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MORMONISM AS MEME IN GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED INFORMATION OPERATIONS ON TWITTER[1]

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ABSTRACT
A general suspicion of Mormonism in American politics and media dates back to the 19th century and continues today. Weber (2019) has described Mormonism as a "meme" that is malleable enough to symbolize different things for different audiences in different contexts. In this study, I examine the presence of "Mormonism as meme" in 511 posts composed by government-sponsored Twitter accounts as part of information operations before, during, and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. I retrieved these posts from a dataset of government-sponsored tweets made available by Twitter and used a mix of computational and human methods to determine: 1) which countries used Mormonism as meme, 2) whether government-sponsored accounts originated or amplified these messages, 3) what identities government-sponsored accounts adopted, and 4) how government-sponsored accounts used Mormonism as a meme. This study's results indicate that six governments invoked Mormonism as part of their information operations during this time frame. Venezuela pursued a strategy that depended on using pro-Trump accounts to repeatedly share messages describing Mormons as communitarian and insular. Other countries (including Russia and Iran) pursued more subtle strategies, more often retweeting others' posts than writing their own. However, they still invoked aspects of Mormonism that called into question its compatibility with liberal, conservative, or broadly American values. As a whole, these posts correspond with both Weber's (2019) description of Mormonism as malleable meme and information operations' twin purposes of influencing the 2016 election and dividing Americans.
KEYWORDS: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormonism, information operations, social media, Twitter.

Among the many controversies of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election were the information operations carried out by non-U.S. governments. DIRESTA and colleagues (n.d.) describe the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA; the most prominent player in this interference) as carrying out a "sweeping and sustained social influence operation... designed to [both] exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in US culture" (p.4). That is, these government-sponsored information operations were intended to achieve not only specific political goals (i.e., influencing the outcome of the

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election) but also broader objectives such as creating a general social tension among Americans. BASTOS & FARKAS (2019) suggested that while the IRA did operate some *white propaganda* social media accounts (i.e., those that identified or suggested a connection with the Kremlin), efforts at sowing tension and discord were typically associated with *black propaganda* accounts (i.e., those that claimed connection with the targeted American population).

A theoretical lens of *memetic media* is helpful for understanding some of these black propaganda efforts. I am not simply referring to "group[s] of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance" (SHIFMAN, 2014, p.41)—though the IRA did regularly employ these *memes* (DIRESTA et al., n.d.)—but rather to the ways "the meme concept encapsulates some of the most fundamental aspects of contemporary digital culture" (SHIFMAN, 2014, p. 4). MILNER (2016) describes memetic media as characterized by multimodal reappropriations of resonant ideas that make up a collective discourse that spreads widely. It is not difficult to imagine how bad actors could take advantage of these fundamental logics—for example, *black propaganda* social media accounts could anonymously reappropriate ideas to serve their own interests, counting on their resonance to spread widely and influence a collective political discourse. Indeed, MILNER (2016) notes that the online infrastructure supporting memetic media also "allows rumors and falsities to spread as easily as fact, provided those rumors and falsities resonate" (p.112).

If the theoretical underpinnings of memetic media have an intuitive connection with government-sponsored information operations, it may be more surprising to think of Mormonism as memetic (and, therefore, of use to these information operations). Yet, WEBER (2019) describes Mormonism as a meme because "the ideas of what constitute Mormonism ... function with rich symbolic meaning" (p.15) and are malleable enough to "self-replicate, mutate, respond to selective pressures, and transmit socially" (pp.52-53). In the American context, one of the symbolic values of the Mormon meme is political suspiciousness. In 2012, Gallup found that 18% of Americans “would not vote for a well-qualified presidential candidate who happens to be a Mormon” (NEWPORT, 2012, para. 1). Even Republicans (despite the candidacy of Mitt Romney, arguably America's most famous Mormon) showed themselves more willing to vote for black,

female, Hispanic, or Jewish candidates than Mormons, likely because of the religious right's suspicion of Mormons' unique theological views (HAWS, 2013; FLETCHER STACK, 2016; STUART, 2020). Furthermore, "Mormon" was the only hypothetical background that Democrats were more skeptical of than Republicans (JONES, 2012), perhaps because of the historical positions of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on race (HAWS, 2013) and its contemporary positions on LGBTQ+ rights (PRINCE, 2019).

The symbolic power and malleability of Mormonism suggest that invoking this religion could be particularly useful for those promoting political division among Americans. In this paper, I describe how government-sponsored Twitter accounts referenced Mormonism as part of information operations campaigns meant to stoke political tensions and achieve political outcomes in the United States before, during, and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Drawing on WEBER's (2019) "Mormonism as meme," I analyze tweets composed by government-sponsored accounts that contained the word "Mormon." My findings suggest that governments engaging in information operations invoked Mormonism as part of their efforts to both 1) support Donald Trump in the lead up to and aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and 2) cause more general political division in the United States. These findings serve as an example of the continuing ambiguity of Mormonism's relationship with American ideas and values. Furthermore, they draw attention to the ways in which information operations may tactically invoke religion to achieve their objectives.

BACKGROUND

"MORMON": A CONTESTED TERM

In writing a paper on "Mormonism," it is important to first specify that I use the term to refer exclusively to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The term "Mormon" is used by many—but not all (SHIELDS, 2019)—of the denominations that trace their heritage back to *The Book of Mormon*, a sacred text purportedly translated from ancient records by Joseph Smith, Jr. and subsequently published in 1830 (BOWMAN, 2012). My use of the term in this paper refers exclusively to the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is by far the largest of the

Mormon denominations. In doing so, I also acknowledge that the Church currently discourages use of the word "Mormon." Thus, I will use the abbreviated reference "the Church" to refer to the institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and will use the adjective "Latter-day Saint" to describe its official teachings, institutions, and leadership.

