all came from different social backgrounds, although specific questions pertaining to the social position of individuals who identified as PCP/M users were not presented. This was on account of my research being predominantly concerned with the *personal* identities of PCP/M users, rather than the social identities, although by all accounts further research into this area would be a useful contribution to the body of literature concerning fiction and media-based religions in general. That said, I was able to collect a small amount of data on this topic.

One participant in my research stated that they were a social worker, and that PCP/M played an important role in their ability to perform in that role. One participant said that they were a freelance artist, cosplayer, singer/songwriter and disability rights advocate, and another described being the founder of an independent publishing company specialising in occult non-fiction. One participant was a Masters student in library studies. All were over eighteen years of age, as dictated by the self-selection criteria. These findings indicate that my participants came from a variety of social environments.

Community roles

All participants in my sample had their own unique positions within their respective PCP/M communities. Of those interviewed, two identified as PC Magicians or witches only. One identified as

predominantly PC Pagan. Two identified as both PC Pagan and PC Witch or Magician, and stated that for them these two things were related. One identified as a Pagan and PC Witch or Magician, but stated that these things were unrelated for them.

Two of my participants expressed a pronounced affiliation with specific unified groups which, for the purpose of this study, would still fall under the definition of PC Paganism.[80] One of these participants also expressed that they had experience with Magic and Magical communities outside this specific group as well. Some participants belonged to more than one of these specific unified groups. One of the members of my sample played an integral role in founding and developing a unified group around one particular media source.

One participant indicates that they had contributed significantly to the PCP/M Tumblr community through sharing Magical spells and recipes which draw on PC sources, and has gained popularity doing so despite their expressed preference for remaining less active in the community beyond their own circle of friends. One of my participants has even contributed to the wider PCP/M through professionally publishing resources on the subject.

Three stated that they had at some point participated in panels at conventions, both fan conventions and Magical, to talk about Pop Culture Paganism or Magic. Others expressed that they are more concerned with their own private and personal practice than teaching or sharing their practice with others.

My participants also mentioned the importance of an offline component PCP/M on the community level. As stated, some members of my sample have participated in panels and offline

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[80] A unified group is one which is unified by the same PCP/M system. The composite account of Medivh provided in section 3.3.2 exemplifies the belief system which might characterise a *Warcraft* based unified group. However, if a number of people all shared a community based on the worship of a specific character in a specific way, that would constitute a unified group as well.

meetups. One member of a unified group explained that their group meets annually, and

shares mutual interests outside of their religious affiliation. One member of a unified group indicated

that they were currently flatting with another member of their community.

The Internet, Tumblr and PCP/M

Although the ease of access led me to use Tumblr as my primary means of finding informants

and data, none of my participants suggested that Tumblr or the internet more generally was the only

aspect of their religious belief or Magical practice in their lives. Although some participants

preferred non-ritualised forms of Magic or worship, such as casting "set it and forget it"[81] spells using

their intent in lieu of materials and ritual, or thinking about Magical practice in theory as opposed to

physically practicing, all indicated that PCP/M was something that they engaged with when not

online.

Some participated in more physical and ritualised practices, including prayer, offerings to

deities, Magical workings or what they characterised as neo-shamanic ritual. Half of my

sample indicated that they had been doing PCP/M before they were even using the internet, or had the

vocabulary to denote what PCP/M was. For this reason, I ultimately chose to not to focus explicitly on

the role of Tumblr or other internet platforms in PCP/M. PCP/M exists outside of the online matrix as

well, and although for some Tumblr may have had an impact on their PCP/M path, my key research

question is concerned more with the relationships between individuals and their identities when it

comes to their religious beliefs or practices. These beliefs and practices may be expressed and shared

on Tumblr, but I have no intent to discuss the relationship between individuals and Tumblr in relation

to their beliefs and practices in-depth.

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[81] This was a direct quote from one of my participants.

With that said, I cannot deny that the internet and Tumblr has certainly been identified as significant, in two respects. First, all of my participants agreed that the internet made communicating with other PC Magic users possible where previously it had not been, and second it enabled access and sharing of resources which enabled individuals to discover PCP/M, and see it as a path they may not have previously considered.

One member of my sample who had been practicing PC Magic since the 1990s stated that the advent of the internet, particularly social networking sites, has seen an explosion in numbers of people interested in PCP/M specifically. Likewise, several other members of my sample indicated a belief that had they not had access to the internet, they may not have taken up PCP/M at all. One participant indicated that Tumblr itself was responsible for their introduction to Magic, but said that since then it has served as a place to find more information about other traditions and a platform to communicate with likeminded people:

(B)

I eventually one way or another found myself in the Tumblr witchcraft community…I see Tumblr as allowing me a glimpse into the practices of diverse people from all walks of life, which helps provide me with inspiration on where I want to go with my practice. I also use Tumblr to connect with like-minded people.

These examples illustrate that Tumblr is particularly impactful in that it serves the two functions described above.

Alongside Tumblr, PCP/M users may also use Discord and Facebook as platforms for communication and resource sharing. There are also the occasional blogs on PCP/M available as well. One particular Facebook community, 'Pop Culture Magick: Practical Magick for Geeks', boasted 600 members at the time of writing this thesis. One participant who was a member of a Discord chat server for a unified community, stated that at the time of their interview their server had

approximately 60 members. This indicates that Tumblr is not unique in hosting PCP/M communities, and I emphasise that my choice to focus on this site specifically was derived from the convenience of the platform for my research.

It is worth noting that the advent of the internet has had a significant impact on the growth of many different Pagan and New Religious movements, aside from PCP/M. Academic literature on such a topic is widely available. Without a doubt, the question of what it is about Tumblr and the internet which facilitates the growth of the PCP/M community on a more general, less individual-identity focused level, would be an excellent area of further research on this movement.

Position in external world

All participants agreed that PCP/M has received negative responses from the wider Pagan and Magical community. Not all participants had experienced this personally. One participant stated that although negative responses to PCP/M may be common in North America Paganism and Magic, it was not common in Australian Pagan and Magical communities. They suggested that they thought this was due to the history of 'traditional' Magical traditions in Australia verses North America, citing Australian Magical traditions as being rooted more in Chaos Magick, where North American Magic was more closely tied to ceremonial Magic and organisations such as the Order of the Golden Dawn.

According to my sample, many of the critiques put forward by those of comparatively 'traditional' Pagan or Magical orders, for example Wicca, Druidry, or Hellenistic polytheism, are based in the belief that PCP/M cannot be 'real' Magic or religion due to its proximity to media or 'fictional' sources. Incidentally, many of the criticisms allegedly levied by 'traditional' groups against

Pop Culture Paganism are reflections of the problems with Pagan studies, that Davidsen argues arise from having the Pagan studies field dominated by self-identifying Pagans.[82]

Elitism amongst Neo Pagans particularly is an issue which one participant in my research identified, before going on to suggest that they thought it might be a defence mechanism. They state that traditionalists in the wider Pagan and Magical community perceiving and rejecting PCP/M as 'silly' may be attributed to a cultural pressure for witches and Pagans to separate themselves from the 'silly' or negative characterisations that people in the scientific rationalist West are most familiar with.

The way the world at large responds to PCP/M is largely negative according to participants. One member of my sample reported that they had been told that they were participating in a 'cult'. One reported that they felt they could not discuss their religious belief with their friends and colleagues in the sciences, due to the belief that they would be ridiculed, or their Christian friends in case they were told that they were 'evil' for practicing witchcraft. One participant reported that having their family find out about their religious beliefs and practices had very serious implications for their personal freedom, although they went on to state that since then the situation had improved for them. It is common for PCP/M users to be called called 'obsessive fans', and much like other Pagan and Magical groups, the wider world usually does not consider PCP/M as a real religion due to its use of popular culture.

Most of my sample stated that the best way they knew of to handle these conflicts was to ignore criticism and continue with their practice regardless. All saw greater benefits of their religious belief and practice than disadvantages.

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[82] See Davidsen, Markus Altena. "What Is Wrong with Pagan Studies?" In *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2012): 183-99.

Figure 6: 'Apparently there this new trend known as "Pop-Culture Paganism".'[83]

valhalvagabond:

> Apparently there's a new trend known as "Pop-Culture Paganism", in which people legitimately worship fictional characters as though they're Gods. Supposedly nobody in the Pagan community is speaking out against it because we should be "accepting". Fuck that. Here's the deal, I can understand liking the morals that a character stands for but if you worship them as though they're beings that actually exist is fucking dumb as shit. That's not Paganism and all you're doing is giving real Pagans a bad name. You're all legitimately idiots and those of you who know about this and think this is completely fine and dandy can fuck off. THEY ARE ACTUALLY FICTIONAL BEINGS, THERE IS 0% CHANCE THAT THEY EXIST, YOU ARE SOME OF THE DUMBEST FUCKING PEOPLE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD. Kindly fuck off and stop calling yourselves Pagans.

Sources and Forms

In my sample, I had individuals who drew from a variety of media sources including Doctor Who, Magic: The Gathering, Alice in Wonderland, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Digimon, and more. All but one member of my sample stated that they consciously draw on pre-existent religious sources for their belief or practice. These could range from symbols and concepts such as the astrological signs, to practices such as prayer and shamanic ritual, to frameworks of conceptualizing reality such as the dichotomy of good and evil, as it appears in Western Christianity.

Mostly, more traditional pantheons and rituals are merged in with popular media sources in PCP/M. None of my participants stated that they were exclusively and innovatively following a pop

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[83]Valhalvagabond, (2013). Acessed 26th January 2018 from http://thetwistedrope.tumblr.com/post/82059420131/pop-culture-paganism. Screenshot by Author.

culture religion without any personal interpretation, or without in some way making it workable in the world. One member of my sample stated that often, their religious belief would even deviate from the source material on the basis of Unverified Personal Gnosis, and that this was an important part of 'filling in' the gaps left by the media 'canon'. The basis on which a person chooses to incorporate and use these sources is most frequently cited as: (a) being based on personal preference; or (b) being based on personal understandings of what a particular deity prefers.

