Gender and Sexuality in YouTube Videos of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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This article explores the interplay of gender and religion in the LDS community in the social medium YouTube. For this purpose, a case study was conducted with two videos under the research question: "To what extent do members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints discuss gender and sexuality on their official YouTube channel, and how do the protagonists represent their own gender and sexuality in these videos?" The research shows a simplified representation of the faith community's attitudes towards gender and religion in social media, which allows for a positive connotation for the sensation of non-heterosexual feelings. In particular, the acceptance of same-sex attraction is emphasized without addressing the sinfulness of its practice. At the same time, it was elaborated that especially the distribution of roles within a family is clearly regulated and that the genders defined as binary by the LDS have clear tasks to fulfill.

1. Introduction and research question

> The relationships between sexuality and religion are complex and reciprocal: on the one hand, religions strongly influence the meaning of sexuality and gender roles in a society; on the other hand, sexuality in all its facets is a central theme of religious interpretive systems (Grieser, 2000 p. 289)[1].

This interconnectedness is particularly relevant and intriguing within the context of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints[2], as will become clear in the further course of the article. While the connection between gender, sexuality, and religion has existed in various religions throughout history, the study of these topics in relation to theological and religious matters, especially in the German-speaking region, is a relatively new field of research (Benthaus-Apel, Gärtner, Sammet, 2021, p. 7). The LDS community, with more than 16,000,000 members worldwide, is a significant religious movement. It is therefore crucial to examine how LDS address the issues of gender and sexuality (The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints, 2022a).

This paper emerged from the seminar-series on Gender and Religion, with a specific focus on a seminar with media representation. Therefore, this article explores not only gender and sexuality aspects of the LDS but also its representation in the medium of YouTube. The central research question of this study is: "To what extent do members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints discuss gender and sexuality on their official YouTube channel, and how do the protagonists represent their own gender and sexuality in these videos?" This question

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[1] Own translation from the german original.

[2] Hereafter abbreviated as LDS, meaning both or either the LDS Church and/or its members. The LDS represents the largest splinter group within Mormonism. The term Mormons is avoided here to clarify that this research exclusively focuses on the LDS and not the entire religion, and therefore the findings may not necessarily be applicable to all Mormon denominations. (Mäder, 2020, p.20).

is of great significance as it provides insights into the theological and sociocultural beliefs of the LDS community through their discussions of gender and sexuality and their portrayal in their official online presence. By examining these aspects, we can gain a better understanding of how religion and sexuality interact in modern society and the impact this may have on members of the LDS community.

2. LDS understanding of gender and sexuality

In its own materials designed to regulate community life, the LDS specifically addresses topics such as sexuality and gender in the *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. This handbook serves as a guide primarily for community leaders within the LDS (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022b). For the LDS, the genders (coded by the LDS as binary) are already given by God before birth, are sacred and marked with specific abilities and attributes. Therefore, there are clear characteristics that are assigned to either women or men, which establish a clear division of roles within families. LDS theology goes so far as to say that the greatest form of salvation after death is reserved only for fully believing heterosexual persons who have beget biological children in marriage (Sumerau, Cragun, 2015, p. 53). Amy Hoyt points out that there is a clear difference between what LDS outwardly characterize as the ideal woman and the real life of women within the faith community. While the theoretical ideal identifies a woman as a stay-at-home-mom who lives in a heteronormative marriage, does most of the child-rearing, and both dresses and acts modestly, the majority of women within the LDS are single, or cannot financially afford to be a stay-at-home-mom. Nevertheless, the family is the focus of women's faith, and they accept the subordination to men that this entails (2020, p. 58). Especially in marriages, the supportive and dependent role of women is emphasized. Femininity constructed by the LDS and the tasks of female persons are always demarcated from masculinity and male tasks (Sumerau, Cragun, 2015, p. 61,65). Even though for men the family is also a central aspect of belief, they are primarily responsible for the protection and survival of the family and for being a good role model for the children, while the mother is responsible for the basic upbringing (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022b, p. 7). Particularly for male devotees is that they are expected to control their sex drive before marriage, so consumption of pornography and masturbation is prohibited among LDS. Women are not expected to do this to the same extent, as it is assumed that they have a naturally lower sex drive (Burke, Hudec, 2015, p. 336). In their own writings, the LDS do not use the terms homosexual or gay, instead they speak of same-sex-attraction. Although they do not approve of sexualities and gender identities that do not conform to their view of God's design, by their own admission they nevertheless reject any forms of therapy that can harm persons and thus also conversion or restoration therapy (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022b, p. 258). Eric G. Swedins shows in his essay *Homosexuality and therapeutic culture in Mormonism* the different phases of LDS versus different therapeutic approaches to homosexuality and makes it clear that conversion and restoration therapies were at times the practice of the church. However, Swedin also makes clear that a change has taken place within the LDS, so that nowadays same-sex attraction is not a sin within the faith, even if the practice of homosexuality remains one (2020, p. 189-197). Something similar can be said for transgender people. "Worthy members who identify as transgender but do not