However, the word "Mormon" remains useful. This study focuses primarily on how others talk about members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United States. It is true that outside perceptions are not as nuanced as Latter-day Saint leaders—and others—would like. For example, WEBER (2019) quotes American sporting and media figure Caitlyn Jenner as describing Graceland University (her alma mater) as Mormon; although Graceland is operated by the Missouri-based Community of Christ, another descendant of Joseph Smith's 19th century movement, this denomination has typically been even more resistant to being called "Mormon" than its Utah-based counterpart. Yet, during the timeframe studied, "Mormon" was the common term for referring to members of the Church, and malicious government entities invoking the Church may be even less disposed than uninformed observers to respect its preferred naming. Thus, while I use officially approved terms to refer to official institutions, my continued use of the term "Mormon" (and its derivatives) is a deliberate reference to unofficial or outside conceptions of the faith.

MORMONISM AS (MALLEABLE) MEME

Unofficial or outside conceptions of the Church are key to this paper; indeed, cultural and public references to Mormonism are frequently vehicles for deeper interrogations of social ideas and values. I use WEBER's (2019) term "Mormonism as meme" to refer broadly to this phenomenon. Although there are several instances of both the institutional church and Mormon communities engaging with memetic media (BURROUGHS & FELLER, 2015; BRUBAKER et al., 2017; ROSS, 2015), "Mormon memes" are not the focus of this paper so much as "Mormonism as a meme." That is, Mormonism corresponds with MILNER's (2016) theory of memetic media in that it is part of a cultural "lingua franca for digitally mediated participation, a common tongue allowing geographically dispersed participants to connect and share" (p.7). For example,

CROPPER and FLOOD (2021) argue that Mormonism served as "the ideal framework for examining at arm's length the key issues at the center of political and social life in Third Republic France" (p.1). However, it is most common to find "Mormons and Mormonism interacting with notions of *Americans* and *America*" (DECKER and AUSTIN, 2010, p.3; emphasis added). Indeed, cultural representations of Mormonism often reflect a deeper reflection by Americans on Mormonism and what it tells them about themselves (BOWMAN, 2012).

The malleability of symbolic Mormonism described by WEBER (2019) is key to this reflection. WEBER (2019) suggests that Mormonism can be successfully invoked to represent that which is either sexually chaste, lascivious, or bizarre; likewise, I have already described how Mormonism can be invoked in ways that suggest insufficient commitment to either liberal or conservative values in American politics. Similarly, BOWMAN (2012) argues that "Mormons have been the model minority and a dangerous cancer on the republic—and sometimes both at the same time" (p.xx), and MAFFLY-KIPP (2012) has noted that Mormons simultaneously embody typically American ideals and fears. This is understandable given that since the 1850s, American views of Mormonism have gradually shifted from outright hostile to cautiously admiring to skeptically ambivalent (HAWS, 2013). These shifts mirrored Latter-day Saint leaders' evolving encouragement of 1) resistance to American culture up through the 1890s, 2) gradual assimilation into the United States through the mid 20th century, and 3) a friendly distinctiveness beginning in the late 20th century (MAUSS, 1994). Unsurprisingly, BAKER and CAMPBELL (2010) note that representations of Mormonism in the news follow a similar pattern.

GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Mormonism's symbolic power and malleability as a meme take on new significance in the context of government-sponsored information operations. Although governments have long engaged in information operations, the surge of social media-based operations beginning in the 2010s signaled a reversal of what had previously been thought of as "a declining trend in information warfare" (BASTOS and FARKAS, 2019,

p.1). This study specifically examines the context of information operations targeting the United States before, during, and after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

The most famous of these information operations is the Russian government's efforts—through the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency (IRA)—to interfere in the 2016 presidential election in favor of Republican candidate Donald Trump. Although Russia was not alone in these efforts (HINDMAN & BARASH, 2018), the example of the IRA is useful for describing this broader phenomenon. The IRA targeted several social media platforms (LUKITO, 2020) with the twin goals of influencing the outcome of the 2016 election and sowing division among Americans more generally (DIRESTA et al., n.d.). Rather than uniformly support Trump and attack his opponents, the IRA employed a series of distinct strategies that—in the aggregate—both attacked and supported a range of candidates, groups, and causes (LINVILL et al., 2019; LINVILL and WARREN, 2020). LUKITO and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that 314 news stories from 71 different outlets "quoted at least one tweet posted by an IRA-controlled account" (p.197), suggesting some success in influencing American political discourse.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate how government information operations invoked Mormonism on Twitter as part of an effort to accomplish political goals and create social tensions in the United States. As part of this investigation, I address the following questions:

1. Which governments used Mormonism as a meme?
2. Did government-sponsored accounts originate or amplify messages based on Mormonism as a meme?
3. Which identities did government-sponsored accounts using Mormonism as a meme adopt?
4. How did government-sponsored accounts use Mormonism as a meme?

METHOD

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This study integrates digital research methods (SALGANIK, 2018; SNEE et al., 2016) into a quantitative content analysis of social media data (RASMUSSEN PENNINGTON, 2017).