One of the members of my sample stated that because they think that PCP/M has its roots in Chaos Magick, this therefore manifests in the attitude which underlines PCP/M. They go on to state that despite this, they think that Chaos Magick and PCP/M are now entirely independent systems.

Six members of my sample reported that predominantly, being a PC Pagan or Magic user meant having a meaningful personal relationship with their deities or spirits. This could be experienced in a range of ways: through prayer and worship, through contemplation, or through dialogues with their deities in everyday life.

3.4.2 Why PCP/M??

Here I will provide a summary of why individuals claimed to be drawn to PCP/M. Understanding the appeal of PCP/M is essential in developing an argument as to why marginalised individuals may be *more* attracted to PCP/M than other religious communities.

The individual reasons for taking up PCP/M were varied, but seemed unified by particular themes. The presence of these themes is consistent, not just for those in my sample, but also for those accounts of 'conversion' to PCP/M which are available online. These themes are those of religious history, community support, the relationship these individuals have to media and a sense of being 'called' to PCP/M. I have summarised my findings in relation to these themes, in tWhat order.

Religious history

A small percentage of my sample cited their previous religious experience in specifically Christian communities as having been traumatic or harmful to them, and that this drove them away from traditional religion and toward alternative movements like PCP/M.

None of my participants with previous experience identifying as Christian expressed that they had been satisfied with Christianity in the long term, although there were some who reported varying degrees of satisfaction with Neo Paganism, Wicca, and non-denominational Magical traditions before they began to experiment with PCP/M.

Four of my sample stated that they had always had an affinity for mythology, Magic or the occult, and that PCP/M was a natural evolution of this interest.

Community

Communities seem to be a very important draw factor for some PCP/M users. According to my interviews, they provide a source of advice and guidance, feedback, comparison of experience, and learning or inspiration.

For one PC Magic user, the community also provides support and guidance when confronting doubt about faith – an issue of particular salience when considering how PCP/M is often perceived by outsiders. Grappling with the 'fictional' status of the sources being used in PCP/M can be a challenge for some individuals, and two of the participants in my sample indicated a belief the criticism of outsiders could undermine belief or compromise the willingness of individuals to practice pop culture systems.

One participant in my sample stated that having interests in common with their PCP/M group, in addition to their religious belief, also provided them with a social support network because many of

their group peers had similar experiences of marginalisation in terms of their identities and experiences.

Although emphasis on community is important, PCP/M systems seem to be individualistic in terms of belief, with communities operating as collectives of individuals who may share particular deities or ideas about how to practice PC Magic or Paganism, but also have significant personal variation. Levels of variation or homogeny can be different depending on the community or group. General consensus seems to be that PCP/M is most effective when it means something to the practitioner, or is tailored to an individual and their values, needs and belief.

Those of my sample who specifically participated in PC Magic indicated that being a PC Magic user was defined by the ability to effectively use sources which are personally relevant in Magical practice, and that this was important because they felt a greater connection to these sources personally than to more traditional Magical systems. Although members of my sample indicated that their community was to some degree important, all agreed overall that individual experience of worship and Magic were more important.

Reflecting this, all participants in my sample advocated for a shared acceptance of the diversity of PC Paganism and PC Magic, indicating a sense of the overarching umbrella community proposed in my introduction. Some did state that there are opponents to this diversity in the community, although these opponents were few.

Relationship with media

This emphasis on individualism in a community context is clearly related to the fact that PCP/M accommodates the personal and subjective interpretations of media sources and their application to religious life.

One PCP/M user indicated that by incorporating their favourite or most meaningful elements of media stories into their reality enabled them to look at the world through the lens of Pop Culture. They suggested that doing so brought them comfort and respite, and made their everyday life more enjoyable.

One participant summed up their delight with popular culture Magic by saying that it was 'just nice', to be able to participate in the activity. Again, this seems to highlight the idea that PCP/M constitutes an emotionally meaningful experience.

The emphasis that other participants put on the fact that PCP/M systems are highly flexible, enough so that the user can incorporate any media source which is meaningful to them and can use them alongside other religions and magical systems, highlights the importance of freedom and personalisation in the movement.

Sense of calling

There seems to be a common idea that PCP/M was not something that the participant willingly chose for practicality reasons, but rather was 'called' to in some indirect way. This 'calling' ranges from having transformative religious experiences with media as two of my participants reported, to participants 'falling into' PCP/M as though it was a natural evolution or development in their lives.

While some participants did report making a conscious decision to take up PCP/M, this was not because they held PC as a practical solution to their religious needs. This kind of conscious conversion was couched in a language of 'naturalness' as well – Participants were more culturally and temporally 'connected' to the stories and worlds of PC than the mythologies of traditional

organisations, and so they were more appropriate religious narratives capable of eliciting strong emotional responses.[84]

Concluding Remarks

Analysis of my interviews indicate that these four draw factors often overlap or interact in various ways. My interviews therefore suggest that PCP/M has appeal because of the following reasons:

- Popular culture and popular media narratives are more familiar and accessible to these individuals, compared to 'traditional' mythologies.
- PCP/M provides a community of peers, who share not just religious beliefs but who also share experiences of marginalisation.
- The ability to develop an individual system of religion allows them the ability to subvert or resist traditional religious values which have excluded them, but still experience 'religion'.

3.4.3 Conclusion

My structured key informant interviews have provided further insight into why individuals engage with PCP/M, and this is the first step towards understanding why marginalised individuals are drawn to PCP/M overall. In this research, I will be focusing primarily on the first reason participants considered PCP/M appealing, with some consideration of the third. The second reason, however, and the role of community in PCP/M, is none the less interesting to consider. Further research on the

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[84] Taylor Ellwood uses this idea heavily in his work, as well. Interestingly, a reasonable number of my participants were familiar with Taylor Ellwood in some way, and his writing is frequently cited on Tumblr as a source for PCP/M knowledge. As PCM and PCM 2.0 are some of the only texts available, which extensively examine the mechanisms of PCP/M, one could argue that Ellwood has played a pivotal role in establishing a sort of PCP/M 'orthodoxy'. Whether or not individual participants choose to align themselves with, or define themselves against, Ellwood's ideas, they still seem to underpin the thinking deployed by PCP/M participants on Tumblr today.

community on PCP/M would be warranted in future, but due to limits on the time and space of this project I must focus more specifically on the individual participant in PCP/M here.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have summarised what I found while conducting research into PCP/M. My statistical research supported my initial intuition that the PCP/M community had a higher percentage of marginalised individuals than other groups on Tumblr. My text-based research and the ethical fabrication of composite accounts helped me to formulate a definition for PCP/M, to collect examples of PCP/M practices and users which illustrated PCP/M for the reader, and to support my definition of PCP/M by showing that participants do consider media symbols appropriate for religious use. Finally, my structured key informant interviews provided details about the attitudes and motivations of PCP/M users, along with descriptions of the experiences these attitudes emerged from.

Having collected this data, I must now show that PCP/M is indeed religious, and that the symbols which are used in it are being used religiously. For PCP/M participants, it is not so significant whether or not PCP/M meets any standard definition of religion, as most of them would consider their behaviour 'religious' regardless. For academic study, however, the question of whether PCP/M really is religious is vital and unavoidable. Without confirmation that PCP/M genuinely constitutes religious behaviour, I am unable to argue that PCP/M uses popular media as a resource for an explicitly *religious* purpose. Unable to argue this, I cannot develop my argument to suggest that marginalised individuals are significantly represented in PCP/M because it uses a database of symbols which are more accessible to them than 'traditional' religious symbols.

An analysis of the religiousness of PCP/M is therefore the topic of the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: PCP/M as functionally 'religious'

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will be arguing that PCP/M is religious because it serves a religious function in the lives of PCP/M participants.

I will begin this chapter in Section 4.2, by specifying what functions something must perform in order to be 'religious'. In 4.3 I will explain why this particular definition is suitable for looking at religiousness in a contemporary Western context, compared to other definitions of 'religion' which have been popular in the past. Finally, in section 4.4, I will use examples to show that according to this definition, PCP/M does function religiously and should therefore be considered religious.

With this illustrated, I will be able to consider why marginalised individuals would use media symbols religiously in Chapter 5.

4.2 What do I mean by 'Religious'?

In this first section, I will provide a definition of the term 'religious'.

I will develop a suitable measure of religiousness by focusing on two qualities of religiousness. The qualities I am focusing on are that something is religious if it provides a framework for meaning-making for participants through a symbolic system; and that the individual places emphasis on the 'transcendence' these symbols provide, making them suitable for 'ultimate' or existential meaning-making.

It is important for me to specify the definition I will be using, because the definition of 'religion' and 'religious' is highly contested in academia, and there is no definition which all scholars in the field subscribe to. As tools for categorising and organising data, definitions must instead be chosen based on their purpose, and so it is necessary to select a clear and useful definition for the purposes of my argument.

4.2.1 Symbolic system

The definition advanced by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* characterises 'religion' as follows:

"(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[85]

By 'symbol', Geertz means anything – including behaviours, objects, qualities, relationships and events - which "serves as a vehicle for a conception".[86] He also states "that conception is the symbols 'meaning".[87] In other words, Geertz suggests that symbols are conduits of meanings, which an audience receives. These symbols exist in relation to one another, in patterns that constitute cultural systems.[88] Religion is one of these cultural

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[85] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 90.
[86] Ibid., 91.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 93.

systems, with the unique capacity to aid in developing "conceptions of a general order of existence" that seems natural and realistic for the social groups located in the system.[89]

Geertz re-emphasises this idea when he states that "religious concepts […] provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience […] can be given meaningful form."[90]

This means that he is characterizing 'religion' as a meaning-making tool for a social collective, within a cultural context that includes a "wide range" of experiences. One of the example he uses is that:

"An Azande sees the collapse of a granary upon a friend or relative against the background of a concrete and rather special notion of witchcraft and thus avoids the philosophical dilemmas as well as the psychological stress of indeterminism."[91]

In this example, Geertz is showing how the Azande makes sense of an event in terms of witchcraft – a feature which they accept as a natural fact of reality within their cultural reality. Meaning-making is characterised as the process of explaining or interpreting existential phenomenon in terms of symbolic systems.