pursue a medical, surgical, or social transition to the opposite of their biological sex at birth ('sex reassignment') may receive a temple recommendation and temple ordinances" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022b, p. 224). On the other hand, persons who undergo conversion are threatened with expulsion from the church or at least restrictions within the faith community. In this context, the social transformation should be emphasized, which, in addition to the change of pronouns and name, also includes the clothing and the general appearance corresponding to the gender (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022b, p. 317f., 407f.).

3. The relationship of gender, sexuality and religion

For this paper, the spectrum model of Linda Woodhead is used, which divides the reciprocal relationship between gender and religion into four different groups. For this purpose, she distinguishes in a preliminary consideration between confirmatory and challenging religions on the one hand and between mainstream and marginal religions on the other hand. While Confirmatory religions aim to support and reinforce social power distributions and thus also the existing gender orders, Challenging religions actively try to change these relations and to counteract them. Mainstream religions are integrated into society and part of the existing power relations, so they are often perceived as

Figure 1: Religion's positioning in relation to gender (Woodhead, 2012, p. 4).

respectable. In contrast, marginal religions do not conform to social standards and are therefore shunned or condemned by the public. If one combines these aspects, one gets the following four groups: Consolidating, Tactical, Counter-cultural and Questing religions (Woodhead, 2012, p. 3-5).

Woodhead classifies LDS as a questing religion. These are treated with aversion by society, although they strongly support the existing gender orders. Adherents of these religions are concerned with maintaining the best possible position within the prevailing gender relations, rather than changing the order to suit their needs (Woodhead, 2012, p. 11-14). The categorization is particularly evident in the sacralization of their views of gender and sexuality, in that LDS not only attempt to justify their heteronormativity theologically, but also enshrine it as a central element in their faith. At the same time, within these gender relations, women seek to produce the best possible outcomes for themselves, which results in an internal empowerment as they are able to obtain a similar spiritual status as men through their efforts to be a good wife and mother (Moslener, p. 279). Although LDS does not fight against the prevailing power system of gender, the movement is often treated with suspicion or aversion by society (Mäder, 2020, p. 86).
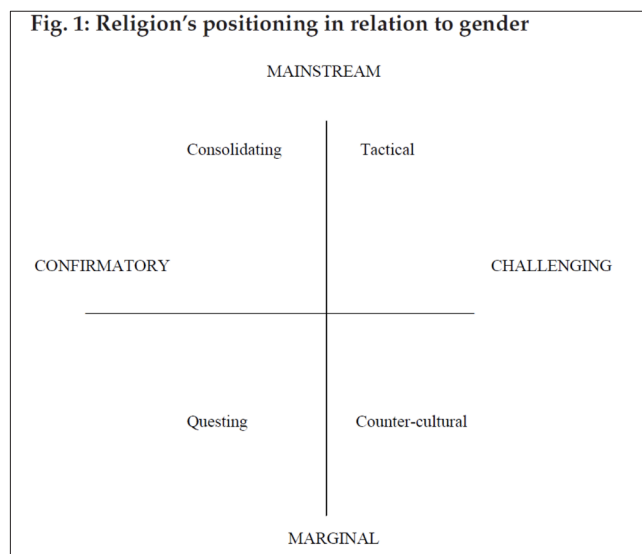
4. New Religious Movements

The term New Religious Movements (NRMs) covers religious and spiritual movements that do not belong to the major established religions. The term was developed as an alternative to the terms sect and cult, which often have negative connotations and are used synonymously in everyday language (Barker, 2014, p. 253f.). The best-known approaches to specifying NRMs were developed by Eileen Barker on the one hand and Roy Wallis on the other. Barker's approach focuses on features that characterize NRMs, thus taking a substantive approach. She has developed six characteristics of NRMs, but it is important to note that not every movement has to fulfill all characteristics to be classified as an NRM. The six characteristics are: (1) NRMs are often composed of converted first-generation members. (2) NRMs are likely to appeal to an atypical segment of the population. (3) NRMs often have a charismatic founder or leader. (4) NRMs often have a dichotomous worldview. (5) NRMs are treated with suspicion and/or antagonism by the rest of society. (6) NRMs change inevitably and usually more rapidly and radically than older established religions (Barker, 2014, p. 241-244).