DATA COLLECTION

Although much Twitter research is conducted by retrieving tweet data from the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API), this project is based on datasets released by Twitter itself. In response to the 2016 United States presidential election, Twitter has made available for researchers and other observers several collections of tweets it has judged to be associated with government-sponsored information operations (TWITTER, n.d.). Thus, the data for this study is based on these collections (those available as of early February 2020), and my identification of "government-sponsored accounts" is based entirely on Twitter's judgment rather than on any API-derived information or personal judgment. Although Twitter's identification of government-sponsored accounts has not always been perfect (LINVILL and WARREN, 2020), this approach remains the most practical way of addressing these research questions at scale.

After acquiring these data, I took steps to make it more useful for this study. As a first step, I used "tweet_language" metadata to eliminate all non-English tweets (though I did not filter tweets by geolocation). I then identified all tweets containing the character sequence "Mormon" (regardless of capitalization). This method also identified some tweets referring to *Game of Thrones* characters named "Mormont" and one referencing a geographical feature with the name Mormon, which were manually identified and removed from the data during the coding process described below. By contrast, tweets that *mentioned* Twitter usernames containing the word "Mormon" were retained in the dataset, and the usernames were coded as though they were typical post content. This decision allowed for the consideration that government-sponsored accounts might deliberately engage with Mormon-themed accounts.

Since it was possible for tweets to appear in more than one Twitter-provided dataset, I also removed any duplicate tweets based on the *tweet id* assigned to each post. This method is not foolproof, largely because Twitter pseudonymized the original tweet ids of certain posts when adding them to public datasets. If Twitter provided different

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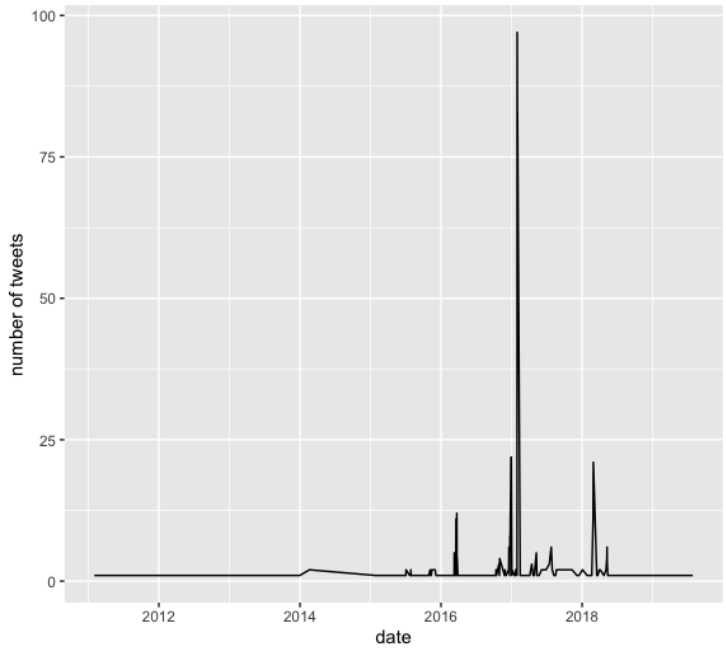
pseudonyms for such a tweet's id in different datasets, multiple versions of a single tweet would appear in my overall dataset. However, as I will describe below, some governments' information operations included heavy-handed "spamming" of the same message across multiple accounts. Because spam may be a point of interest (rather than an annoyance) for Twitter researchers (see CARPENTER et al., 2020), I avoided more aggressive methods of removing potential duplicates (based, for example, on tweet content and time of composition). Those methods would have risked removing tweets that appear to be duplicates but were actually part of a crude attempt at spreading a message at scale.

This process resulted in the identification of 511 tweets composed by 258 distinct accounts. As indicated in Figure 1, these tweets were composed between 2011 and 2019. However, most tweets were composed between late 2015 and early 2018 (with a spike in early 2017), indicating a particular (and unsurprising) focus by these accounts on the campaign, inauguration, and eventual administration of Donald Trump.

Figure 1: Distribution of "Mormon" tweets over time.



DATA ANALYSIS

Using the dataset described above, I took the following steps to answer each of the four research questions.

RQ1: Which governments used Mormonism as a meme?

To determine which governments' information operations invoked Mormonism, I identified the specific Twitter-provided dataset each tweet came from (and, subsequently, the country Twitter associated with that dataset).

RQ2: Did government-sponsored accounts originate or amplify messages based on Mormonism as a meme?

Twitter users may populate their own feeds by either writing their own posts or "retweeting" others' posts—a way of amplifying an already-existing message. In Twitter-provided data, a retweet begins with the character sequence "RT @." I therefore identified the number of posts beginning with this sequence.

RQ3: Which identities did government-sponsored accounts using Mormonism as a meme adopt?

To answer this question, I first reviewed all of the unique accounts in this dataset and developed a codebook describing recurring, mutually exclusive themes in their profile descriptions (see Table 3 below). After developing the codebook, I determined the reliability of the codes with the help of a second coder. We each coded a sample of 65 accounts (approximately 25% of the total accounts). Our codes agreed 86.2% of the time and achieved a Cohen's kappa of .78, which can be considered *substantial* (LANDIS and KOCH, 1977).

RQ4: How did government-sponsored accounts use Mormonism as a meme?

To answer this question, I first reviewed all of the unique posts in this dataset and developed a codebook describing recurring, mutually exclusive themes in the posts (see Table 4 below for the final version of these codes). As alluded to earlier, some governments pursued a "spamming" approach to information operations that sent identical posts from several accounts, either simultaneously or over a set period of time. I therefore considered—and eventually coded—only one instance of each identical post.