In sum, the ideas expressed through the symbolic system of a 'religion' must provide a lens for participants to understand reality, and how they ought to behave based on that

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[89] Ibid., 90.
[90] Ibid., 123.
[91] Ibid.

understanding. For something to be 'religious' it must also provide a model of reality for the individual, and an idea of how they should and can act within this reality.

Limits of Geertz's definition of religion

I am aware that Geertz's definition of religion as a 'system of symbols' is difficult to apply to a contemporary Western context, because the two final points he makes in his definition are not well suited to a society in which there is no single religion which is 'cloaked in an aura of factuality' for all individuals, and therefore 'uniquely realistic'.[92] This is because Western society has undergone a process of secularisation, which has challenged the authority of singular religious institutions such as the Churches.[93] Geertz's system, therefore, is too general for application to a contemporary religious environment, although it might be argued that socially holistic meaning-making systems which Geertz considers 'religious' may still exist in the West without necessarily calling themselves 'religions'.[94]

For this reason, I will therefore deploy the idea of a 'symbolic system' which serves a meaning-making function, alongside another religious feature which can provide a nuanced understanding of the less social, and more individualised religious behaviours of post-modernity. This is the feature of 'transcendence'.

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[92] Ibid., 90.
[93] I will be discussing the process of secularisation further in Section 4.3.1.
[94] For example, in the form of a political ideology which provides existential meaning to all members of a particular nation or society, while also being naturalised.

4.2.2 Transcendence

Thomas Luckmann developed the notion of 'transcendence' in order to make sense of the changing form of religion in post-modernity.[95] He argued that religion is not disappearing from the contemporary Western world, but it does appear to be because of a change in the types of transcendence which individuals emphasise as relating to 'ultimate meaning'. [96]

Transcendence is when an individual becomes aware of their own existential boundaries, and the 'other' beyond themselves.[97] Transcendences can be "Great", "Intermediate", or "Little", depending on the distance between the self, and the 'other' which the individual becomes aware of.[98] "Great" transcendence is when an individual is aware of something beyond human reality, such as an other-worldly 'God'. "Intermediate" and "Little" transcendence is when an individual is aware of something beyond an individual within human reality, or beyond the boundaries of their existence in time and space.[99] Human beings, Luckman states, exist in a continuous flow of 'transcendence', wherein we are always aware of the spatial and temporal, social, and occasionally ontological reality in which we are located.[100] An individual orientates themselves existentially through transcendence, thus transcendence provides an individual with a sense of 'ultimate meaning'.

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[95] Luckmann, Thomas. "Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?" *Sociological Analysis* 51, no. 2 (July 1990): 127-138.
[96] Luckmann, "Shrinking Transcendence," 127.
[97] Ibid., 128.
[98] Ibid., 129.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., 128.

Luckmann states that the contemporary religious environment has shifted the location for 'ultimate meaning' from the 'great' transcendences of traditional religion to 'little' and 'intermediate' transcendences of everyday life.[101] He claims that:

"The Churches have become institutions among other institutions, just as traditional religious orientations compete with orientations concerned exclusively with this-worldly transcendences on different levels: nation (nationalism), social class (social mobility or the classless society), family ("familism"), other people ("togetherness"), and the "sacralized" self ("self-fulfilment")."[102]

It is important to emphasise the point that "great" transcendence is not entirely excluded by this shift, what Luckmann calls the 'shrinking span of transcendence'. Instead, he explains that traditional religious systems which focus on the 'great' transcendences are still a part of the Western religious environment. This environment is one wherein the individual can select certain aspects from the "religious marketplace", and can assemble them "into a somewhat precarious private system of "ultimate" significance."[103] By emphasising the importance of, or "being concerned with" one or more particular types of transcendence, the individual defines the kind of transcendence which is relevant to their own 'ultimate meaning'. As a consequence of the rise of these private systems, religiousness is no longer something which encompasses a whole social or cultural reality.

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[101] Ibid., 135.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 134. This idea of post-modern religion as something which is 'precarious', and assembled from cultural resources taken from a "religious marketplace", will be discussed further in section 4.3.2. Luckmann indicates that the religious marketplace is

4.2.3 'Meaning-making' and 'Ultimate meaning'

Luckmann's approach works well with Geertz, because both approaches agree that there is a degree of 'meaning' involved in religion. Geertz talks about meaning-making in the sense that it provides a general framework for making sense of reality. Luckmann talks about 'ultimate meaning', or that which ascribes meaning to day-to-day life. Both of these structures provide a way for individuals to understand reality and order their lives. I will use the term religious meaning-making henceforth, to denote 'ultimate meaning-making' or 'meaning-making'.

The dimension which Luckmann's approach adds to Geertz's definition is the idea that particular transcendent objects can point to ultimate meaning, when the individual selects them for use in their religious meaning-making system, and that system does not need to be considered 'cloaked in an aura of factuality' nor 'uniquely realistic' by all members of a social group. By 'transcendent objects', I refer to the particular objects which cause transcendence to any degree. For example, Luckmann cites meeting "other beings who are remarkably like ourselves" as a type of intermediate transcendence, as it makes the individual aware of a reality beyond themselves - they are "not alone in the world".[104] These "other beings", or any objects which make an individual aware of something beyond themselves, are 'objects of transcendence'.

Geertz's approach to 'religion' adds to Lukmann's, meanwhile, because it provides a way to break Luckmann's 'models of ultimate meaning' into their component parts when the symbols which are used in ultimate meaning making are equated to 'transcendent objects'.

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[104] Ibid., 128.

These symbols are transcendent objects because they convey the meaning of the 'other'

beyond the individual, and they are religious because they are concerned with 'ultimate'

meaning. The symbol which is distinctly 'religious' is therefore one which provides a type of

transcendence the individual emphasises, and is therefore perceived as referring to ultimate

meaning for them. Something is 'religious', then, when it uses symbols which are considered

transcendent and capable of providing ultimate meaning, to generate a meaning making

system.[105]

4.2.4 Concluding remarks

With this all considered, a particular movement can be called 'religious' if it has

qualities of religion, which enable it to function religiously. This means it provides a

framework for religious meaning-making, through the use of symbols which convey a sense

of something beyond the individual, and that the individual considers relevant for religious

meaning-making.

Notably absent from my measure of religiousness is any notion of a unified social

community, or 'Church'. This requirement of being socially unified was the same feature of

Geertz's definition I have not used in my own. As I stated at the end of 4.2.1, this

requirement would cause many religious systems which exist in the contemporary West to be

categorised as 'non-religious', including PCP/M. Instead, these systems are a product of a

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[105] In the case of PCP/M, this is a helpful measure of religiousness, as it aids in distinguishing 'fan' behaviour from religious behaviour. A media fan who is engaged with a particular media source, and is inspired to model their behaviour on that media because they find it relatable or appealing, does not consider that the symbols contained within as indicators of existential meaning. A religious actor, however, believes that media symbols do point to existential meaning, and they engage in meaning-making with reference to these symbols for this reason.

social and cultural context which is conducive to religious systems which seem unlike the religious systems of history, such as the institutionalised and socially dominant 'Church'.

In the following section, I will consider the cultural and social environment which has made this definition necessary, as it is from this cultural and social environment that PCP/M has arisen.

4.3 Religiousness in the secular age

In this section, I am explaining why I have chosen the aforementioned measure of religiousness, in lieu of other measures, in order to identify PCP/M as a religious.

I will begin this section in 4.3.1 by looking at the changes which have occurred, and in 4.3.2 I will discuss the result of these changes in the contemporary West. This is in order to show how the religious environment has changed, necessitating a shift away from definitions of religion which consider it to be a social institution. I will briefly conclude in 4.3.3, before moving on to the next section.

4.3.1 Modernisation and religion

The transformation of religion in the West, and the need for a change in the definition of religion, began with the process of 'modernisation'.

Modernisation is a shift along a spectrum, from a 'traditional' to an 'industrialised' society.[106] The process of modernisation made religion appear to be declining, if religion was defined or characterised as being a socially unifying phenomenon. Émile Durkheim's definition, which stated that religion was "a unified system of beliefs and practices […] which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them," constitutes a good example of this kind of definition.[107] Durkheim's idea that communities are defined by a 'unifying system of belief' is particularly important, as these types of shared beliefs and practices were the primary casualty of modernisation.[108]

Modernisation scholars such as Peter Berger argue that this is because social life in 'modernised' world has grown fragmented, due to the 'rationalisation' and 'disenchantment' which has taken place during modernisation.[109] Rationalisation and disenchantment are ideologies which claim that empirical analysis of something can provide knowledge and control of that thing, making metaphysical religious belief and religion redundant.[110] This notion of 'control' through systematic analysis extended to social control as well, in the form of compartmentalising social intuitions for the purpose of organisation. For example, the division and specialisation of labour which emerged in the work force, and the transference of private control of services such as healthcare and education from family-centred Church

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[106] Berger, Peter. "Secular Branches, Religious Roots." *Society* 20, no. 1 (1982): 64.

[107] *See* Durkheim, Émile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, a Study in Religious Sociology*. London, New York: G. Allen & Unwin; Macmillan, 1915.

[108] As many of my interview participants agreed, 'community' is still very important in PCP/M, although this community is diverse and non-unified. The form which this community takes, therefore, is vastly different to Durkheim's 'Church'. PCP/M cannot therefore be considered a religion according to this definition, despite the emphasis that some participants put on the PCP/M 'community'.

[109] Partridge, Christopher. *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture. Volume one.* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006) 9.

