This manuscript is a late draft of an article that was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Media and Religion*. The version of record can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2019.1696121

Approaches to Mormon identity and practice in the #ldsconf Twitter hashtag

Spencer P. Greenhalgh

University of Kentucky

K. Bret Staudt Willet and Matthew J. Koehler

Michigan State University

Author Note

Spencer P. Greenhalgh, School of Information Science, University of Kentucky; K. Bret Staudt Willet, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education, Michigan State University; Matthew J. Koehler, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education, Michigan State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Spencer P. Greenhalgh, School of Information Science, University of Kentucky; spencer.greenhalgh@uky.edu; 859.218.2294; 320 Lucille Little Fine Arts Library, Lexington, KY 40506-0224

Declarations of interest: none.

Abstract

In this paper, we document different expressions of Mormon identity and different approaches to Mormon practice within the #ldsconf Twitter hashtag. In particular, we examine #ldsconf during two important events in the recent history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: the presidential transition from Thomas Monson to Russell Nelson in January 2018, and the Church's formal acceptance of Nelson as Church president in April 2018. Our findings suggest that the #ldsconf hashtag allows for more expression of identity than formal Latter-day Saint contexts and that Twitter hashtags afford a ready audience for religious discussion in which no bounds are set on appropriate identity or practice.

Keywords: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; hashtags; online communities; Mormonism; Twitter;

Approaches to Mormon identity and practice in the #ldsconf Twitter hashtag

Introduction

The #ldsconf Twitter hashtag presents a compelling context in which to study presentations of and tensions in Mormon identity and practice in the age of the Internet. Hashtags are key words or phrases preceded by a hash (#) sign that can mark a 280-character post on Twitter (a *tweet*) as participating in a specific conversation; because hashtags serve to gather all those tweeting about a particular subject, they have sometimes been conceived of as *portals* to shared social spaces (e.g., Rosenberg, Greenhalgh, Koehler, Hamilton, & Akcaoglu, 2016, Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017). For example, use of the #ldsconf hashtag began in 2008 as a grassroots effort among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter "the Church," for brevity) to discuss its April and October General Conferences. This hashtag soon evolved in two significant ways. First, although most #ldsconf activity still occurred during General Conferences, some Twitter users began to use it throughout the year to reference the Church and its members more generally. Second, the Church eventually endorsed the hashtag (Burroughs, 2013) and promoted its use during General Conferences—until October 2018, when it asked Church members to use the #generalconference hashtag instead.

The low threshold for participation in a Twitter hashtag creates interesting tensions in the context of the Church. Passive participation in a hashtag is as simple as knowing the hashtag and reading tweets that contain it, and even a more active contribution to the hashtag only requires including it in one's own tweets. Thus, participation in #ldsconf is open to anyone who is aware of it, regardless of their relationship with Mormonism. In contrast, although the Church acknowledges diversity among its members, it has also endorsed specific views of what it means to identify with and practice in the Church and has often emphasized unity around those

identities and practices and de-emphasized other differences. For example, during the April 2019 General Conference, one leader taught that Church members should identify themselves primarily as "a child of God" and that any other "label, even including occupation, race, physical characteristics, or honors, is temporary or trivial in eternal terms" (Oaks, 2019). Similarly, the sacraments, major policies, and typical practices of the Church are highly standardized in a handbook that is written at Church headquarters and then distributed to local leaders.

In contrast, research on Twitter hashtags has emphasized the diversity of those who participate in them. For example, research has found that participants may have unexpectedly diverse identities given the expected focus of a hashtag (e.g., Rosenberg et al., 2016; Veletsianos, 2017) and that a hashtag may even be "hijacked" by Twitter users advocating different views than those of its initial organizers (e.g., Kosenko, Winderman, & Pugh, 2019). In short, even orthodox members of the Church expressing Mormon identities and participating in Mormon practices on Twitter do so outside of the supervision and control of Church authorities. Thus, like other online manifestations of Mormonism, the #ldsconf hashtag represents a "complex intersection of top-down... and bottom-up... processes" (Burroughs & Feller, 2015, p. 362).

Given this tension, our purpose in this study is to describe the various expressions of identity and the various approaches to practice that occur within the #ldsconf hashtag. In describing the diversity associated with Mormon identity and practice in the #ldsconf hashtag, we make two particular contributions. First, we describe how the heterogeneity of this particular Mormon space stands in contrast to the efforts of Church leaders to standardize practice and emphasize shared identity. Second, and more broadly, we use this example to draw attention to how Twitter hashtags serve as ready audiences for diverse discussions of religion, identity, and practice.