Codes applied to that post were eventually extended to all instances of it. Because codes were mutually exclusive (which facilitates measuring inter-rater reliability), it was particularly important to determine which code took precedence in case of a potential conflict. In the internal codebook, I developed rules for precedence that favored more noteworthy elements of a tweet. For example, although Mitt Romney is famously Mormon and Donald Trump was frequently acknowledged as having a "Mormon problem" during his campaigns, Ted Cruz's connections with Mormonism are less obvious. Thus, in a tweet mentioning all three political figures, the Ted Cruz code took precedence. I comment further on the interconnected nature of some codes in the results section below.

After developing the codebook, I determined the reliability of the codes with the help of a second coder. We each coded a first sample of 64 tweets (approximately 25% of unique tweets) but failed to achieve adequate inter-rater reliability. We therefore discussed our coding, removed one code, and made further adjustments to the codebook. Based on this revised codebook, we coded another sample of 64 tweets and achieved 89.1% agreement and a Cohen's kappa of 0.88 (*almost perfect*; LANDIS and KOCH, 1977).

RESEARCH ETHICS

Social media data present new challenges in terms of research ethics. Data on platforms like Twitter are often considered "public" and therefore not subject to ethical oversight by the University of Kentucky. However, Twitter users are not always aware—or approving—of the fact that researchers may use their posts without their consent (FIESLER & PROFERES, 2018). Furthermore, given the power of modern search engines, simply removing names or usernames is not necessarily sufficient to protect the identity of a particular user (GREENHALGH et al., 2021). In this paper, I therefore take an approach that is attentive to "questions of power relations" (SUOMELA et al., 2019, p.4). For example, because Twitter users retweeted by government-sponsored accounts have not formally consented to their inclusion in this paper, I avoid directly quoting their tweets, except in rare cases where an anonymous account uses exemplary language. However, the government-sponsored accounts

themselves—as well as public figures they have retweeted—operate from positions of power, and I have fewer hesitations about quoting material from their accounts or posts.

RESULTS

RQ1: Which governments used Mormonism as a meme?

Table 1: Countries Represented in Dataset

Country	Number of Tweets (n = 511)	Number of Accounts (n = 258)
Venezuela	247 (48.3%)	147 (57.0%)
Russia	167 (32.7%)	45 (17.4%)
Iran	71 (13.9%)	47 (18.2%)
China	18 (3.5%)	11 (4.3%)
United Arab Emirates	7 (1.4%)	7 (2.7%)
Saudi Arabia	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.4%)

As seen in Table 1, six different countries referenced Mormons or Mormonism as part of their information operations. Venezuelan-sponsored accounts made up over half of the accounts in the dataset and produced nearly half of the tweets in the dataset. Russia—the country most Americans would associate with information operations on Twitter—comes in second place in terms of the number of tweets and in third place (after Iran) in terms of the number of accounts. However, the Iranian accounts are responsible for less than half as many tweets as the Russian accounts, underlining that different governments' accounts tweeted about Mormons at different rates.

RQ2: Did government-sponsored accounts originate or amplify messages based on Mormonism as a meme?

Table 2: Modes of participation represented in dataset

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Mode	Number of Tweets (n = 511)	Number of Accounts (n = 258)
original tweet	313 (61.2%)	189 (73.3%)
retweet	198 (38.8%)	73 (28.3%)

As seen in Table 2, a majority of the tweets were composed by the operators of the government-sponsored accounts, with the remaining tweets having been composed by (presumably) genuine accounts and subsequently reposted by government agents. Similarly, nearly three-quarters of the accounts posted at least one original tweet, with only just over a quarter limiting themselves to amplifying existing messages and a small number of accounts employing both modes of participation. Nearly 80% of the original tweets (n = 245) that referenced Mormonism were composed by Venezuelan accounts, despite Venezuelan accounts accounting for less than half of the entire dataset. Furthermore, only two Venezuelan tweets were retweets, suggesting that different governments had different levels of intentionality in their engagement with Mormonism. Besides Venezuela, China was the only country to be associated with more original tweets related to Mormonism (n = 13) than retweets (n = 6).

RQ3: Which identities did government-sponsored accounts using Mormonism as a meme adopt?

Table 3: Themes in presentation of government-sponsored accounts.

Code	Description	Number of Accounts (n = 258)	Number of Tweets (n = 511)
Donald Trump	profile descriptions that describe the account as pro-Trump or as focused on Trump	117 (45.4%)	216 (42.3%)
news	profile descriptions that describe the account as belonging to a journalist, focusing on news, or providing access to information	47 (18.2%)	93 (18.2%)
normal	profile descriptions that include personal	39 (15.1%)	45 (8.8%)

person	descriptions, humor, inspirational statements, or other "normal" practices for Twitter profiles		
professional	profile descriptions that describe the account as being associated with a company or that include professional qualifications or job titles	12 (4.7%)	16 (3.1%)
liberal	profile descriptions that describe the account as liberal, as supporting liberal causes or individuals, or as being opposed to the right or to Donald Trump	6 (2.3%)	8 (1.6%)
Islamophobic	profile descriptions that describe themselves as opposed to Muslims, Islam, Sharia, etc.	5 (1.9%)	95 (18.6%)
conservative	profile descriptions that describe the account as conservative or as supporting conservative causes	4 (1.6%)	4 (0.8%)
parody account	profile descriptions that describe the account as a "parody account"	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.4%)
unclear	profile descriptions that are ambiguous or too short to determine what they mean	26 (10.1%)	32 (6.3%)