[110] Aupers Stef, and Dick Houtman. *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital.* (Leiden: BRILL, 2010) 1.

communities to the state.[111] As a result of this decentralisation, many religious institutions were no longer able to operate as a unifying social body.[112]

This fragmentation grew, as globalisation encouraged intercultural communication and migration during modernity, and contributed to the diversity of individuals and religious ideologies in the West. [113] Much like Geertz does in his definition of religion, Steve Bruce suggests that in a homogenous religious society, where everyone believes in the same things, religious beliefs can be accepted as accurate accounts of how things are (have an 'aura of factuality'). In a world where there are many different religions, people do not see religion as wholly accurate expressions of reality, and parents and communities become less likely to enforce religious conformity.[114] 'Religion', when it is equated with being a unifying social phenomenon as in Durkheim's definition, would therefore certainly appear to be dying out as the institutions which previously dominated the social environment began to decline.[115]

Overall, modernisation has caused a series of changes in the contemporary West, and these changes have had an impact on the place religion occupies in society.

4.3.2 The transformation of religion and the 'cultic milieu'

Although modernisation has certainly challenged the social position of religion, the social reality of continued religious behaviour as I have defined it complicates the proposal that religion in all forms was declining. During the last century, a wide variety of diffuse

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[111] Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West,* 14.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Bruce, Steve. "Secularisation and the Impotence of Individualised Religion." *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1-2. (Spring/Summer 2006): 38.
[114] Ibid., 37.
[115] Aupers and Houtman, *Religions of Modernity,* 24.

alternative religions have continued to be popular in the West.[116] The United States alone is host to a tremendous variety of small and large religious and religiously orientated groups – in the introduction to *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements,* Hugh Urban lists Mormonism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Scientology, Theosophy, Neopaganism, Satanism, and more as examples of the variety of religions which make up the contemporary Western religious demographic.[117]

These new forms of religion have their origins in what Colin Campbell dubbed the 'cultic milieu'. The cultic milieu is a social environment in which there is a large collection of different religious ideas, taken from a variety of sources, which are all available for participants to appropriate as they choose.[118] Luckmann echoes this when he suggests that post-modern religion is "characterised by immediate mass cultural accessibility of the supply of representations [transcendent objects] referring to varied levels of transcendence."[119]

The cultic milieu model locates the emergence of small 'cults' within the fragmented (diverse) social environment of modernity. It suggests that these kinds of religious movements are enabled by a 'fertile' context in which there is:

1. A number of individuals, 'seekers', who all value 'tolerance and eclecticism' in religious or spiritual belief.[120]

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[116] Hadden, Jeffrey K. "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory." Social Forces 65, no. 3 (1987): 603.
[117] Urban, Hugh B. *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America.* (California: University of California press, 2015) 4.
[118] Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West,* 40.
[119] Luckmann, *The shrinking span of transcendence,* 136.
[120] Campbell, Colin. *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization: A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain.* (SCM press: London, 1972) 127.

2. A melting pot of cultural resources available to seekers, which can be drawn

upon in order to create a small movement, or 'cult'.[121]

Colin Campbell, who coined the idea of a cultic milieu, does not use the term 'cult'

pejoratively. Rather, he draws upon Ernst Troeltsch's typology of Church-sect-mysticism, in

order to characterise it.[122] He emphasises that cults fall into the 'mysticism' category, as

opposed to being a 'Church' or a 'sect', because unlike the Church or sect the religions of the

milieu are focused on the individual religious experience and are non-exclusivist.[123] While

cults may not be particularly long-lived, thanks to their 'non-exclusivist' orientation, there is

an exceptional amount of diversity in the cultic milieu, leaving it rich in options.[124] Being

small groups, religions of the cultic milieu are less socially significant overall,[125] and there is

no requirement that they need to be concerned with specifically 'supernatural' features such

as spirits. The Cultic Milieu is more culturally focused than Troeltsch's typology, however. It

places emphasis on understanding the context which 'cults' emerge from, in addition to

understanding cults individually.[126]

On an even more individual level, the material in the cultic milieu can lend itself to

the development of a unique individual religious system. I have touched on this idea already,

as it was suggested by Luckmann that in the post-modern age it is possible for an individual

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[121] Ibid., 130.
[122] Ibid., 119-120.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 121.
[125] Ibid., 127.
[126] Kirby, *Fantasy and Belief,* 14.

to use the symbols available in the fragmented religious milieu in order to create a "somewhat precarious private system of "ultimate" significance."[127]

The existence of a cultic milieu, and the innumerable movements which arise from it, challenge the idea that religiousness is declining in society, despite the fact that religions which fit more traditional definitions of 'religion' do appear to be. Although PCP/M is notably different from movements of the cultic milieu, due to its use of media sources in addition to or in lieu of those which populate the milieu, PCP/M has still arisen from this same social context of fragmentation. I will be discussing the media milieu, which PCP/M draws upon in addition to or in lieu of the cultic milieu, in 5.2.1.

4.3.3. Concluding remarks

In sum, the cultic milieu model shows that there has certainly been a change in the types of religion which populate the West. This change is best characterised as a shift from institutional or social religion, to a religion of individual choice. This necessitates a shift, from definitions of religion which see it tied to social institutions, to definitions which focus more on the function of these religions. The definition provided in 4.2, which emphasises the role of the individual in symbolically constructing their own meaning and orientation in the world, is an example of the kind of definition suitable to for post-modern religions and by extension, to PCP/M.

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[127] Campbell, *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,* 134.

4.4. Is PCP/M religious?

In this section, I will be comparing data collected via interviews and text-based research, in order to illustrate that PCP/M is 'religious'.

In the introduction, I defined PCP/M as:

"A religious movement in which participants incorporate media symbols into religious practice." I also stated that "This behaviour implies that the cultural symbols which populate the media are perceived as suitable for religious use by participants." (See Chapter 1, Section 1.3.1.)

In order to show that PCP/M is religious, it will illustrate that it uses media symbols to construct existential meaning, and the symbols are used in this way because they are 'transcendent objects' which make the individual aware of something beyond themselves, and that the individual considers relevant to ultimate meaning. I will demonstrate this claim in two parts. First, in 4.4.1, I will show PCP/M does operate as a meaning-making system, which emphasises the appropriateness of media symbols as 'transcendent objects' that make an individual aware of reality beyond themselves, and are relevant to ultimate' meaning. In 4.4.2 I will provide a short note on the varied use of transcendence across both PC paganism and PC Magic.

4.4.1 PCP/M as a worldview and system of ultimate meaning making

PCP/M is a means through which individuals make existential meaning. This existential meaning is derived from the emphasis which placed on the transcendence afforded by the symbols in the meaning making system.

This is evident in some of the responses I received during the interview process:

(A)

...being in Her [the participant's deity] *service gives me a greater understanding of other peoples' pain, helps me be more comfortable with it, and allows me to help them understand and work through it.*

In this instance, the participant speaks of how their experiences contemplating the ideas and mythologies surrounding their deity, whose sphere of influence includes experiences of pain and suffering, helps them to be more empathetic towards others. The participant is making existential meaning because they are gaining sense of how they ought to act in the world and in relation to others, based on the symbolic structure of their religious system. The deity as a symbol also serves a 'transcendent' function, making the participant aware of others who are in the world beyond themselves.

(B)

For me, because pop culture has informed most of my worldview and beliefs, pc magic provides me with another connection to my favourite pop culture ... It also helped me to look at the world in a different way through the lens of pop culture...

This participant recognises a direct connection between the media they engage with, and the way in which they perceive the world. For them, using PC Magic is a way of making meaning because it allows them to look at the world through the lens of pop culture, and develop the way they see reality based on that. This example appears to suggest that this meaning is 'ultimate' meaning, as they indicate that the popular culture 'informs' their worldview and beliefs (i.e. ideas which they take on), but that PC Magic also provides a way of 'looking at the world differently'.

(C)

[before I was able to find PCP]… *I felt … totally lost spiritually. I felt like I didn't know how the world worked, because I was aware of the spiritual side of life, but had no method of understanding it.*

For this participant, their understanding of the world arose from PCP/M, and they suggest that they had in fact been actively seeking a way to make sense of the world around them when they first decided to take PCP/M on. For them, PCP/M provide a framework through which they could make sense of the 'spiritual' reality, which is beyond the material world and therefore related to 'great' transcendence.

(D)

PCM is unique in that it encourages people to explore their identity, in relation to the Popular Culture that they like. Popular Culture in general does that, but PCM adds a spiritual aspect to it which you may not necessarily find in the general fan groups ...

You can also engage with PC which you consider to be real. For example, if you are working with batman because you genuinely believe in batman, how does that shape your identity? Do you become a more moral and just person, or not? This is because in PCM, you are also working with very specific interpretations of how characters behave, and what they will do [in your life] as a result of working with PC.

Finally, this participant provides an interesting insight into the way that PC Magic relates to a very specific aspect of meaning-making, particularly ultimate meaning-making which involves emphasis on the 'transcendent'. This aspect is that of identity. Identity is tied to ultimate meaning-making because an individual's identity is the point beyond which all 'other' things exist. Therefore, it constitutes the 'self' which is located within the reality that meaning-making systems make sense of. This participant suggests that PCP/M encourages individuals to think about themselves, and their behaviour in relation to the rest of reality, using popular culture as a source of examples and ideas. The participant illustrates that they consider popular cultural symbols appropriate for this use, by stating that PC Magic was a 'spiritual' reading of symbols. This notion of the 'spiritual' echoes ideas of 'great' transcendence, or that which is beyond all mundane experience. Hence, the media symbols being used in this way are 'transcendent objects'.

From these examples, we can see that PCP/M definitely operates as a meaning-making framework for individual participants. I will provide further information on how PCP/M serves this purpose in Chapter 5.

4.4.2 Transcendence, PC Paganism and PC Magic

PCP/M users make meaning through their religious system, through using symbols they consider transcendent, and capable of providing 'ultimate meaning'.

I have found in my research that that although PCP/M is open to all forms of transcendence as locations for ultimate meaning, it does overall tend more towards an idea of 'great' transcendence. Nonetheless, PCP/M is often divided into the categories of 'Pagans' or 'Magic Users', and the emphasis on what transcendence is capable of imparting ultimate meaning can vary between these categories.

The degree of 'transcendence' in PCP/M can generally be broken into in two parts: the 'intermediate' transcendences of PC Magic; and the 'great' transcendence of PC Paganism. It is worth noting that not all cases of little or great transcendence are exclusive – often PCP/M users may refer to all of these types of transcendence as a source for ultimate meaning.