Background

In this section, we conceptualize religious identity and its relationship to religious practice and describe the diverse ways that Mormonism has been expressed in online spaces.

Religious identity and practice

To define religious identity in online spaces, we draw from Lövheim and Linderman's (2005) description of identity as the way "the individual relates himself or herself to a certain collective" (p. 122). This view is informed by Goffman (1959), who used the metaphor of a play to describe how people use certain techniques to present certain identities to certain audiences. Goffman's work has frequently been applied to research on social media platforms (Hogan, 2010), which typically invite participants to self-identify and self-describe. Indeed, researchers have used religious disclosure in online profiles as a measure of religious identity (e.g., Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011; Kimmons et al., 2017). Twitter users may relate themselves to more than one collective (e.g., Carpenter, Kimmons, Short, Clements, & Staples, 2019), but social media contexts create dilemmas by *collapsing* audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2010)—making it difficult to direct one's posts to a single collective (and away from others).

Religious identities can also be understood through the religious practices that they are associated with. Drawing from Scribner and Cole (1978) and other scholars of social practice, Skerrett (2014) defined religious practices as "purposeful sequences of religious activities assisted by multimodal tools and that privilege theological systems of knowledge" (p. 966). Carrying out these activities implicitly demonstrates the theological systems that a person privileges, thereby lending insight into their religious identity. Indeed, Skerrett's (2014) definition is grounded in a tradition that frames practices as an "identity kit" (Gee, 1989, p. 7). Religious practices have been adapted for Twitter in a number of ways (such as using tweets to

request or share prayers; Cheong, 2010), and have been examined by scholars as part of broader inquiry about religious identity in this space (e.g., Kimmons et al., 2017).

Mormon identities and the Internet

The Internet has long been a home for diverse Mormon identities and practices. In response to institutional pushback in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Mormon feminists turned to online discussion groups as "safer, more private spaces" (Brooks, 2016, p. 19), and many of the Mormon blogs that emerged over the next few decades also embraced feminist and other liberal ideas (Brooks, 2016; McDannell, 2019), thereby signaling identities outside of the conservative Mormon mainstream. In contrast, "Mormon mommy bloggers" have embraced and expressed femininity in ways that reflected traditional Mormon teachings without being overtly religious, and other women used blogs to engage in religious self-expression in a way that generally supported the Church and its teachings (McDannell, 2019).

This diversity of various Mormon identities—and corresponding practices—has carried over into Twitter. For example, Kimmons et al. (2017) described some Mormon Twitter users as engaging in traditional practices such as bearing testimony or witness of particular beliefs. However, other approaches to Mormon identity—both progressive (Riess, 2018b) and reactionary (Hitt, 2019) are also present on Twitter.

Within the broader phenomenon of Mormon Twitter, the #ldsconf hashtag is noteworthy. Until October 2018, it was the only major hashtag associated with the Church's General Conference. Consequently, whereas reactionary, traditional, and progressive approaches to Mormonism may each have dedicated websites and podcasts, separate Twitter hashtags, and self-selected Twitter networks, #ldsconf potentially allows for contribution from and observation by Mormons (and others) with a range of different identities. However, existing research on the

#ldsconf hashtag has focused mostly on the presence of liberal criticism in #ldsconf (Burroughs, 2013) or the expression of feminist, LGBTQ+, or “ex-Mormon” identities in "backchannel" hashtags (Johns & Nelson, 2015). Little work has been done to examine the full range of identities—and approaches to practice—represented in this hashtag space.

Purpose, research context, and research questions

The purpose of this study is to describe and examine the diverse Mormon identities and approaches to Mormon practice expressed by those contributing to the #ldsconf hashtag. By examining the diversity of expression that exists within a single space, we emphasize how online spaces dedicated to Mormonism demonstrate a diversity of identity that is not always apparent through traditional contexts and practices.

Research context

For the purposes of this study, we have focused on use of the #ldsconf hashtag during two specific events between January 2018 and April 2018, a time period when a major transition was happening in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Thomas Monson, president of the Church for nearly ten years, passed away in early January. Monson’s successor, Russell Nelson, was designated later in January and then officially accepted by the body of the Church during the General Conference that took place on 31 March and 1 April of 2018. This presidential transition was the first since Twitter was founded in 2006 and the #ldsconf hashtag emerged in October 2008—and the last presidential transition before the Church began promoting the use of a different hashtag (and implicitly discouraging use of #ldsconf).

Research questions

Given this purpose and context, we ask the following research questions:

1. How do #ldsconf contributors relate (or not relate) themselves to Mormonism in different ways?
2. How do #ldsconf contributors approach Mormon practices in different ways?