Government-sponsored accounts appeared to follow three broad strategies in developing their fictional Twitter profiles (see Table 3). The first category makes explicitly partisan (and otherwise political) connections. Indeed, nearly half of the accounts in this dataset establish a link with Donald Trump (e.g., "I'm a Trump supporter all the way to the WH. Awesome feeling to be a part of #Making America Great Again"). Several others describe themselves as explicitly liberal (e.g., "Hillary is my choice! #NeverTrump"), conservative (e.g., "Const Conservative Patriot Mamma□Defending #Liberty & #Freedom!□Luv #fam #friends #dogs & dancing cha-cha-cha!□"), or Islamophobic (e.g., "I believe that OUR COUNTRY needs to BAN ISLAM and #DeportALLMOSLEMS! Islam is pure evil! STANDUP, FIGHTBACK, SPEAKUP TAKE OUR COUNTRY BACK .. #INFIDELFORLIFE"). This first category is also noteworthy for some of the specific trends that emerge. For example, 114 (97.4%) of the Trump-focused accounts are associated with the Venezuelan

government. It is also important to note that while Islamophobic accounts make up less than 2% of the accounts in this dataset, those accounts are collectively responsible for nearly 20% of tweets.

The second category consists of profiles that make appeals to authority. These include profiles masquerading as journalists or news organizations (e.g., "Be the first to know Seattle's local news. Politics, sport, entertainment, business, features and more that you need to know and share") and those that foreground professional credentials or affiliations (e.g., "College Professor, Lawyer, Blogging on Politics, Business, Marketing and Social Media").

In contrast with the previous two categories, many accounts adopted an "everyperson" approach presumably intended to blend right into Twitter. These accounts included content typical of Twitter profiles (e.g., "I recently gave up Warcraft so my productivity, and drinking, have increased dramatically.") or identified themselves as parody accounts (e.g., "Role playing account. Parody Account. We don't own the content posted.").

In addition to these three broad categories, it should be noted that about 10% of the coded profiles were not in English, very short, or otherwise too ambiguous to determine strategy or intent. It may be noteworthy that none of these government-operated accounts claimed to be Mormons or to be affiliated with Mormonism in any way.

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RQ4: How did government-sponsored accounts use Mormonism as a meme?

Table 4: Themes in evocations of Mormonism by government-sponsored accounts.

Code	Description	Number of Tweets (n = 511)	Number of Accounts (n = 258)
Mormonism as Communitarian	tweets that describe efforts to build "Mormon cities" or describe Utah as a "Mormon state"	181 (35.4%)	117 (45.4%)
Mormon Tabernacle Choir	tweets that explicitly or implicitly focus on the Mormon Tabernacle Choir	52 (10.2%)	24 (9.3%)
Mormonism and Abuse	tweets that focus on sexual or other abuse committed by or connected to Mormons	41 (8.0%)	18 (7.0%)
Mormonism and LGBTQ+ Topics	tweets that focus on LGBTQ+ topics or people in relation to Mormonism	24 (4.7%)	19 (7.4%)
Mormonism and Islam	tweets that compare, contrast, or otherwise connect Mormonism with Islam	21 (4.1%)	7 (2.7%)
Mormonism and Boy Scouts of America	tweets that focus on Mormons' connection with the Boy Scouts of America	20 (3.9%)	17 (6.6%)
Mitt Romney	tweets that focus on Mitt Romney	17 (3.33%)	7 (2.7%)
Ted Cruz	tweets that focus on Ted Cruz in connection with Mormonism	16 (3.1%)	3 (1.2%)
Mormon Leadership	tweets that represent official church statements or that reference the president or other leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	15 (2.9%)	9 (3.5%)
Donald Trump	tweets that focus on Donald or Melania Trump in connection with Mormons or Mormonism	14 (2.7%)	7 (2.7%)

Mormonism and Polygamy	tweets that make connections between Mormonism and polygamy or that reference "fundamentalist Mormons"	13 (2.5%)	13 (5.0%)
Mormonism and Politics	tweets that focus on connections between Mormonism or Mormons and political movements	11 (2.2%)	4 (1.6%)
Mormons as Victims of Terrorism	tweets that describe or reference Mormon missionaries that survived terrorist attacks	11 (2.2%)	2 (0.8%)
The Book of Mormon Musical	tweets that focus on the Broadway musical "The Book of Mormon"	10 (2.0%)	8 (3.1%)
Evan McMullin	tweets that (explicitly or implicitly) focus on Evan McMullin	8 (1.6%)	8 (3.1%)
Mormonism as Authoritarian	tweets that describe Mormonism as authoritarian, "mind-controlling," or a cult or that discuss excommunications or "MormonLeaks" efforts	8 (1.6%)	6 (2.3%)
ex-Mormons	tweets that focus on no longer being Mormon, having been raised Mormon, or the process of leaving or resigning from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	6 (1.4%)	3 (1.2%)
Mormon Temples	tweets that focus on Mormon temples	5 (1.0%)	5 (1.9%)
Mormon Missionaries	tweets that reference Mormon missionaries	4 (0.8%)	3 (1.2%)
Mormonism and Race	tweets that mention race in the context of Mormonism	3 (0.6%)	3 (1.2%)
Mormons as Exemplary	tweets that describe Mormons as talented, as good examples, or as doing important work	3 (0.6%)	3 (1.2%)
Mormonism and Last Days	tweets that reference the apocalypse or signs of the "end times," including in reference to a "Blood Moon"	2 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)
Mormonism and Marijuana	tweets that focus on medical marijuana in relation to Mormons or Mormonism	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.8%)

other	tweets that use the word "Mormon" in some other context	24 (4.7%)	23 (8.9%)