For example, in PC Magic:

(E)

My understanding of PCM is that it is using pop culture media as an inspiration for how you perform magic … in terms of correspondence and imagery, for example the Shadowhunters TV series … could inspire someone to use the runes as sigils and make their own stele that can be used to activate those sigils.

In this example, the transcendent symbol of the 'rune' taken from the media source does not point to a cosmic 'other' beyond the mundane world, but rather to a more mundane truth about the nature of the earthly reality beyond themselves. It makes the participant perceive the reality they are located in as subject to manipulation using magical processes. Incorporating media symbols as a way to conceptualise this perceived reality shows that the participant has emphasised this transcendence as relevant to 'ultimate' or existential meaning over other symbols, either other religious symbols which may indicate ultimate meaning to other people, or non-religious symbols which may only impart everyday meaning.

PC Paganism, however, tends to incorporate more blatant references to 'Great' transcendences:

(F)

The thing I want to emphasise the most because I think it's a point of difference between us and everyone else is that we really think the spirits are real. They came to us and we treat them as real."

(G)

I use [Magic: The Gathering]*'s Multiverse system to explain the cosmos - I fully believe if I could astral project, I could astral project to one of the Planes of MTG and actually experience the Plane. It also helps explain how I can work with pop culture entities - they have their own realm that we access via.... [I'm] Not too sure, honestly, but just as they can be spirits here, we can be spirits there.*

(H)

As a pop culture pagan/Whovian witch, The Doctor is an actual entity separate from the show. He is a self-aware being who happens the have a version of himself that chose to stay and work with me.

All of these examples refer to an 'alternate' or non-mundane reality beyond human experience, and thus to 'great' transcendence.

Although PCP/M features emphasis on transcendence across the spectrum, and there is certainly a degree of variation on the part of the individual, there may still be some value in distinguishing between the two on the basis of which transcendence they emphasise.

4.5. Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that although PCP/M does not appear to be religious by traditional definitions, it is religious by the definition I have provided and therefore it is religious in the same way that other contemporary religious movements are religious.

After selecting my definition for religion, and then explaining why I had chosen that definition, I was able to illustrate why PCP/M is religious and therefore, support my claim that marginalised individuals are turning to PCP/M for religious purposes. With this addressed, I can now explain how, and why, PCP/M serves this function for marginalised participants through the use of media symbols. This is the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: Mythologies and Meaning and Strategies of Action.

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will be addressing how, and why, PCP/M participants use media symbols religiously. I will then suggest why marginalised individuals are drawn to PCP/M based on this.

I will begin my argument in 5.2, by showing how media symbols are used in constructing 'subjective mythologies' that guide meaning-making. In 5.3 I will consider whether or not they are used in this way because the individual consciously chooses to use (or consume) them in this way. In 5.4, I will argue that in fact, they are used in this way because these media symbols are perceived as being accessible for participants to use religiously, and that their decision to use them is not wholly conscious despite appearing to be so.

Arguing that PCP/M systems made of media symbols function as a meaning-making framework, because these symbols are the ones which are accessible for individuals to perceive ultimate meaning, means that I can theorise why marginalised individuals are highly represented in PCP/M. I will suggest that this is because their exclusion from traditional religious institutions means they must use alternative, more accessible symbols to make meaning in their lives.

5.2. Subjective mythologies and PCP/M

In this section, I will provide a summary of how the media can be converted into a system for meaning making for individuals.

I will begin in 5.2.1, and describe how the symbols in the media become a media milieu, which operates like Campbell's 'cultic milieu' by providing a source from which individuals can take symbols and construct their own system of meaning making (see section 4.3.2). In 5.2.2 I will explain how meaning making systems actually operate, in order to help individuals behave in, and make sense of, the world they are a part of. This will lead into a discussion of how symbols are selected for meaning making in sections 5.3 and 5.4.

5.2.1 Media symbols and mediatisation

PCP/M is a movement which accepts that media symbols are viable symbols for use in religious meaning-making. A media symbol, like any other symbol, may be a behaviour, object, quality, relationship or an event that acts as "a vehicle for a conception - the conception is the symbol's "meaning"[128]. The distinguishing feature of a media symbol is that it has come from a particular communications media source, such as television, books, films, or others.

Before these symbols can be used in religious systems, they must become available for individuals to use them in this way. Stig Hjarvard provides a useful way of describing this process, using the theory of 'mediatisation' to explain how symbols were removed from their

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[128] Geertz, *Religion as a cultural system*, 91.

original contexts, in order to make a pool of symbols for audiences to draw upon in their religious lives.

Mediatisation, first and foremost, does not characterise 'media' as a tool which is used by institutions such as a Church in order to communicate messages or ideas. Hjarvad argues that in fact, mediatisation is the process wherein 'the media' has become an institution in its own right, and that other institutions are dependent upon it in order to communicate messages or ideas. Other institutions must operate in accordance with the 'logic' of the media or of a particular media platform in order to use it.[129] For example, a Church cannot simply use a television broadcast to communicate an idea to an audience. It must conform to the logic of the particular media platform (television) first. This means it must produce content using visual components, as television is a visual medium, and depending on the network or company which owns the television broadcasting equipment, the message being conveyed must be compatible with the ideology of the network. This is because the network has power to choose not to broadcast the content, if it is deemed unsuitable. As a result of this, the media plays an important role in deciding the ideas and symbols which are being circulated in our social environments.[130]

The multiplicity of media platforms is the most important feature of media logic. Due to the number of institutions which are dependent on the media to convey their ideas, and the many forms of media available, institutions which use the media are only able to use it to convey single ideas or messages amongst many. Specific religious ideas or messages, such as

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[129] Ibid., 132.
[130] Hjarvard, Stig. "The Mediatisation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change." *Culture and Religion* 12, No. 2, (2011): 121.

ideas about what angels are according to the Catholic Church, are not the only ones available

to audience members through the media. Therefore, it is impossible for a single authoritative

viewpoint on any subject to exist.[131]

The presence of multiple religious ideas and messages in the media has resulted in the

rise of what Hjarvad calls 'banal religion'. Hjarvad describes 'banal religion' as a collage of

elements (Geertzian 'symbols') taken out of their original contexts in institutionalised

religions and folk religions, and appear in communications media as plot devices or other

details. Banal religion can also include elements which are not from an explicitly or

exclusively religious context, but come to have religious associations when used in a

particular way in media.[132] An example would be the way that the colour white is used in

film, to create a sense of purity or holiness in some contexts.

Banal religion therefore constitutes a milieu of symbols from which people can

construct understandings about religion generally, or their own particular religious system

which uses the elements of banal religion. It can therefore function in a way which is similar

to Colin Campbell's "cultic milieu", which I have described in 4.2.3. Over time, the religious

signs which populate the media have become available cultural resources for religious use in

lives of Western audiences – For Hjarvad, "common religion has found a new and prominent

source: the banal religion of the media."[133]

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[131] Ibid., 126.
[132] Ibid., 128.
[133] Ibid., 130.

Mediatisation theory, and the concept of 'banal religion', only really focuses on media symbols which seem to be related to religion in their original context. Nonetheless, mediatisation theory does not exclude the possibility that traditionally non-religious signs might be read 'religiously' by audiences. As I have already covered in Chapter 4, PCP/M is religious because it develops meaning-making frameworks using transcendent symbols, and the transcendence of symbols can still be emphasised even if they are not 'traditionally' religious.

I have described the process through which media symbols become available for religious use for individuals above. However, the way in which these symbols are used specifically in meaning-making, is not yet clear. In the 5.2.2, I will provide a description of how this is done, through organising these media symbols into narrative systems or 'subjective mythologies', which challenge dominant ideologies and create meaning specifically for the individual.

5.2.2 Subjective Mythologies

'Subjective mythologies' or 'subjective myth', are the mechanisms through which the meaning-making process takes place, using the media symbols which populate the media milieu.

What is subjective mythology?

Symbols are vital components in for organising our reality. However, they are not capable of providing meaning, religious or otherwise, on their own. This is because signs must be organised, in relation to one another and ourselves, in order for us to perceive

meaning in them. Humans are naturally inclined to resolve this problem by looking for signs which aid in conceptualising the world around them, and organising them into narratives.[134] Religious narratives, specifically, are those which are concerned with existential meaning, which is derived from the transcendence of the symbols included in them.

Religious narratives which use fictional symbols, according to Markus Davidsen, occur because individuals today like to build their own faith from many sources in order to suit their preferences or needs.[135] Adam Possamai argues that a personalised religious belief which uses fictional sources in some way is a form of 'subjective mythology'. He states that although this subjective mythology is specific only to the individual, it is functionally comparable to traditional myth if traditional myth is defined as "a story which helps to explain the human condition".[136] These two theorists consider the emergence of personal mythologies which use media symbols to be the result of modernisation, much like the personal religions which arise from the cultic milieu.

I am using Possamai's concept of "subjective mythologies" for PCP/M, denoting mythologies which are unique to the individual and constructed using symbols taken from both the media milieu and the cultic milieu.[137] This is because, as I have suggested in Chapter 4, PCP/M uses media symbols 'religiously' because it is the subjective individual which emphasises the transcendence of these symbols, and their relevance to 'ultimate meaning'.

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[134] Petersen, Anders Klostergaard. "The Difference between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature: A Matter of Degree Only." *Religion* 46, no. 4 (2016): 510.
[135] Davidsen Markus Altena "The Religious Affordance of Fiction: a Semiotic Approach," *Religion* 46, no. 4 (2016): 522.
[136] Possamai, Adam. *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-real Testament.* New York: Peter Lang. (2005): 67.
[137] Despite considering PCP/M to be a 'subjective mythology', I have chosen *not* to consider it a 'Hyper-real religion' despite the fact that Possamai actually classified it as one in the introduction to his book. This is on account of the priority that 'Hyper real religion' places on the role of consumption in developing subjective mythology – something which, I will argue in 5.3, is present in PCP/M to some extent but not to the extent that is assumed by proponents of consumer religion theories.