To answer these two questions, we have identified two specific cases within the broader context described in the previous section: the *prophetic transition* from Thomas Monson to Russell Nelson, and the *solemn assembly* in which Nelson was officially accepted by the membership of the Church. For the sake of clarity, we present the data, method, and results associated with these cases in separate sections alongside additional background information.

Case 1: Prophetic transition

To examine how different Mormon and other identities are expressed within the #ldsconf hashtag, we turned our attention to the two-week period between Thomas Monson's death on 2 January 2018 and Russell Nelson's first press conference as president of the Church on 16 January 2018. Although the #ldsconf hashtag is primarily associated with the Church's General Conferences, it is also used between Conferences as a catch-all hashtag for Church-related conversations on Twitter—much like other Twitter hashtags associated with real-time events (Rosenberg et al., 2016; Carpenter, Tani, Morrison, & Keane, 2018). This hashtag therefore affords one simple way of finding who is tweeting about the Church during this major moment in its history.

Method

We began our examination of the prophetic transition case by using a Twitter Archiving Google Sheet (Hawksey, 2016) to collect all tweets and retweets containing the #ldsconf hashtag that were composed between 2 January and 16 January 2018. We then used the *rtweet* package for the R programming language (Kearney, 2018) to remove from consideration any since-

deleted tweets or tweets from profiles that had been suspended or set to private, which resulted in 680 #ldsconf tweets and retweets composed during this time. The rtweet package also allowed us to collect information (i.e., the screen name, profile, and listed URL) for each of the Twitter accounts that had tweeted or retweeted the #ldsconf hashtag during the selected timeframe. This process resulted in the identification of 217 different profiles.

After reviewing all 217 profiles, the first two authors developed a series of mutually-exclusive codes (described in Table 1) to describe the way that each account related—or did not relate—itself to Mormonism (Lövheim & Linderman, 2005). Based on recurring themes in the profiles, the authors developed supplementary codes related to other expressed identities (also in Table 1) that were not mutually exclusive (either among themselves or with the main set of codes). The two authors then coded a sample of 53 profiles to establish inter-rater reliability, achieving either greater than 90% agreement between coders, greater than .75 Cohen's kappa (which Landis and Koch [1977] described as *substantial*), or both for all of the codes. Then, a single coder analyzed all 217 profiles. Only English-language words and terms in the account materials were coded (with the exception of our identification of languages other than English).

Findings

As indicated in Table 1, the majority of Twitter users who participated in the #ldsconf hashtag during this two-week period did not express an explicit connection to Mormonism—or even religion—in their Twitter profiles. Furthermore, although critics of Mormonism only represent a small number of accounts, their presence in a hashtag created by Church members is a reminder of the open nature of hashtags as compared to traditional Mormon contexts.

[Table 1 near here]

Accounts that reference Mormonism or explicitly identify themselves as Mormon collectively represent just short of 40% of the profiles that we coded (and just short of a third of the total #ldsconf tweets during this timeframe). Profiles that only reference Mormonism (e.g., by linking to a Church website in their profile but not specifically articulating their religious affiliation) may be attempts to indicate religious identity in a more subtle way, though they are outweighed two-to-one by profiles that explicitly articulate a connection with the Church. Particularly noteworthy are accounts that identify as Mormon entities—for instance, @churchhistory, the Twitter account then used by the Church's history department. Other entities we identified had no official connection with the Church and were instead news organizations with a focus on Mormonism, the Twitter accounts of Mormonism-focused blogs or YouTube channels, or Twitter accounts dedicated to either humor or inspirational messages with a Mormon approach. As seen in Table 1, these entities are also noteworthy because they represented less than 10% of the profiles we coded but over one-third of the #ldsconf tweets during these two weeks (more than any other group of profiles).

Although the other identity codes that we developed (see Table 1) appear infrequently, they lend further insight into the diverse identities that appear within the #ldsconf hashtag. The presence of languages other than English in over 15% of profiles may reflect the growing international character of—or interest in—the Church. The few profiles that express political identity represented considerable range, from a profile that boasted being "further to the left than a vegan" to another whose self-identification as "#lds" was followed by a reference to a right-wing anti-government militia. None of the accounts associated with the political left identified themselves as Mormon; leaving it unclear whether these accounts represent liberal Mormons, liberal critics of Mormonism, or some other identity. In contrast, one of the two accounts

identifying as feminist and two of the three accounts identifying as pro-LGBTQ+ also explicitly identify as Mormon, suggesting that these Twitter users identify both with the Church and with social movements that it has traditionally not welcomed.