As seen in Table 4, 23 specific approaches to "Mormonism as meme" were present in the data. An additional "other" code captured 24 tweets with less cohesive or more ambiguous references to Mormonism, including some that used the term "Mormon" as part of what LINVILL and WARREN (2020) describe as "playing hashtag games" (p.7). Furthermore, ten tweets were references to the Broadway musical "The Book of Mormon" which is inspired by Mormonism but distinct enough to make a confident interpretation of accounts' intent difficult. The remaining approaches fit into the following broader categories:

MORMONISM AND AMERICAN VALUES

The most common reference to Mormonism avoided specific (partisan) political references, instead questioning the religion's commitment to or compatibility with the broader American project by describing it as communitarian and insular. Although 181 tweets fell under this code, 82 of these tweets used the identical language "Building Zion: the controversial plan for a Mormon-inspired city in Vermont" to introduce a link to a news story, and a further 97 linked to another news story using the identical language "From book to boom: how the Mormons plan a city for 500,000 in Florida." All 179 of these tweets (98.9% of tweets coded in this way) were associated with Venezuelan-run accounts. One of the remaining tweets referenced one of these same news stories, and the final one made a comment about "those damned Mormons with their Mormon State! □".

Less frequent codes may also represent strategies meant to invite reflection on whether Mormonism is compatible with American values. For example, most of the 24 tweets discussing Mormonism in the context of the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., "#TopNews Hundreds of Mormons resign in Utah same-sex policy protest") are implicitly or explicitly critical of the Church's socially conservative policies, likely souring liberal Americans on Mormonism. More ambiguous—but nonetheless noteworthy—are the 20 tweets discussing the Church's evolving relationship with Boy Scouts of America (e.g., "Mormons Sever Ties with Boy Scouts of America"), which

ultimately ended in December 2019. Mentions of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) may in fact be aimed at deeper interrogation of Mormonism and American values because of the patriotic nature of the Scouting program and the perception that the Church was leaving the organization because of its gradual opening toward the LGBTQ+ community. Three tweets that referenced race in relationship to Mormonism took different approaches, with two referencing racism in the Church's history (e.g., "Mormons grapple with race decades after ban on black leaders.") and one making racist statements presumably intended to shift Mormons' thinking ("Black impersonator steals 183k from Mormon Church, arrested... #tcot #blackviolence"). Two tweets referencing Mormonism in the context of a Utah debate over medical marijuana (e.g., "Mormon church explains stances on 2 medical marijuana bills #health ") tied the religion to the continuing evolution of American values and Mormons' place within that evolution.

MORMONISM AND POLITICS

Many references to Mormons and Mormonism used them as a proxy for discussing the political controversy surrounding Donald Trump. For example, the 52 tweets referencing the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (since renamed the Tabernacle Choir on Temple Square) are largely—if unintuitively—focused on politics rather than music. The Choir performed at the January 2017 Trump inauguration, and while some of the tweets associated with this code simply reported on the Choir's intent to perform, most commented on the controversy associated with this decision (e.g., "Mormon Choir Vilified for Scheduled Performance at Trump Inauguration"), or one choir member's subsequent resignation ("Comparing Trump to Hitler, Mormon Tabernacle Choir singer quits over inauguration invite acceptance"). Likewise, 17 tweets repeated criticism of Mitt Romney's disapproval of Trump ("Trump on Romney: 'Are you sure he's a Mormon?' #politics"), 16 commented on or criticized Republican primary candidate Ted Cruz's appeal among Mormons (including a repost of Trump's tweet suggesting that "Lyin' Ted Cruz should not be allowed to win [the Utah primary]- Mormons don't like LIARS!"), and eight commented (usually in negative terms) on Evan McMullin, the Mormon who ran as a third-party presidential candidate in 2016 and appealed to his co-

religionists and other conservatives to reject Trump (e.g. "The Truth About Evan McMullin – And Why I Am So Disappointed in My Mormon Friends For Falling For This").

Other tweets interrogated or encouraged Mormons' political loyalties even more explicitly. For example, 14 tweets examined Mormonism's relationship with Trump, either highlighting his struggle to win over Mormon votes during the primary (e.g., "Donald Trump's Mormon problem, explained"), asserting that no such trouble existed (e.g., "Love this UTAH for Trump balloon flying over Salt Lake City. Many Mormons are for Donald Trump.#Trump2016"), or describing Mormons as threatening to Trump (e.g., "Billy & Bushes, Ryan, Mormon Mafia attack @realDonaldTrump, ignore HRC's odious deceit,contempt for Americans").

Eleven additional tweets made connections between Mormonism and politics more generally, including retweeting now-defunct accounts called @MormonDems and @MormonRight.

MORMONISM AS ITS OWN PHENOMENON

Many evocations of Mormonism seemed not to extend beyond the religion itself, focusing on relevant news, history, and practices. In some cases, these invocations can be seen as relatively neutral, such as the 15 tweets referencing Church leadership or the five referencing the religion's iconic temples. Others, such as the three describing Mormons as exemplary, are complimentary. Some tweets, however, were not as kind. For example, the 15 tweets referencing fundamentalist Mormon offshoots (13 referencing polygamy and another two referencing beliefs about the "last days") make none of the distinctions between fundamentalist groups and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that the latter has long fought to maintain. Another collection of tweets was even more critical: 41 called attention to cases of abuse committed by Mormons, eight described the Church as authoritarian, and six spoke (approvingly) of people leaving or having left the Church.