Therefore, they do not constitute a form of socially cohesive 'religion' despite being individually religious. They are indeed 'subjective'.

I am not using the term 'mythology' in the popular sense, which considers 'myth' as a story which is necessarily fictional and mythologies as compilations of fictional myths. Instead, I am conceptualising mythologies as systems made of individual myths, and I am conceptualising these myths as symbolic system which reveals the cause of particular realities, and therefore can provide a guide on how an individual ought to exist in relation to these realities. [138]

This means that even PC magic systems, which may not have a singular 'plot' orientated narrative but still have a unifying system of smaller accepted truths underpinning an individual's actions, can also be described as having a "mythology".

Subjective mythologies and subversion

All participants in my research shared the idea that PCP/M was an effective meaning-making framework because it was made up of symbols which they personally considered important. All of the symbols used in these systems were transcendent in that they pointed to something beyond the individual, and the individual emphasised them as a source for ultimate meaning. We can see this focus on subjectivity clearly, in the following quote:

(I)

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[138] van Uden, Marinus H.F & Hessel J. Zondag. "Religion as an existential resource: On Meaning-Making, Religious Coping and Rituals: *European Journal of Mental Health* 11 (2016): 5.

For me, red is a fairly neutral colour… because I really liked the Dragonlance series, [which] had three different mages. White was good, black was bad, and red was neutral. So it's easy for me to associate red with neutrality.

The participant uses red in spellcasting to represent 'neutrality', and has explained why in terms of an experience they had with a particular media source they enjoyed. The symbol red is therefore transcendent, because it indicated a reality beyond the individual (that red is neutral, and could be used in magical ritual to represent this), and the fact that the individual accepted this as a fact of their reality shows that they consider this symbol relevant to ultimate meaning for them. This symbol and its meaning were taken from a media source.

They participant was careful to point out that this ultimate meaning, or insight into reality, may not necessarily be suitable for others. The participant also suggests that their understanding may be 'opposed' to a stereotypical reading of the symbol 'red. That is, a more typical idea conveyed by the colour red might be that of 'anger' or 'passion'. The participant in question was the same one who, earlier in the interview, stated that because of their PCM practice:

(J)

It seems that I have inadvertently set myself up in opposition to just about everyone.

There is a connection here, between the subversion of dominant social conventions and PCP/M, which has interesting implications for the religious identities which arise from PCP/M mythologies.

Paul Teusner considers the role of marginality in mythologies, in his research on the theological relevance of the horror genre, in a way which may be useful for this example. He states that:

"Horror films offer a myth which is marginal. The telling of a story constructs a world of narrative symbol that offers a certain meaning to the real lives of an audience. This meaning is seen as foreign to the present social construct of reality, and marginalises those who align themselves with this meaning with the rest of society." [139]

Although Teusner uses the term 'marginal' myth, the idea he expresses can be transferred to subjective mythologies. Unlike Davidsen or Possamai, however, he implies that these kinds of mythologies tend to subvert dominant social features. This is because in many instances, participants actively seek meaning in 'alternative' sources such as horror film for the express purpose of subverting the mythologies which underpin the dominant social construct of reality or religion.

Construction and subversion within a cultural system?

As I have mentioned in 4.2.1, there is an obvious tension between subjective mythologies, and Geertz's concept of 'religion' as a holistic, naturalised, symbolic system. The idea that meaning making frameworks can be constructed contradicts the idea that meanings appear to arise naturally from systems of symbols in a cultural environment. I

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[139] Teusner, Paul. "Resident Evil: Horror film and the construction of religious identity in contemporary media culture", Paper presented for the Qualifying Examination of the Master of Theology. (Melbourne College of Divinity: Melbourne. 2002) 29.

deployed a part of Geertz's approach, pertaining to symbols and meaning, nonetheless, arguing that the process of secularisation has meant that a 'naturalised' system of social ideology is no longer possible anyway. This is because in the past century, religion has undergone a shift from a wide-reaching social institution to a diverse cultic milieu, and the cultic milieu does not have the same degree of social significance.[140] Religion has switched to "a matter of personalised choice rather than an inherited state".[141]

This change in the position of religion in society has allowed new religions such as PCP/M to subvert the naturalness of cultural and religious systems. They challenge the religious or cultural status quo through constructing frameworks for meaning using the symbolic materials which populate cultural environments. This observation has also been made in the book *Invented Religions,* by Carole Cusack, and I will be discussing Cusack's work further in the following section.

5.2.3 Concluding remarks

PCP/M uses media symbols which have been displaced from their original contexts and into a media milieu, much like 'traditionally' religious images and ideas have been displaced from their religious contexts into a cultic milieu. These symbols are organised into subjective mythologies, which work only for the individual, because those individuals consider media symbols as transcendent, conduits of ultimate meaning.

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[140] Campbell, *The Cult, The Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,* 127.
[141] Cusack, *Invented Religions,* 144.

The way that PCP/M participants use media symbols in a personalised manner helps them to subvert dominant ideologies. An explanation for the presence of marginalised individuals in PCP/M might therefore be focused on the fact that individualisation has meant that marginalised participants are able to select, or 'consume', symbols with which they can consciously construct their own system based on their needs. This is an approach that many scholars of post-modern religion have taken to media religions.

In the next section, I will consider whether PCP/M it is helpful to consider PCP/M in this way – as the result of a society in which religion is 'consumed' for a purpose by participants. Undoubtedly, there is some degree of consumption involved in the emergence of such a movement, but in section 5.4 I will show that that explaining the movement in terms of 'consumption' does not provide a complete account of the demographic features which are the focus of my research question. Instead, the consumerist aspects of PCP/M are only minor features, and *not* the core driving feature behind the presence of marginalised individuals in the movement.

5.3. Consumerism and PCP/M

In this section, I will consider whether or not PCP/M has arisen out of consumerism, and whether or not a 'religion-as-consumption' model is sufficient to answer my research question.

I will begin in section 5.3.1, first by laying out why PCP/M may have some features of consumption, before going on to indicate why these ways of approaching PCP/M actually oversimplifies how PCP/M participants make choices. In section 5.3.2, I will conclude that a

model which is more aware of the factors which condition choices would be better suited to answering my research question.

5.3.1. Invented religions and PCP/M

As I have mentioned, PCP/M can challenge the dominant religious or cultural system through constructing frameworks for existential meaning using media symbols. Therefore, PCP/M appears to fit well in Cusack's 'invented religion' framework.[142] Cusack indicates that invented religions use narratives in order to project causality into the world, and thus they serve a 'meaning making' function.[143] She states that for some people, fictional sources may provide sufficient meaning for an individual, as the criterion of the ontological 'truth' of a religion is no longer important in religions of the contemporary age.[144]

Cusack also states that invented religions are religions of a consumerist society, wherein "the modern individual usually makes decisions based on self-needs…and has effectively become detached from the traditional sources of identity"[145] By 'traditional sources of identity', she means rigid class structures, moral restrictions imposed by society, and Church affiliation. She sees consumerism as the sole driving feature of individualised religious systems, and argues that "individuals constitute their identity" through consciously choosing, or 'consuming' the symbols they use in their religious system.[146] Adam Possamai agrees with this, asserting that individuals today now prefer to construct religion 'a la carte'

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[142] I would argue that PCP/M is actually more akin to the bricolage ideology which underpins the new age in general, as unlike the religions Cusack discusses PCP/M is not unified by a single 'framework' such as Pastafarianism, or Discordianis, but PCP/M and Invented religions are more similar in terms of content.

[143] Cusack, *Invented Religions,* 139.

[144] Ibid., 145.

[145] Ibid., 143.

[146] Ibid., 141.

rather than accepting a pre-existent religious framework to adhere to.[147] Markus Davidsen also argues that religions which are close to fictional sources have arisen because individuals today are inclined to build their own faith from many sources, some of which may be fictional, in order to suit their preferences or needs.[148]

All in all, Cusack's approach, along with the approaches of other consumption based approaches to media religions, is very rational-functionalist in character.

To consume…

The language of 'choosing' and 'consuming' is frequently used by participants to explain how they engage with their sources. It is even illustrated by one of my interview participants, who outright stated that:

(K)

"I've always had a strong relationship with the media I consume..."

In *Pop Culture Magic 2.0,* Taylor Ellwood dedicates considerable space to contemplating the role that the corporate, capitalist world plays in PCP/M behaviour. He suggests that PCP/M is a space in which fans and corporate entities meet one another. It is a site of tension between the selling and purchasing of something, but at the same time is a valuable means through which worldviews can be made.[149]

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[147] Possamai, *religion and Popular Culture,* 65.
[148] Davidsen, "The Religious Affordance of Fiction," 522.
[149] Ellwood, *Pop Culture Magic 2.0,* 72.

Overall, this appears to support Cusack's claim that religious consumerism is driving individuals to select the symbols they use in their religious meaning making according to their personal needs.[150] She claims that because of the fragmentation of modern life, all individuals have access to any symbols they want to use in a cultural environment. Religious identities and the system of symbols which is related to those identities have become detached from their original sources such as family or geographical location, and so anyone is free to consume any media for religious purposes irrespective of other factors.[151]

Or not to consume.

This all suggests that it is logical to categorise PCP/M as a religion which is driven by individual consumption. Nonetheless, taking a consumption-driven approach to PCP/M is unsuitable for answering my research question, because these kinds of approaches are based on a fundamentally flawed understanding of how individuals 'consume'.