Case 2: Solemn assembly

To examine how Mormon practices are approached in different ways within the #ldsconf hashtag, we focused on the morning of Saturday, March 31st, 2018, when one rare-but-significant Mormon practice was taking place. Although each General Conference of the Church includes the practice of *sustaining* (i.e., symbolically voting in favor of Church leaders' appointments), the first Church-wide sustaining of Church leadership that includes a new president of the Church (and, therefore, prophet) is referred to as a *solemn assembly.*

A solemn assembly is accompanied by slight changes in practice, both in comparison to the typical practice of sustaining and—often—in comparison to previous solemn assemblies. As during typical sustaining ceremonies, a presiding officer reads the names of individuals and the positions they are being appointed to. The presiding officer asks all those in favor of sustaining certain leaders to raise their hand, after which he gives individuals an opportunity to dissent (also by raising their hand). However, additional elements are added to this practice during a solemn assembly. For example, during the 2018 solemn assembly, Henry Eyring called for individual votes by different groups of Church members—defined by a combination of their age, gender, and position within the Church—before calling for a vote by the entire body of the Church (the only vote during a typical sustaining). As a further contrast to typical sustaining votes, which take place while seated, each of these groups stood during their respective votes.

Method

We began our analysis of the solemn assembly case by using the DiscoverText software (see Shulman, 2011) to identify all #ldsconf tweets composed during the 2018 General Conference's solemn assembly (i.e., from approximately 10:09 Mountain Time to approximately 10:20 Mountain Time on the morning of March 31st, 2018). We then used the *rtweet* package for the R software (Kearney, 2018) to collect additional information associated with these tweets and remove from consideration any retweets, since-deleted tweets, tweets from profiles that had been suspended or set to private, or tweets from users whose Twitter settings were set to a language other than English. This resulted in the identification of 280 tweets.

In analyzing these tweets, our purpose was not to categorize and count individual tweets (as we did for the previous research question) but rather to collectively identify broad, descriptive themes emerging from the data. After reviewing all 280 tweets, the first author identified initial themes (see Saldaña, 2009); the first and second authors then carried out four rounds of coding in which they individually coded a set of 70 tweets with those themes, collectively discussed their analysis, and refined the themes. Given the authors' differing levels of familiarity with the Church, this collaborative approach leveraged both "the insider's local expertise and the outsider's relative lack of taken-for-granted assumptions about the topic." (Cornish, Gillespie, & Zittoun, 2014, p. 86). This process resulted in seven distinct themes.

Findings

In this section, we identify the seven themes that emerged from our analysis and discuss what they reveal about how Mormon practices are approached in different ways in the #ldsconf hashtag space. Although we describe each of these themes thoroughly, we are also aware of the

many ethical issues involved in studying public Twitter data created by often-unwitting participants (see Fiesler & Proferes, 2018) and therefore avoid including identifiable details.

Supporting and approving

Our first theme refers to #ldsconf tweets that expressed support or approval. This emphasis should come as no surprise, given that the entire purpose of the solemn assembly is for members of the Church to sustain their leaders. Indeed, some tweets associated with this theme used the phrase "I sustain" in their tweets to indicate via Twitter what participants were also indicating by raising their hand as an official part of the ceremony. Similarly, some participants used their tweets to express personal conviction that Russell Nelson is a prophet of God. Others used the #ldsconf hashtag to say that they were crying during the ceremony, which in Mormon culture suggests spiritual experiences confirming participants' beliefs.

However, this theme encompasses the idea of supporting and sustaining in a way that goes beyond the expectations of the official, traditional practice of sustaining. Indeed, many of these tweets show a shift in focus from *supporting a Church leader* to *approving by a Church member*. For example, whereas the practice of sustaining typically frames Church members as obediently supporting of the changes and nominations already approved by the leadership, one participant tweeted "#ElderGong and #ElderSoares as new #apostles! Love it. #ldsconf", which reframed him as a more active participant in the process with the agency to express personal approval of the new apostles (rather than approve of the leadership's choice by default).

Humor and informality

Although much of the activity in the #ldsconf hashtag during the solemn assembly corresponded with the purpose of that *assembly*, it often departed from the *solemnity* implied by that name. For example, one tweet reads "GUYS I POPPED OUT OF MY BED W NO PANTS

AND RAISED MY HAND SO FAST #ldsconf" and also included an animated image of a cartoon character (more specifically, one of the Minions from the movie series *Despicable Me*) eagerly raising their hand. This tweet encompasses several of the ways that we saw humor and informality expressed during this time.

First, many contributors to the #ldsconf hashtag during the solemn assembly noted the informal contexts in which they were participating in this practice (e.g., while watching General Conference from bed).