Although the LDS is not a first-generation religion per se, it is worth emphasizing that Baker nevertheless defines it as such because it steadily has more converted members than born-in ones (Barker, 2014, p. 239; The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints, 2022a). In the Woodhead classification, it was already shown that LDS is viewed with suspicion by society, which is why the fifth characteristic is also fulfilled. Furthermore, the movement has a charismatic leader or prophet, both in its founding and today (Vance, 2015, p. 25; 40). The dichotomous worldview, which is evident in what is permitted and what is forbidden, but also in the heteronormativity of the LDS, has also been elaborated. Therefore, the classification of the LDS as NRM is conclusive.

In contrast to Barker, Wallis does not examine what characteristics mark the movements, but rather what their attitude toward society is. In doing so, he distinguishes three different types of NRMs: World-Rejecting New Religion, World-Affirming New Religion, and World-Accommodating New Religion. World-Accommodating New Religions do not anchor their engagement with society primarily in their faith. They separate the secular from the spiritual or sacred and participate in social life, whereby changes in society or adaptations to it are at most of secondary interest, since their faith is the driving force behind their way of life (Wallis, 2003, p. 54f.). According to Wallis' approach, the movement can be classified as a world-accommodating new religion, as it distinctly distinguishes its religious practices from mundane existence and prioritizes self-optimization within the religious framework rather than within society as a whole.

5. Methods

For this case study, two videos from the official LDS YouTube channel (The Church of Latter-day Saints, n.d. a)[3] were analyzed using Mayring's Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring,

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[3] The official LDS YouTube channel has existed since 2008 and has currently 2.13 million subscribers. To date, 884 videos have been uploaded to the channel. The videos cover a range of topics and genres, including offers of help and personal stories, but also music videos, holiday greetings, thematic series and short stories from the scriptures. (The Church of Latter-day Saints,

2015): *Ricardo's Story- Reaching Out toward the Light* (The Church of Latter-day Saints, 10/25/2016a)[4] and *Elizabeth's Take on Love and Understanding* (The Church of Latter-day Saints, 10/25/2016b)[5] , which are connected to each other, because they deal with the same story from different perspectives. The videos consist primarily of interview material, so the spoken content was treated like interviews and were transcribed. However, in order to be able to include the visual content in the analysis as well, observation protocols were created for the videos and merged with the transcripts. For the transcription of the spoken material, the simple scientific transcript according to Susanne Fuß and Ute Karbach was used (Fuß, Karbach, 2019, p. 64-68). The center of this analysis is the formation and application of categories. For the videos analyzed, the merged transcripts were first examined for important content, which was then paraphrased and generalized in order to constantly increase the level of abstraction. From these generalizations, categories could be formed, which in turn could be divided into main and sub-categories. Finally, the results of the various videos were evaluated quantitatively and combined in a final analysis to interpret them in relation to the research question (Mayring, Fenzl, 2019, p. 633; 636; 638; 641). In order to enable the traceability of this article, the details for the quotes of the videos are not given with the transcript lines but with the time stamp of the videos when the quote starts.

6. Results

The first video *Ricardo's Story - Reaching Out toward the Light* was uploaded on October 25th, 2016, and has a duration of 7 minutes and 15 seconds. The focus of the video is on Ricardo, a 46-year-old man who shares his journey of self-discovery regarding his attraction to men and his faith. His wife, Elizabeth, also contributes to the narrative, explaining how his husband's sexuality has influenced their relationship and how she deals with it today. The video presents monologues by both Ricardo and Elizabeth, interspersed with different visuals, with an emphasis on Ricardo's artistic activities. Throughout the video, Ricardo creates paintings, which eventually come together to form a cohesive artwork (LDS1, 6:12).