MORMONISM AND ISLAM

The fifth-most frequent code was applied to 21 tweets that invoked Mormonism in making a comparison with Islam. Most of these tweets were Islamophobic—but invoked Mormonism in different ways. Some compared Mormonism favorably to Islam (e.g., "Ever wonder hey you never hear about a radicalized Amish lone wolf or Mormon sleeper cell? □ #IslamIsTheProblem") whereas others described Mormonism as inappropriately similar to Islam or as equally worthy of disdain (e.g., "Islam is currently the most dangerous religion. Christianity is stupid, with Mormonism being the stupidest of all."). A further 11 tweets referenced Mormon missionaries who survived the March 2016 Brussels terrorist attack. Although none of these tweets mentions Islam, the Trump campaign used "radical Islamic terrorism" as a buzzword throughout 2016, and government-sponsored accounts may have sought to stoke Islamophobia among Mormons. This possibility is tentatively supported by the two tweets that explicitly positioned Trump as able to protect Mormons (and other Americans) from terrorism (e.g., "□ BREAKING: 3 Mormons from UTAH injured in #Brussels Attack Trump's the only one with the guts to stop them #UTCaucus").

DISCUSSION

Shifman (2014) and Milner's (2016) both emphasize that internet memes are more than individual variations on captioned pictures or stock phrases. Rather, MILNER (2016) suggests that understanding these variations draws attention to "the memetic dimensions of... a media ecology where it's relatively cheap and easy to make a statement, remix a text, or spread an idea" (p.7). The relative cheapness and ease of memetic media is of obvious interest to government-sponsored information operations, whose sponsors are particularly interested in spreading ideas. Yet, while it may be unintuitive to think of a religion as being a meme in the same sense as those captioned pictures or stock phrases, this study highlights how Mormonism "connect[ed] with enough participants to inspire iteration after iteration from a fixed premise" (MILNER, 2016, p.29)—in short, as WEBER (2019) describes, Mormon can be effectively "used as a code word... [even if] the meanings of that code do not always tether to the same concepts" (p.15). In the following sections, I illustrate the memetic aspects of Mormonism by first describing some of the approaches to "Mormonism as meme" that

exist in these data—that is, the meanings behind different uses of "Mormon" as code word—and then emphasizing the malleability of this meme across and even within emergent themes. In doing so, I connect these references to Mormonism to the twin purposes of government-sponsored information operations in this context (DIRESTA, n.d.): influencing political outcomes and creating social tensions.

EVOCATIONS OF MORMONISM AS MEME

Because Venezuela is not frequently mentioned in popular and political discourse about government information operations through social media, its prominence in these data is notable. Venezuela sponsored over half the accounts in the dataset, which composed nearly half of its tweets. Other manifestations of prominence (e.g., responsibility for nearly 80% of original tweets and over 97% of Trump-focused accounts) suggest the possibility of a clumsy-but-deliberate strategy of discrediting Mormonism among Trump supporters. Despite the obviousness of this strategy (i.e., "spamming" social media), and although these tweets were unlikely to influence elections, Venezuelan efforts effectively tap into long-held American concerns about Mormonism, perhaps to inflame social tension in the United States. Over 98% of tweets commenting on Mormonism and communitarianism came from Venezuelan-sponsored accounts, suggesting a familiarity with Mormonism's 19th century efforts to "make of themselves an independent civilization" (BOWMAN, 2012, p.152) in the American West. Related concerns linger in the form of some Americans' concerns about the Church's influence on political communities with large Mormon populations (e.g., PRINCE, 2019). Venezuela's strategy is likely motivated by its existing tensions with the United States and the common perception in some parts of Latin America that Mormons are "agents of American assimilation." (BOWMAN, 2012, p.221). For example, between 2016 and 2018, Venezuelan authorities imprisoned Utahn Latter-day Saint Josh Holt, who was visiting to marry his Venezuelan girlfriend, on suspicion of plotting against the government.

Other countries took more subtle—but perhaps no less deliberate—approaches to invoking Mormonism. Except for Venezuela and China, all governments employed retweeting more often than original tweeting. As opposed to Venezuela's forcible

insertion of Mormonism into online conversations, this approach amplifies extant, collective discourses (and, thereby, tensions) about Mormonism. Similarly, while Venezuelan-run accounts tended to be politically oriented, other countries mixed their partisan accounts with "regular" Twitter users and trustworthy professionals, which presumably influenced Americans' conversations about Mormonism in a gentler way. However, subtle does not mean ineffective. Tweets on topics such as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Boy Scouts of America were more common than tweets associating Mormonism with obvious political figures—and address deeper questions of the Church's relationship with the United States. For example, MAUSS (1994) describes the Church's 1913 adoption of the Boy Scouts of America as part of the initial "effort to bring the church into mainstream American life" (p.26; see also BOWMAN, 2012), making the 2019 severance of that relationship an obvious opportunity to call the compatibility of the two into question. Similarly, invoking the controversy around the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's performance at Donald Trump's inauguration is all the more effective for the Choir's critical role in furthering Mormons' American assimilation in the 20th century (HAWS, 2013).