Second, many participants expressed themselves in ways that draw more from Internet culture than Mormon culture (e.g., using abbreviations, informal expressions, and all capital letters). Tweets associated with this theme also used slang expressions, emojis, and informal punctuation (such as the use of several exclamation points to express emotion).

Third, some participants used pop culture references in their tweets about the solemn assembly (e.g., the animated image of a Minion). Other examples of this included a joke that referenced the 2000 American rap song *The Real Slim Shady* (which includes the repeated line "please stand up," echoing the standing during the ceremony) and a tweet that embedded a clip of actress Maya Rudolph's exaggerated Brazilian accent in a scene from the television show *Saturday Night Live* (in reference to new apostle Ulisses Soares's native country).

Diversity and equity

Much of the #ldsconf activity surrounding the solemn assembly commented on the call of the Chinese-American Gerrit Gong and the Brazilian Ulisses Soares to the (previously) all-white, predominantly-American Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Most of these references approved of increased representation, but a small number of comments were mixed (approving of their appointment but suggesting that their diversity shouldn't matter as much as their ecclesiastical

authority) or outrightly dismissive (suggesting that "Social Justice Warriors" could now stop complaining about lack of diversity in Church leadership). This theme also encompassed tweets that commented approvingly on the more prominent role of women within the 2018 solemn assembly (as compared to previous assemblies).

Moment in history

A number of #ldsconf tweets commented on the historic nature of this particular solemn assembly. The vast majority of these comments were directly connected to the last theme; that is, they noted the historical importance of the sustaining of the first Asian-American and Latin American apostles in the church or expressed relief that the Church had "finally" taken this step. However, one tweet noted another first, that this represented the first solemn assembly in the era of Mormon interaction on Twitter.

Personal connection

This theme is associated with tweets in which #ldsconf participants expressed a personal connection with the Church leaders being called and sustained during the solemn assembly. For example, upon hearing the names of the new apostles, some participants shared that they personally knew them or had met them at some point. The connection that other participants felt was less direct but still personal. One Asian-American convert to Mormonism described the pushback she received from friends when joining the predominantly-white Church and expressed her excitement that the Church now had a Chinese-American apostle. Other connections were even more distant, such as when participants tweeted about the excitement of Brazilian or Chinese members of the Church they had contact with.

Speculation and expectation

Although most members of the Church do not play any role in the decision of who will fill leadership positions, that does not prevent them from engaging in speculation about who might be called to fill a vacancy. We found that this speculation was also expressed in #ldsconf tweets, largely in the form of acknowledging whether previous guesses had been proven right or wrong.

Procedural differences and mistakes

Our final theme represents an abstraction of and reflection on the practice of the solemn assembly itself. While sustaining happens frequently within the Church, solemn assemblies happen relatively rarely and involve the addition of new elements to the practice. As a result, some of the #ldsconf tweets composed during the solemn assembly consisted of questions about or comments on changes in the ceremony.

Some of the tweets associated with this theme also commented on procedural mistakes that individuals made during the ceremony—an inevitable result of the contrast between familiarity with the general practice and the rarity of this specific context. These tweets included some in which contributors observed through the live broadcast that even high-ranking Church leaders (including new president Russell Nelson) seemed to stand, sit, or vote out of place.

Discussion

In this section, we comment on the implications of our findings from these two cases. Although we have studied identity and practice separately as part of our analysis, our discussion acknowledges them as intertwined phenomena (Gee, 1989; Skerrett, 2014), with religious practices providing opportunities to demonstrate religious identity and with specific approaches to a given religious practice suggesting elements of one's religious identity.

Importance and diversity of identity and practice in #ldsconf

In this study, our primary objective has been to examine how different Mormon identities are expressed in the shared social space of the #ldsconf hashtag, both explicitly—through Twitter users' self-descriptions—and implicitly—through hashtag participants' approach to Mormon religious practices. We first offer the observation that the #ldsconf hashtag allows for identity expression in ways that traditional approaches to Mormon practice may not. Formal sustaining offers no opportunity for self-expression other than a vote either for or against a certain appointment. In contrast, we have demonstrated how Church members have used the #ldsconf hashtag to claim a more active role in sustaining, expressing personal convictions or connections, and offering commentary—adding more of a personal voice to the practice.

We also note that a majority of the Twitter users we examined participated in the #ldsconf hashtag but did not express a clear relationship with Mormonism. In Kimmons et al. (2017)'s analysis of Mormon Twitter accounts, they identified an approximately 1:8 ratio of self-identified Mormons to Twitter users that were likely to be Mormon but did not explicitly identify themselves as such, and there may be a similar dynamic at work in the #ldsconf hashtag. Indeed, scholars' interest in religious self-identification in online settings (e.g., Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011; Kimmons et al., 2017) has been primarily driven by an assumption that there are compelling social reasons not to present one's religious identity in online spaces (see also Marwick & boyd, 2010). However, it is equally possible for these users to be critics of Mormonism who choose not to identify themselves. Indeed, given that some Americans perceive Mormonism as a non-Christian religion (Jones & Cox, 2011)—and therefore as suspect—it is possible that some of the accounts we identified as referencing religion (but not Mormonism specifically) would also identify as critics of the Church.