The analysis reveals eight main categories: sexuality (14 instances), visual representation (9), family (30), emotions (48), art (47), faith (15), neutrality (10), and gender roles in general (5). The category of sexuality can be further divided into four subcategories: negative connotation of homosexuality (2), avoidance of the terms homosexual or gay (9), usage of the terms homosexual or gay (2), and ignorance of bisexuality*[6] (1). It becomes evident that throughout the video, direct terms like homosexual or gay are generally avoided, and instead, expressions such as *same-sex attraction* ("Ricardo: [...] confident he was to talk about his same-sex attraction in a non-shameful way"; LDS1 2:54) or *feelings towards men* ("Ricardo: And as we began

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02/20/2020; 01/27/2022). The channel description makes clear both who is responsible for the channel and that comments that do not meet the wishes or demands of the faith community will be deleted: "This is the media channel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Unless otherwise indicated, all content on this channel is copyrighted by Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Comment Policy: Please note that comments that are profane, crude, insensitive, off topic or contain personal attacks will not be approved. For more information and content, visit: ChurchOfJesusChrist.org." (The Church of Latter-day Saints, n.d. b)

[4] For the purpose of simplicity, the specification will be abbreviated as LDS1 in the following.

[5] For the purpose of simplicity, the specification will be abbreviated as LDS2 in the following.

[6] Bisexuality is used here as an umbrella term and is representative of all sexualities in which people feel romantic feelings and/or sexual attraction for at least two genders. To make this clear, an asterisk is placed after bisexuality.

dating more seriously, I felt that it was important to share with her that I have thoughts and feelings towards men"; LDS1, 1:55) are used. However, it is worth noting that there are scenes where the terms homosexual or gay are actively used ("Ricardo: At a meeting at work, I met a fellow co-worker there, that is openly gay"; LDS1, 2:50). Although it is only mentioned once that the concept of bisexuality* seems to be unknown or not accepted (Ricardo: I know a lot of people might ask: well, how is it that you said that you're attracted to your wife, when you said you're attracted to men. [...] I got to say that I don't really have an explanation for that. All that I can say is, that's how I'm wired; LDS1, 2:24) it is important to include this in the research, as the clear distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality creates a binary framework, neglecting other sexualities. Whether this could even imply a denial of other sexualities cannot be answered at this point, as the topic was not further elaborated.

The category of visual representation is identified nine times in this analysis, illustrating how the chosen medium aims to convey the content not only through words but also through visuals, enhancing its clarity and impact ("In the middle is a picture of a man sitting on a bed with a child and talking. The man is very tall and has a straight and definite sitting posture. The child is curled up in himself and clasps his hands between his legs", LDS1 0:44). The category of family can be divided into two subcategories: gender roles in the family (17) and family cohesion (13). Gender roles in the family can be further categorized into three subcategories: the expectation for the man to pay attention to the woman (3), the role of the father in the family (6), and the support of the woman for the man (8). This division highlights the video's intention to emphasize the supportive role of the woman ("Elizabeth: But I know the kind of person he is and it didn't change my feelings for him, I still loved him and still wanted to pursue our relationship"; LDS1, 2:15), while expecting the man's active participation in family life by giving attention to his wife and dedicating time to his family ("Ricardo: And what I agreed to do was to get home and put away my cell phone, dedicate my time to the kids and to her"; LDS1, 4:22). These categories demonstrate that although the man is the central figure in the video's narrative, an equal amount of attention is given to exploring the role of women in the family. The category of family cohesion underscores the significance of family within the LDS community, as the video highlights more aspects related to family bonds than to sexuality-related themes („Ricardo: [...] I will say that it's a family journey"; LDS1 6:19).