This understanding is flawed because the idea that individuals construct their systems through the expression of rational choice between alternatives, and that these choices are motivated by a functional purpose, homogenises the individual actors involved in developing PCP/M frameworks. It implies that everyone within PCP/M is behaving the same way, for the same reasons, which is certainly a counter-intuitive implication considering how much emphasis Cusack and other scholars who use consumer theories of religion place on individualism. Fundamentally, Cusack and other scholars which take consumption approach assume that in an age of consumerism, there are no limits to personal choice because

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[150] Cusack, *Invented Religions,* 143.
[151] Ibid.

individuals no longer feel connected to the 'traditional sources of identity' which had

previously limited them in their religious choices.[152]

This is plainly not true. Especially in the case of PCP/M, where the identity of the

individual seems to have a direct correlation to their religious choices. As much as identities

are "the result of a very individual process of reflection and choice and an empowering

expression of beliefs, tastes and values,"[153] they are also very much still "determined by

wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts."[154]

Identities are also sometimes imposed on individuals due to inequalities in power, and

this gives rise to identities which are 'marginalised' or may experience exclusion from certain

aspects of society. Surely, an individualist approach ought to take these context-derived

features of 'the individual' into account? Unfortunately, there is no room to consider the role

of identity to this degree in a consumerist understanding of religion, which considers all

individuals in the contemporary West as socially homogenous and rational religious actors.

Characterising PCP/M as purely motivated by consumption therefore reduces the

complex 'individual', the party which is supposed to be catered to through individualisation,

to an entity which operates identically to other entities and develops a rational-functional

meaning making system by making unfettered decisions between alternatives. Furthermore,

claiming that personal choice is the only driving feature of PCP/M does not really provide an

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[152] Ibid.
[153] Kay, Rebecca. "Identity and Marginality." *eSharp* 6, no. 1 (2005): 1.
[154] Ibid.

insight into why marginalised participants seem to prefer PCP/M to other theoretically

'consumerist' movements, such as the New Age, or contemporary Paganism.

5.3.2 Concluding remarks

PCP/M shares some similarities with Invented Religions based on content, and

arguably PCP/M is consumerist in that participants can choose to use it, and there is a strong

sense of individual autonomy tied to this choice. As I have shown in the preceding section,

however, conceptualising PCP/M as an act of consumption does not explain why individuals

who claim to have marginalised identities are well represented in it at all.

Partridge argues that it is more useful to consider popular media as something which

operates in the lives of audiences on an unconscious level, rather than a text which can be

used selectively for a religious purpose (as in consumerist models), so much.[155] This would

mean that there is an unconscious dimension involved in the development of PCP/M

mythologies and the selection of the symbols which make them, and this unconscious

dimension may be better suited to answering my research question.

For that reason, I will be considering what conditions the choices of marginalised

individuals, when it comes to identifying symbols which can be emphasised as transcendent

and suitable for religious meaning-making, in the next section.

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[155] Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West,* 121.

5.4. Marginalisation and strategies of action

In this section, I will be considering an alternative to characterising PCP/M as the result of consumerism. This alternative is applying a 'strategy of action' framework. This approach to PCP/M will enable me to answer my research question by highlighting the relationship between marginality and the accessibility of media symbols.

I will begin in 5.4.1 by describing the strategy of action approach, and the cultural tool kit model which arises from this approach. In section 5.4.2 I will highlight what this model tells us about marginalisation, and the choices that individual participants make when constructing PCP/M mythologies. I will then sum up my findings in 5.4.3, and state the implications these findings have for my research question.

5.4.1 Cultural tool kit

Ann Swidler developed the 'strategy of action' model, as well as the 'cultural tool kit' model of human behaviour.[156] The cultural tool kit model differs from consumption models of behaviour, in that it considers the environmental factors which motivate individuals rather than the desires or needs of the individual independent of these environmental factors.

Swidler proposes that culture is a tool kit of symbols which people can use in 'strategies of action', or persistent ways of ordering behaviour over periods of time. According to Swidler's argument, culture does not provide values which inform behaviour

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[156] Swidler, Ann. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986) 273-286.

directly, but instead provides a resource from which individuals can construct behaviours, or long term strategies of action.[157]

The ideas presented in this approach are an excellent addition to mythological understandings of PCP/M systems. A 'strategy of action' encompasses both the mythology building (developing a strategy), and the meaning-making that occurs through that mythology (action). It also acknowledges that individuals use symbols from their environments to do this. However, they may use these symbols for reasons other than because they want to.

The strategy of action model is also very aware that individuals, rather than watching a particular TV show and using it as a direct source for religious practice and belief, are in fact more likely to be watching a particular show (or other media) and engaging with the signs which make up the show in conjunction with other influencing factors such as social environment, personal history, and social position.[158]

Fundamentally, this means that the symbols which an individual is inclined to use in their strategies of action, or in developing their PCP/M personal mythologies, are those which are available to them when those factors are taken into account. An individual who has grown up identifying as gender non-binary in a non-religious family, and who watched a particular TV show when they were younger, is more likely to feel they have access to the symbols which populate that TV show than the symbols which populate a religious system that is alien to them, and may exclude them due to their gender identity. An individual who has been

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[157] Ibid., 273.
[158] Ibid., 276.

mentally ill, and formally a member of a Church which harmed or excluded them for this reason, is more likely to look for a way to construct a religious system that uses symbols they feel are more appropriate for them as a mentally unwell individual, or which they have not been excluded from accessing.

In Swidler's framework, there is also no requirement for the symbols that make up these strategies of action to come from the same source. Rather, they are simply taken from the cultural environment as they are needed. In the case of PCP/M, these symbols might come from either or both of the cultic and media milieus.

A strategy of action is therefore something which develops relative to the individual, their cultural context, and their experiences. Someone who is familiar with particular narratives, who already has a vocabulary of symbols and meanings readily available because of their context and experience, is more likely to adopt a religious strategy of action which accommodates this knowledge. Switching worldviews, particularly in order to maximise an outcome such as a wholly new theological system, would require a major shift in cultural lens.[159] The implication of this is that participants in PCP/M who have mythologies which draw on media did not invent these systems from scratch, for fun, as consumers, but rather developed them using the symbols available to them for religious use.

The idea of participants using accessible symbols is vital in theorising why marginalised individuals are drawn to PCP/M PCP/M, as marginalisation limits the accessibility of symbols that individuals might want to use.

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[159] Ibid., 276.

5.4.2 Marginalisation and access to cultural resources

As I have indicated in 5.4.1, the cultural toolkit model and strategies of action introduces an essential key to examining the presence of marginalised identities in PCP/M, because it acknowledges the limitations that make some individuals less likely than others to use particular cultural resources.

Limitations on access to cultural resources are certainly a potential result of marginalisation itself. This is because marginalisation is something which results in exclusion, and in the case of gender, sexuality, and disability/illness, exclusion from particular religious communities is not unusual. Upon being excluded from traditional religious systems, marginalised individuals are less likely to have access to the religious symbols which populate those systems, and are less likely to use them in constructing personal mythologies.

In "Salvation and Animation", Venetia Robertson uses the case study of women in both medieval Christianity and in the practice of soul-bonding,[160] in order to illustrate the way that women, a marginalised group, are able to craft worldviews and reflect on their position in the world using the sources which are available to them.[161] This principle, in conjunction with the data I have collected in my research, enforces my conclusion that individuals who are excluded from developing personal mythologies using traditional

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[160] Soulbonding is when an individual perceives a profound psychic 'bond' between themselves, and a character.
[161] Robertson, Venetia. "Salvation and Animation: religion, fandom and identity in the romantic narratives of mystics and Soulbonders," In *Fiction, Invention and hyper reality*. Carole M. Cusack and Pavol Kosnác eds. (London: Routledge, 2016) 58-78.

religious resources on the basis of their identities will turn to alternative sources for

developing these mythologies.

Many PCP/M participants involved in my research have indicated that this experience

of exclusion, or even just a sense of unsuitability for them purposefully, have limited their

ability to engage meaningfully with 'traditional' religion:

(L)

We've grown up with the radical Christian right wing telling us that to be saved from

sin we can't be who we are, and that's become our perception of religion.

As a result of this, many participants are drawn to PCP/M because it is accessible to

them, as marginalised individuals 'outside' of dominant culture:

(M)

A lot of what I'm finding [in PCP/M] *is you get a lot of alternative people… because a*

lot of the traditional [paganism and magic] *tends to be Wicca centric, and has the*

split between masculine or feminine roles. And a lot of people are like... bullshit. …

I think, it is my gut feeling, that you end up with more people from the LGBT

community in pop culture witchcraft because it allows freedom of expression without

having to say 'where do I fit in this gender/role prescript system' [which is]

uncomfortable and impractical.

(N)

I've seen people who create entire traditions based on a non-binary understanding of gender because they just can't force themselves into a practice centred *around the cisgender/heterosexual union of God and Goddess.*

(O)

Our community pulls a lot of outcasts. People who experience physical illness, mental illness, people who are on the fringes of society. People who are different in gender or sexuality or general philosophy. People who don't fit in anywhere else and these are just generally the types of people who are drawn to pop culture… [because] *You can make the rules. If you want homosexuality to be ok, you can write that* down *in your own bible and then suddenly homosexuality is okay now. And* that's *not a thing you can do with a Christian bible. They won't let you.*

(P)

I think [my conversion to PCP/M] *was … driven by* [my identity] *subconsciously more than anything else. I was just looking for what worked, and I didn't look at it and go 'oh yeah that seems right for me – this is an obvious choice considering how I feel about* xyz'. *One day I was just doing it and I was like 'oh look at that'.*

As I have already suggested, PCP/M systems enable an ongoing experience of meaning-making and because each system constitutes a personalised mythology. Personalised mythologies are sometimes constructed through choice, in a way which challenges the naturalism of Geertz's system of symbols and is characteristic of post-modernity, but the

notion that participants are 'chosen' to practice PCP/M, or that PCP/M has a revealed

dimension, suggests that PCP/M is not driven by pure consumerism at all. This is because

there are, in fact, limits to personal choice. These limits can include physical limitations,

social limitations, and spatial limitations, and these limitations did not cease to exist once

modernisation was underway. This challenges the relevance of consumption as a framework

for examining PCP/M, and highlights why it is that more marginalised individuals might be

drawn to PCP/M than comparable religions in the post-modern West.