Addressing the main focus of our study, our data suggest that a diversity of expressions of Mormon identity and approaches to Mormon practice are expressed by contributors to the #ldsconf hashtag. Accounts that explicitly identified as Mormon included personal accounts, one official Church account, and a number of unofficial group or inspirational accounts. Furthermore, there are indications that (politically) conservative and liberal Mormons participate in this space. Similarly, our analysis of tweets composed during the solemn assembly demonstrated a range of approaches to the Mormon practice of sustaining, including more traditional expressions of support that would not be out of place in Sunday meetings, other expressions of support that are just as eager but much less formal, and even "meta approaches" that reflect on the practice of sustaining itself.

One notable aspect of this diversity is the way in which the #ldsconf hashtag allowed participants to express other identities in conjunction with their Mormon identity. As previously described, Church leaders have encouraged Mormons to identify primarily as a child of God (and, by extension, a member of the Church) and avoid putting too much emphasis on other defining characteristics; however, #ldsconf participants were largely happy to express their other identities during a uniquely Mormon events. For example, much of the humor and informality present in #ldsconf tweets during the solemn assembly drew from pop culture or Internet culture (see also Brubaker, Boyle, & Stephan, 2017; Burroughs & Feller, 2015). Similarly, while the Church puts an emphasis on leaders' divine callings rather than other aspects of identity (Riess, 2018a), many #ldsconf participants were quick to comment on the diverse ethnic and racial identities of the new apostles called during the April 2018 solemn assembly and to express an approval that stemmed from either a shared ethnic or racial background or from a personal progressive emphasis on diversity and representation.

Twitter hashtags as ready religious audiences

Our findings in this study also call attention to the nature of Twitter hashtags as ready audiences for religious conversations. This framing is informed by our previous descriptions of hashtags as loosely-bounded spaces (in contrast to clearly-defined communities; Rosenberg et al., 2016; Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017) and previous work describing technologies as assembling audiences that both insiders and outsiders can then address (Brunton, 2013). In short, Twitter hashtags have a low threshold for participation and cannot be truly owned or managed by a particular group; those aware of the hashtag can therefore use it to gain a ready audience even despite disagreements about "proper" identity and practice.

For example, our analysis has revealed the presence of at least some critics of Mormonism who are making their voices heard during a significant and sacred moment in Church history. Although there are relatively few of these critics in the cases that we have chosen, our anecdotal experience with—other research of (e.g., Johns & Nelson, 2015)—and our anecdotal experience with—#ldsconf over the course of several years suggests that they are a consistent and important feature of the hashtag space. Whereas status within a *community* is obtained through participation in the norms of that community and acceptance by existing members (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991), *spaces*—including Twitter hashtags—have a more leveling effect on participation (Gee, 2005). In short, critics of Mormonism demonstrate an awareness of the uses and affordances of Twitter hashtags to gain an audience for their criticism that they may otherwise struggle to get access to—a dynamic also recognized in other research on Twitter hashtags (Kosenko et al., 2019).

Furthermore, this strategy for finding an audience was not limited to critics of Mormonism. As previously mentioned, only one of the several official Twitter accounts run by

the Church during this time tweeted during the presidential transition; furthermore, some notable Twitter users related to Mormonism (e.g., the @bycommonconsent account, which has over 20,000 followers and is associated with the prominent Mormon blog of the same name) were also absent from the #ldsconf hashtag during this time. These accounts—both official and unofficial—must certainly have been active in commenting on Thomas Monson's death and his succession by Russell Nelson. That they did not use the #ldsconf hashtag to do so suggests that they relied instead on established Twitter networks to share information, and others' use of the hashtag during this time (indeed, anyone's use of the #ldsconf hashtag outside of the Church's General Conference) may suggest that some accounts use the hashtag to reach a Mormon audience that they otherwise would not be able to access through their own networks.