The emotions category can be further divided into five subcategories: self-confidence (10), shock (1), affection (10), sadness (17), and joy (10). On the one hand, self-confidence concerns Ricardo's assessment of his work colleague who talks openly about his homosexuality, but on the other hand Ricardo also describes his own self-confidence after accepting and embracing his attraction to men ("Ricardo: [...] Just to be myself has been the most amazing thing" LDS1, 5:45). Shock is mentioned once, referring to Elizabeth's initial reaction upon learning about Ricardo's attraction to men ("Elizabeth: Yeah, that was a surprise, that was a shock. I wasn't expecting that. LDS1, 2:10). Affection encompasses emotional and sexual connections between Ricardo and his wife, as well as other men ("Ricardo: I know a lot of people might ask: well, how is it that you said that you're attracted to your wife, when you said you're attracted to men."; LDS1, 2:24). Sadness is identified when Ricardo experiences conflicts related to his sexuality and masculinity („Ricardo: I just went to my room and start crying. I I couldn't understand what was the big deal about be me and myself"; LDS1, 0:53) and when Elizabeth feels

neglected by him („Elizabeth: [...] I was happy for him but at the same time I didn't feel number one"; LDS1, 3:50). Joy is associated with Ricardo embracing his sexuality and being true to himself („Ricardo: To me that's being authentic. [...] This is finding that core happiness within you"; LDS1 6:49).

The art category highlights the strong connection between Ricardo's life journey and his artistic passion. Despite facing rejection for his artistic interests during childhood, Ricardo has integrated art into his life and pursued a career in graphic design. Art is used both visually and metaphorically, emphasizing its significance in Ricardo's story. The faith category, similar to sexuality and art, illustrates a process of reconciliation between Ricardo's life experiences and his faith („Ricardo: Before the mere fact that I had those attractions always made me feel really disconnected to God and to the Savior"; LDS1, 5:14); („Ricardo: The support from my bishop, my wife, the support from my close friends at work and co-workers. As I feel their love and support in my life [...] through them I feel the love and support from God"; LDS1, 6:25). The neutrality category primarily relates to the protagonists' clothing choices, which are simple and devoid of patterns or distinctive cuts. The use of neutral colors is also reflected in Ricardo's artistic representations. The gender roles in general category focuses on the assumption of specifically masculine hobbies or behaviors („Ricardo: Watch your mannerisms, you need to be more manly about the way you talk [...]. You need to do these other things that boys do"; LDS1, 0:40). Ricardo's narrative challenges these assumptions by showcasing his artistic talents and passion throughout the video.

The second video "Elizabeth's Take on Love and Understanding" (LDS2) was also uploaded on October 25th, 2016, and has a duration of 3 minutes. Unlike the previously analyzed video, Elizabeth is the main protagonist in this video, but Ricardo also has speaking parts. There are no visual overlays in this video; instead, Elizabeth and Ricardo speak directly to the camera separately. The analysis of this video yielded four main categories: sexuality (15), family (5), emotions (6), and faith (4). The sexuality category can be further divided into four subcategories: negative connotation of homosexuality (4), avoidance of the terms homosexual or gay (7), usage of the terms homosexual or gay (3), and ignorance of bisexuality* (1). Negative connotations of homosexuality are particularly evident at the beginning of the video when Ricardo expresses hope for a cure for his homosexuality ("Ricardo: I actually thought that getting married and all that will cure me [...]. It unfortunately didn't happen"; LDS2, 0:11). The video attempts to avoid the terms homosexual or gay more frequently, using expressions like "same-sex attraction" ("Elizabeth: I don't really think about it in those terms that: oh I'm LDS and my husband's SSA" LDS2 0:57) or "attractions towards men" ("Ricardo: It was just more about coping with these attractions towards men and hoping that getting married will change it"LDS2 0:48). However, the terms homosexual or gay are also used directly ("Elizabeth: [...] But when discussions arise, when they talk about gay people"; LDS2, 1:14). Furthermore, it is suggested that there may be an incompatibility between Ricardo's homosexuality and his feelings towards his wife, although he denies it ("Ricardo: But I always felt really conflicted inside. It did not affect my love for my wife or my attraction towards her"; LDS2, 0:35), indicating a lack of consideration for the concept of bisexuality* or other possible sexualities that would make compatibility apparent.

The family category in this video is particularly evident through the support Elizabeth provides to her husband, reaffirming Ricardo's situation and encouraging other church members to support other homosexual individuals:

> Elizabeth: [...] so I felt like I could sympathize a little bit more [...] knowing my husband and what he goes through [...] and how- how things affect him in his feelings. [...] The members that are understanding and non-judgmental, that show love and support for people who are gay or experiencing attraction, that's the best thing they can do, is just not to judge. (LDS2, 1:27)

The emotions category in this video is a combination of sadness and compassion. Through Elizabeth's perspective, the video attempts to provide a close external viewpoint that does not view homosexuality as an ideal state but still creates an approach that does not fully condemn it:

> Elizabeth: And so when there are hurtful comments, it's really hard for those members that experience SSA or that are gay. It's really hard for them to feel welcome at church, and we want them to feel welcome, we want them to feel loved, and that (3) we can all make it back to heavenly Father someday. (LDS2, 2:30)

The faith category particularly emphasizes the compatibility of homosexual feelings and LDS beliefs. However, it appeals not only to homosexual individuals but also to existing members, encouraging them to welcome and love people with these feelings within the community and faith ("Elizabeth: [...] we want them to feel welcome, we want them to feel loved, and that we can all make it back to heavenly Father someday"; LDS2 2:42).