The cultural tool kit approach also has the advantage of accounting for the individuals

who do not claim a marginalised identity specified by my key identity markers. As every

individual is free to construct their own mythology, based on their own context, it is possible

for any number of external cultural or social factors to motivate an individual to turn to

PCP/M. This may include, but is not limited to, living in a Western social context in which

'traditional' institutions such as a Church are not so much inaccessible, as irrelevant or

undesirable.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the development of PCP/M systems is a

development of personal mythology which aids in religious meaning-making by providing a

background to contextualise behaviour and ways to see the world. I have also shown that

although consumption does play a role in the construction of these mythologies to some

degree, this is not the sole motivator in PCP/M and does not explain the demographic of the

movement on Tumblr. This demographic can be explained better by considering the

limitations of the access marginalised individuals have to cultural resources, such as

traditional religious symbols.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

6.1 Summary

In this thesis, I have argued that marginalised individuals are more represented in PCP/M, because they feel that the cultural symbols which populate the media are more accessible for them to use religiously. This is important for marginalised individuals, who may desire religious experiences and systems for meaning-making but due to being marginalised may not feel that they have access to traditionally religious symbols for meaning making.

I began this thesis in Chapter 2, by describing the methods I would use to collect my data on PCP/M, and followed this in Chapter 3 with a summary of my findings. In Chapter 4 I considered definitions of 'religion, In order to argue that PCP/M is functionally religious because it provides a system of 'meaning making' using transcendent objects, for those who participate in it. In Chapter 5, I considered how PCP/M serves this meaning-making function, and why participants in PCP/M might turn to media sources in order to provide this religious function. Ultimately, I concluded that the use of media symbols constituted a 'strategy of action' for PCP/M participants, because these symbols are considered accessible to them in their cultural environment.

6.2 Discussion

When I first began my research, I had thought that marginalised individuals would be drawn to PCP/M because it was a way for them to experience a religion which was constructed to represent and enforce their own identities. Like Cusack, Possami and

Davidsen, I had suspected that PCP/M was simply a product of a post-modern, consumption-based religious environment, and that individuals were choosing to consume symbols based on their personal tastes and values in order to build a religious system which catered to their needs.

My original hypothesis was that I would find marginalised individuals preferred to use media as a source for religious symbols because it was a way they could represent aspects of their identity in their religious practice. For example, I had anticipated that individuals who were mentally unwell would be inclined to include mentally unwell characters in their systems, and that individuals with a marginalised gender identity would draw upon characters who had that same identity in theirs. This model assumed that PCP/M practitioners were making conscious decisions between symbolic resources in order to best suit their needs. Although this does certainly happen, my research has shown that each individual PCP/M system is far more complex than that.

Explaining PCP/M as the result of consumerism does not provide an explanation for why media symbols might be emphasised as 'transcendent objects' which are amenable to use in ultimate meaning-making, in preference to other cultural symbols from more traditionally "religious" contexts. Nor does my original hypothesis, which saw PCP/M as a form of representation, explain why individuals might not instead deploy subjective readings of 'traditional' religious symbols in order to represent themselves. For example, why would an individual who was gay prefer PCP/M over deploying subjective interpretations of biblical narrative, perhaps by characterising Jesus or some other significant biblical figure as gay, in order to support the idea that homosexuality is acceptable in Christianity? In fact, some

participants in my study constructed systems in which their identities were notably *not* referenced or represented at all.

My interviews suggested that there is in fact a correlation between marginalisation, perceived or real social exclusion, and the perceived accessibility of particular cultural resources. I accept that to some extent, PCP/M is a product of the fragmented, consumer-driven environment of the contemporary West. However, many individuals engage religiously with media symbols through PCP/M, not just because they "choose" those symbols, but because those symbols are more "accessible" to them in their marginalised positions in society. The notion of accessibility thus provided insight into why individuals might favour media symbols over other symbols already in the cultic milieu, and explained for why marginalised individuals were represented in greater numbers in PCP/M than in comparable groups also on Tumblr.

6.3 Limitations

My research for this thesis has been limited to PCP/M. It therefore does not include any data on other 'Fiction-based', 'Invented', or 'Hyper-real' religions. Nor does it provide any particular insight into other Pagan or Magical groups, who use symbols derived from sources other than popular media.

My research was conducted using only Tumblr.com, strictly speaking, and therefore my argument applies only to this particular PCP/M community, during the period I conducted my study. My small sample size also means that further research will be needed in future if my conclusions are to be verified across other sites and groups.

Finally, I interviewed only a small number of participants in this research, about very specific features of PCP/M and the individuals who participate in it. Although I am satisfied that my research is sufficient to answer my research question, as I indicated in 2.5.2, the evidence I have collected is by no means sufficient for me to make more general claims about the movement, or its social relevance.

6.4 Implications

I have advanced an argument here, that practitioners do not choose the symbols they use in an unbounded manner, where all conceivable possibilities are equally weighted. Rather, their choice is also conditioned by at least one other factor, that is, the perceived accessibility of symbols to the practitioner. This approach suggests that future theories of 'religion-as-consumption' may need to be more nuanced, and ethnographically driven. This is because prior models assume that modernity has given rise to a culture wherein anyone has access to any cultural resource, and anybody can use any resource for any purpose. These assumptions overlook the fact that social stratification and separation are still very much a fact of our reality, however. It is likely that there are many other factors which limit the endless choice suggested by religion-as-consumption theories as well, and a more ethnographic approach which focuses on these factors would provide a more useful insight into why and how religious behaviour operates, rather than simply assuming that religion in post-modernity is consumerist, and rational.

This research also has interesting implications for religious studies because it is focused on a new demographic or religious actors in the West, and the way in which they are

behaving religiously. Although there is no dearth of scholarship on issues such as sexuality and religion, illness and religion, and gender and religion, this previous scholarship is conducted within traditional parameters of these categories of marginalisation. For example, it focuses on the relationship between women and religion, or on the relationship between homosexuality and religion. There is no scholarship which thoroughly considers religion in relation to more recent developments in identity politics. Academic research which examines the relationship between religion and individuals with newly visible gender identities (particularly non-binary genders), or individuals who are neither homosexual nor heterosexual, is scarce. There is also no research available which considers the role that newly visible marginalised identities play in developing new forms of religion, and one of the major implications of this work is that it illustrates how research into this topic would certainly be worth doing. After all, these groups have absolutely impacted the Western religious environment by normalising a new type of religiosity - on the popular level the acceptance of and participation in PCP/M increases with every new resource on PCP/M made accessible online.

Finally, this research hints at the idea that this large demographic of people with particular types of newly-visible identities, which has emerged in the West in the last decade, may in fact be more inclined towards particular types of religions, for particular reasons. Although there are theories which correlate certain religious experience to certain mental health conditions, and theories which consider the relationship between marginalisation and certain types of religiosity in general, there is no research at this time looking at the types of religious practices likely to be adopted or constructed by people with these newer kinds of sexual or gender identities. As an emerging demographic of religious actors, it is absolutely essential that the discipline of religious studies begin to consider the impact of such a

149

community on the way religion exists in society, and the way in which it is studied and understood. My research has therefore made a profoundly significant contribution to the field in this regard.

6.5 Further Research

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the present work is the first scholarly study of PCP/M. This means, naturally, that there is great scope for further research in almost all respects.

First, it will be necessary to conduct further research into the nature and function of the community in PCP/M in future. This is because throughout my research, many of my informants emphasised that the PCP/M community was significant to them, and had even aided in the development some of their own religious systems. The community in PCP/M is unlike Durkheim's 'Church', due to the lack of unifying belief and practice, but many of my participants stated that the PCP/M community was important because it provided them with a tolerant and accepting group of peers they could turn to for support, advice and feedback. Further study into PCP/M might consider how the community enables individuals to continue and develop their religious beliefs and practices, and expand upon my research which considered the motivation of PCP/M participants on an individual level only.

Next, research into the online aspects of PCP/M, and the interaction between identity, online spaces, and religion would also be warranted in the future. This is a particularly salient area of research for PCP/M on Tumblr, in light of contemporary sociological work on the internet and the exploration of identity. The role the internet plays in conditioning what

cultural resources individuals consider 'accessible' would also be an interesting way to address the PCP/M phenomenon.

Finally, it would be worthwhile investigating why non-marginalised individuals involved in PCP/M also feel that they have more access to media symbols as transcendent objects, and emphasise these as a source for personal meaning-making. This study has focused specifically on the portion of PCP/M participants who have marginalised identities, and the relationship between those identities and PCP/M, however there are many PCP/M participants who do not identify themselves as belonging to one of the marginalised communities mentioned here. This begs the question of what motivates non-marginalised individuals to draw upon media symbols for religious purposes. If, as I have argued, the 'choice' to use media symbols is conditioned by the perceived accessibility of those symbols for marginalised individuals, is this also true for those who are not marginalised? Asking what makes non-marginalised individuals feel that media symbols are more accessible to them for religious use than 'traditional' ones is a logical further step in the study of PCP/M, and the study of social contexts in individual religious development.

Appendix I: Schedule of questions used in interviews

PART ONE: The self

- How do you identify/tell me about yourself?
- What is your previous experience with religion and witchcraft, respectively?

PART TWO: PCP/M

- Can you describe what PCP/M is, as you understand it?
- How did you first hear about PCP/M?
- How did you come to the decision that PCP/M was something you wanted to experiment with?
- Can you tell me about your experiences using PCP/M?
    - o Deities
    - o Rituals
    - o Spells
    - o Mythologies/Systems
    - o Other
- Can you tell me about some of the source materials you personally draw upon in your practice?
- How did you come to the decision to use this source material?
- How do other religious systems influence the way you use PCP/M?

PART THREE: Commitment and community

- How does PCP/M affect your life online?
- How does PCP/M affect your life offline?
- Can you tell me about the role that tumblr specifically plays in your practice?
- Can you tell me about the role that other social networking sites play in your practice?

PART FOUR: PCP in context

- How do you understand PCP/W relationship to the wider Pagan/Magical community?
- How do you think the wider pagan/magical community perceives PCP/M?
- Why do you think they have this perception?
- What, in your opinion, makes PCP/M different from other systems of religion/magic?

PART FIVE: Closure

- Can you tell me about the most negative effect that PCP/M has had on your life?
- Can you tell me about the most positive effect that PCP/M has had on your life?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me about PCP/M, or your experiences?

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