These findings demonstrate how religious Twitter hashtags can serve as spaces where wide ranges of people interested in a particular religion engage with a waiting audience in an ongoing definition and redefinition of that religion and what appropriate religious identity and practice look like. That is, liberal Mormons may assert the importance of a diverse Church leadership only for conservative Mormons to suggest that their priorities are misplaced. Practicing Mormons may express their faith while former Mormons invite them to reconsider. All the while, each account contributing to this process of conversation and definition can do so regardless of their prominence or established network. Indeed, whereas the findings highlighted in the previous section demonstrate that the Church has little control over the Mormon identities and practices that emerge in the #ldsconf hashtag, we have emphasized in this section that #ldsconf participants themselves have little control over what constitutes appropriate identities or practices. Rather, it is the lack of control on the part of any one stakeholder in a religious conversation that makes Twitter hashtags such interesting contexts for religious discussion.

Limitations

Although the two cases that we have considered in this paper lend important insight into Mormon identities and practices in #ldsconf, it is important to note the limited—and unique—scope of these two cases within the long history of the hashtag.

Our research is also limited in that we examined #ldsconf participants' Twitter profiles and tweets independently of each other. Separating out these forms of data has also resulted in some ambiguity in our findings: For example, an analysis of associated tweets may have lent additional insight about Twitter profiles lacking explicit connections to Mormonism.

Furthermore, this study has focused entirely on the data produced by #ldsconf contributors and does not include any of their own perspectives or those of participants who observed but did not contribute to the hashtag.

Conclusion

Online spaces allow for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and others with connections to Mormonism) to present Mormon identities and approach Mormon practice in ways other than those that are typically seen (or approved of) in formal Church settings. We have studied Mormons' (and others') use of the #ldsconf hashtag during two cases related to the recent prophetic transition in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and these findings contribute to our understanding of online Mormonism in two major ways. First, we have found that participating in Mormon practices through the #ldsconf hashtag allows for more expression of identity than traditional approaches to these practices, including the expression of other identities alongside a Mormon identity. Second, we draw researchers' attention to Twitter hashtags as affording a ready audience for religious discussion without establishing qualifications in terms of identity or practice.

References

Bobkowski, P., & Pearce, L. D. (2011). Baring their souls in online profiles or not? Religious self-disclosure in social media. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 50*, 744-762. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01597.x

Brooks, J. (2016). Mormon feminism: An introduction. In J. Brooks, R. Hunt Steenblik, & H. Wheelwright (Eds.), *Mormon feminism: Essential writings* (pp. 1-23). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Brubaker, P., Boyle, K., & Stephan, D. (2017). The shared cultural experience: A comparison of religious memes created by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, religious media, and church members. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *16*, 67-79. doi:10.1080/15348423.2017.1311127

Brunton, F. (2013). *Spam: A shadow history of the Internet.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Burroughs, B. (2013). "And I'm a (social media) Mormon": Digital ritual, techno-faith, and religious transmedia. *QWERTY, 8*(2), 71-81.

Burroughs, B., & Feller, G. (2015). Religious memetics: Institutional authority in digital/lived religion. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 39*, 357-377. doi:10.1177/0196859915603096

Carpenter, J. P., Kimmons, R., Short, C. R., Clements, K., & Staples, M. E. (2019). Teacher identity and crossing the professional-personal divide on Twitter. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 81*, 1-12. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2019.01.011

Carpenter, J. P., Tani, T., Morrison, S., & Keane, J. (2018). Exploring the education Twitter hashtag landscape. In E. Langran & J. Borup (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for*

Information Technology and Teacher Education Conference 2018 (pp. 2230-3325). Waynesville, NC: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

Cheong, P. H. (2010). Faith tweets: Ambient religious communication and microblogging rituals, *M/C Journal, 13*(2). Retrieved from: http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/

Fiesler, C., & Proferes, N. (2018). "Participant" perceptions of Twitter research ethics. *Social Media + Society, 4*(1). doi:10.1177/2056305118763366

Cornish, F., Gillespie, A., & Zittoun, T. (2014). Collaborative analysis of qualitative data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Gee, J. P. (1989). Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction. *Journal of Education, 171*, 5-176.

Gee, J. P. (2005). Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces: From *The Age of Mythology* to today's schools. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power, and social context* (pp. 214-232). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Greenhalgh, S. P., Koehler, M. J. (2017). 28 days later: Twitter hashtags as "just in time" teacher professional development. *TechTrends*, *61*, 273–281. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-016-0142-4

Hawksey, M. (2016). Twitter Archiving Google Sheet (Version 6.1) [Computer software]. Available from http://tags.hawksey.info

Hitt, T. (2019, 24 January). The bizarre cult of #DezNat: Alt-Right Mormons targeting porn and the LGBTQ community. *Daily Beast.* Retrieved from https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-cult-of-deznat-alt-right-mormons-targeting-porn-and-the-lgbtq-community

Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science Technology & Society, 30*, 377-386. doi:10.1177/0270467610385893

Johns, M. D., & Nelson, S. (2015). Analyzing main channel and back-channel tweets during the October Church of Latter Day Saints General Conference. Paper presented at the 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers, Phoenix, AZ.