The analysis of the videos has shown that sexuality and gender are relevant topics for the LDS faith. Specifically, it has become clear that a deviating from exclusively heterosexual feelings is evaluated negatively. However, a clear distinction is made between homosexual attractions and feelings and the actual enactment of those attractions, suggesting that while the feelings may not be desirable, they can at least be compatible with the faith. The explicit condemnation of homosexual behavior could not be deduced or refuted in the videos. One could hypothesize that while controversial topics are addressed in LDS YouTube videos, certain aspects may intentionally be overlooked to create a more positive approach to the faith. This is particularly plausible due to the LDS's characteristic of being a NRM and its annual increase in converted members compared to those born into the faith. However, these videos do not contradict the established theoretical framework; instead, they offer a simplified representation. In line with the developed understanding of sexuality, the videos also exhibit a tendency to avoid the terms "homosexuality" and "gay" and do not address other concepts of sexuality. Regarding gender relations, there is clear alignment with the previously established findings. Binary genders appear to be an unquestioned realm, and the videos strongly emphasize gender roles. The position of women, in particular, reflects aspects of the Questing Religion identified in Woodhead's Spectrum Theory. It is evident that women feel comfortable in their roles and represent empowerment. Since the videos do not mention whether the Elizabeth has a career, she could even embody the ideal type of a stay-at-home mom. Additionally, the significance of modest clothing and general modesty of women, as developed in the theoretical framework, is highlighted in the video. The topics related to women are so significant that they can receive their own videos to present their perspectives, even though the main story is not about them. It can be inferred that through their idealized behavior as perfect wives, they serve as role models and contribute to shaping their faith. While the first video partly criticizes

male stereotypes as long as they do not limit their role as husbands, the ascribed femininity of women is continuously honored, albeit sometimes indirectly. In both videos, it is evident that the protagonists are aware of their gender and sexuality and their positions within the faith, and they aim to support and reinforce them. A significant aspect of this videos is Elizabeth's special position. She serves as a mediator between individuals with same-sex attractions like her husband and the rest of the faith community, with her empathy explicitly highlighted. It can be hypothesized that LDS women are particularly suited for tasks that require empathy and communication, and these are characteristics of their gender. However, further research is needed to fully support this hypothesis.

7. Conclusion

To fully answer the research question, a significantly larger sample size is needed than what was possible in this study. However, certain trends can be identified based on the analysis. It has been observed that the protagonists in the LDS YouTube videos address and represent the topics of sexuality and gender in accordance with their faith. In both cases, a clear binary framework is presented, which is also evident in LDS literature. While gender binary appears to be the optimal state that should be maintained, sexual binary is viewed as an unfortunate situation that is acknowledged but not desirable. Nevertheless, the LDS attempts to create a positive approach through the videos by omitting the problems and incompatibility of practicing homosexuality with the faith. Further insights that could lead to a more significant answer to the research question could be obtained through a larger sample size, interviews with the protagonists or producers of the videos, or (participant) observations in LDS worship formats. Beyond this research question, it would be interesting to explore how the LDS utilizes other social media platforms, particularly those that employ different formats such as Instagram or TikTok. It would be intriguing to examine the time-limited content in stories and similar features, focusing on whether more radical statements are made or critical aspects are addressed, given the temporary nature of such content. Alternatively, it could also be fruitful to investigate gender and sexuality in the LDS context in countries other than the United States, where different laws and worldviews shape the everyday lives of the local societies. It is evident that there is a vast research field in this regard, and further analysis would be worthwhile. Religion exists in a constant tension with society, and vice versa, making it an exciting endeavor to continue researching these topics in the near future to see if the LDS adapts to certain societal issues or attempts to shape society itself.

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