Of course, not even the most effective information operations could have arranged for the Choir and the Scouts' appearance in the news during the timeframe of this study. Similarly, since many of the coded tweets were in fact reposts of others' work, the focus on this controversy did not originate exclusively from information operations. Nonetheless, government-sponsored accounts' focus on these events—even more than on more obvious political debates—suggests strategic thinking combined with a certain awareness of Mormonism. Indeed, although casual references to Mormons while participating in "hashtag games" (LINVILL and WARREN, 2020, p.7) were ambiguous enough to only be coded as "other," they suggest that these government agents are familiar enough with Mormons to joke about them as part of efforts to blend in with regular Twitter users.

THE MALLEABILITY OF MORMONISM AS MEME

The malleability of Mormonism as a symbol is apparent from a holistic consideration of the codes associated with this analysis. For example, some codes

described individual (or small groups of) Mormons as exemplary or sympathetic while others described the religion itself as authoritarian and spoke approvingly of individuals or groups who became ex-Mormons. While other codes can also be said to invoke Mormonism in different ways for different purposes, this pattern is notable for mirroring HAWS's (2013) observation that individual Mormons are generally seen more favorably than Latter-day Saint institutions are.

Malleability is also present *within* certain codes—not just between them. Consider, for example, a tweet such as "Comparing Trump to Hitler, Mormon Tabernacle Choir singer quits over inauguration invite acceptance" reminds liberal readers that the Church has tacitly accepted a Trump presidency while demonstrating to conservative readers that at least some Mormons think of Donald Trump as a Hitler-like figure. No matter the political affiliation of the reader, the tweet provides them with reasons to possibly think twice about Mormons and Mormonism—perfect for creating tension among Americans. This tweet is perhaps the most extreme example in this study of WEBER's (2019) assertion that Mormonism's symbolic power can be called upon to symbolize different things—even, as BOWMAN (2012) and MAFFLY-KIPP (2012) have described, symbolizing seeming opposites at the same time.

Other tweets treated Mormons themselves—and not just their popular image—as malleable. While the examples listed above generally correspond with government-sponsored accounts' broader goals of creating social tension, these accounts also made and amplified calls for them to act in particular ways during the primary and general elections, underlining more specific goals of achieving particular political outcomes. In keeping with government-sponsored accounts' willingness to "play both sides" (e.g., LINVILL et al., 2019; LINVILL & WARREN, 2020), some tweets endorsed Mormons' general hesitation to vote for Trump. However, the overall goal of government interference on social media during this timeframe was—at least in the case of Russia—to promote Trump's election (DIRESTA et al., n.d.). In keeping with this goal, tweets often appealed to Mormons to abandon alternative figures like Ted Cruz and Evan McMullin. Reviewing the history of Mormonism and American politics, STUART (2020) has argued that the United States Republican Party has a generally one-sided relationship with Mormonism: While Republicans rely on Mormon votes, they

generally remain wary or distrustful of them. This utilitarian view is exaggerated by the presence in these data of Donald Trump's appeal that to Mormons that they "don't like LIARS!" and therefore shouldn't vote for Cruz, an appeal that ignores his own incompatibility with some Mormon values and his alleged private mocking of Mormons (COPPINS, 2020). Of course, this cynicism was exaggerated even further by foreign entities' apparent wielding of Mormonism against Mormons themselves to serve their own, malicious ends.

However, one final reminder of the malleability of the Mormon meme serves as a reminder that Islam even more distrusted in the United States than Mormonism (JONES, 2012). Simultaneous evocations of Mormonism and Islam are not limited to these data—WEBER (2019) notes that "often in contemporary American culture, to speak of Mormons... is also to invoke anxieties about Muslims" (p.17). Note that Weber equates "speak[ing] of Mormons"—not "anxieties about Mormons"—with "anxieties about Muslims." While this distinction may be not be deliberate, it certainly describes the patterns present in these data. Not all of the comparisons between Mormons and Muslims made—or amplified—by government-sponsored accounts were derogatory towards Mormonism. However, whatever they had to say about Mormonism, these tweets were overwhelmingly Islamophobic. Furthermore, accounts using Islamophobic profile language were not only relatively common but disproportionately productive in terms of numbers of tweets.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations to this study suggest possibilities for further research regarding the intersection of religion and social media-based information operations. For example, while this study (reasonably) assumes that information operations' focus on Mormonism is targeted at the United States, future scholarship might profitably consider tweets in other languages (and examine geolocation data) to determine whether (or how) Mormonism is also invoked in information operations targeting populations outside the United States. More importantly, while this study documents how government information operations effectively appeal to Mormonism's ambiguous relationship with

the United States to further their ends, further research is needed to see how these operations have invoked other, more vulnerable religions, such as Judaism and Islam.

CONCLUSION

Mormonism's symbolic power and the malleability of that symbolism have made the American-born religion an effective, memetic vehicle for asking deeper questions about American ideas and values. This study has explored 511 posts invoking Mormonism that were composed by 258 Twitter accounts sponsored by six governments as part of their information operations against the United States in the period before, during, and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In aggregate, these tweets suggest that government agents deliberately invoked Mormonism as part of twin strategies to influence the 2016 election and to create tension and division among Americans. Perhaps more importantly, the large proportion of retweets—and the high profile of some retweeted accounts, including then candidate Donald Trump—serve as a reminder that Mormonism is a meme that exists within American discourses and debates even without outside prompting. These findings serve as a contemporary manifestation of a long-running, ambiguous relationship between the faith and its home country—and raise broader questions about the role of religion in information operations targeting the United States.

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