Jones, R. P., & Cox, D. (2011). *The 2011 American Values Survey: The Mormon question, economic inequality, and the 2012 presidential campaign*. Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, Inc.

Kearney, M. W. (2018). rtweet: Collecting Twitter data (Version 0.6.7) [R package]. Available from https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=rtweet

Kimmons, R., McGuire, K., Stauffer, M., Jones, J. E., Gregson, M., & Austin, M. (2017). Religious identity, expression, and civility in social media: results of data mining Latter-day Saint Twitter accounts. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 56*, 637-657. doi:10.1111/jssr.12358

Kosenko, K., Winderman, E., & Pugh, A. (2019). The hijacked hashtag: The constitutive features of abortion stigma in the #ShoutYourAbortion Twitter campaign. *International Journal of Communication, 13*. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7849

Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, *33*, 159-174.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Lövheim, M., & Linderman, A. G. (2005). Constructing religious identity on the Internet. In M. T. Højsgaard & M. Warburg (Eds.), *Religion and cyberspace* (pp. 121-137). London, UK: Routledge.

Marwick, A., & boyd, d. (2010). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society, 13*, 114-133. doi:10.1177/1461444810365313

McDannell, C. (2019). *Sister Saints: Mormon Women since the end of polygamy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Oaks, D. H. (2019, April 6). *Where will this lead?* Talk given at the 189th Annual General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Salt Lake City, UT.

Riess, J. (2018a, January 16). LDS Church announces new First Presidency counselors. *Religion News Service*. Retrieved from https://religionnews.com/2018/01/16/lds-church-announces-new-first-presidency-counselors-oaks-and-eyring/

Riess, J. (2018b, May 17). Fake Mormon news story goes viral, claiming the LDS Church has apologized for racism. *Religion News Service*. Retrieved from https://religionnews.com/2018/05/17/fake-mormon-news-story-goes-viral-claiming-the-lds-church-has-apologized-for-racism/

Rosenberg, J. M., Greenhalgh, S. P., Koehler, M. J., Hamilton, E., & Akcaoglu, M., (2016). An investigation of State Educational Twitter Hashtags (SETHs) as affinity spaces. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, *13*, 24-44. doi:10.1177/2042753016672351

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1978). Literacy without schooling: Testing for intellectual effects. *Harvard Educational Review*, *48*, 448-461. doi:10.17763/haer.48.4.f44403u05l72x375

Shulman, S. W. (2011). *DiscoverText: Software training to unlock the power of text*. Paper presented at the 12th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research, College Park, MD.

Skerret, A. (2014). "Closer to God": Following religion across the lifeworlds of an urban youth. *Urban Education, 51*, 964-990. doi:10.1177/0042085914549365

Veletsianos, G. (2017). Three cases of hashtags used as learning and professional development environments. *TechTrends, 61*, 284-292. doi:10.1007/s11528-016-0143-3

Tables

Table 1: Coding Scheme for and Results of Analysis of Religious and Other Identities

	code	description of account materials	number of profiles (n = 217)	number of tweets (n = 680)
religious identity (mutually exclusive)	does not reference religion	make no reference to religion (including Mormonism)	122 (56.22%)	213 (31.32%)
	references religion	reference religion but not Mormonism	8 (3.69%)	49 (7.21%)
	references Mormonism	reference Mormonism or Mormon culture but do not explicitly identify the user as Mormon	27 (12.44%)	104 (15.29%)
	identifies as Mormon (individual)	represent an individual person identifying as Mormon	36 (16.59%)	42 (6.18%)
	identifies as Mormon (entity)	represent a group, organization, or "themed account" related to Mormonism	20 (9.22%)	249 (36.62%)
	identifies as critic of Mormonism	position the user as or reference material critical of Mormonism	4 (1.84%)	23 (3.38%)
other identities (not mutually exclusive)	identifies with political right	identify the user as being on the political right or embracing causes associated with the political right	6 (2.76%)	10 (1.47%)
	identifies with political left	identify the user as being on the political left or embracing causes associated with the political left	4 (1.84%)	7 (1.03%)
	identifies as pro-LGBTQ+	identify the user as LGBTQ+ or as being pro-LGBTQ+	3 (1.38%)	3 (0.44%)
	identifies as feminist	identify the user as being feminist	2 (0.92%)	3 (0.44%)
	includes language other than English in profile	includes (but not necessarily exclusively) text from a language other than English	38 (17.51%)	107 (15.74%)