

Part II: Interactions between the Communication Spaces of Documentary Media and Religion

4. The (Ex-) Mormon Image Campaigns

The money spent on public relations campaigns in the run up to elections is telling evidence of the media's ability to mold an image. The discussion in this chapter focuses on the spaces of communication of two series that are in effect commercials and on the modes in which they can be read. In *I'm a Mormon* (US 2010–2015) and *I Am an Ex Mormon*²⁸⁵ (US 2010–2015), members and former members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) respectively promote their world views. In the *I'm a Mormon* video series LDS Church members advertise on behalf of their church by presenting themselves as model Mormons. In the *I Am an Ex Mormon* video series former LDS Church members defend their decision to leave by highlighting the advantages of no longer belonging to the institution. While in both series social actors provide personal insights into to their lives and worldviews, different self-representation strategies are applied in the videos, which last between two and five minutes.

Self-representation by the LDS Church in the media has a long history. In Mormon film productions, where members of the LDS Church employ media to particular ends, self-representation strategies often seek to outweigh representations by others. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media*²⁸⁶ and in a comprehensive work in progress,²⁸⁷ Sherry Pack Baker, a historian of communication, has traced the now-distant roots of Mormon engagement with the media, providing an overview of an intensive relationship throughout the history of the Mormons. Baker points out that since its foundation in 1830, the LDS Church has had a positive attitude toward the media, often employing the most current technological innovations. Today the LDS Church continues that tactic, using print, images, audiovisual media, and the Internet to spread its message, recruit members, and transmit information.²⁸⁸

285 'Ex-Mormon' is used here to describe former members of the LDS Church; the unhyphenated 'Ex Mormon' refers to the video campaign *I Am an Ex Mormon*.

286 Pack Baker, "Mormonism."

287 Sherry Pack Baker, "Mormon Media History Timeline, 1827-2007," *Brigham Young University Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 117–23.

288 See part I, chapter 3.1.

4.1. Two sides of an image campaign

The current chapter compares the videos of two different production spaces, putting them in conversation with each other. On one hand, I interrogate the media strategies found in the commercials *I'm a Mormon*, a series launched – and produced by the LDS church. On the other hand, I explore the *I Am an Ex Mormon* video series, produced by former LDS Church members in response to the LDS Church campaign. The self-definition by LDS Church members found in the former series is communicated in specific reading modes, to which the Ex-Mormons respond in the latter. Both series promote worldviews that are religiously defined in terms similar to the relationship between brand and consumer in a secular context of markets and goods. Assessing the relationship between brand and consumer in a faith-based context, Mara Einstein has noted,

consumers take on brands as part of their personal identity and in turn become evangelists for the product. The irony is that conversion and evangelizing have traditionally been religious processes, and now that religious institutions are reclaiming the concept of self-promotion, they are being chastised for being marketers.²⁸⁹

In the case of the *I'm a Mormon* series, members of the LDS Church promote their church through self-representation; they are their own “marketers.” The counter-campaign of *I Am an Ex Mormon* is, by contrast, reactive.

My approach is shaped by three questions that scrutinize aspects of the two series. The first question concerns the self-representational strategy: how can we characterize that self-representation in the spaces of communication of the *I'm a Mormon* videos and in the response of the *I Am an Ex Mormon* videos? This first part of each subchapter contextualizes the video clips, embedding them in the communication spaces of the broader media campaigns. The second part of each subchapter considers a single episode from each series in light of the second question: how do the commercials communicate their message? The third question, addresses reading modes: in which reading modes, constructed and shared by all participants, from makers to audience, do the series participate? This subchapter is framed by

289 Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 85. Einstein's monograph provides a concise and rich overview of marketing strategies by religious communities or religious practices. The result is a ground-breaking study of religion and advertising that analyses marketing vocabulary as employed within religious spheres.

the semio-pragmatic model of the communication spaces of production, consumption, distribution/circulation and reading modes.²⁹⁰

A semio-pragmatic approach considers a variety of situations, or modes, by which the audience reads the sources. Reading modes are steered by the audio-visual source itself, which provides information in the space of representation, and the source's communication spaces. Fleshing out possible reading modes is a heuristic tool that embraces different audiences in the space of consumption of an audio-visual source. The idea behind this approach is that an audio-visual source's meaning is generated in the tension between the space of consumption, where different audiences receive the same source, and the space of representation, which interacts with the other spaces of communication.²⁹¹ By no means exhaustive, such an approach seeks to explore a source's possible reading modes. If the same reading mode is applied by different spectators (including the producers), the meaning of the audio-visual source is located on the same "axis of relevance."²⁹²

The conclusion of the chapter compares the reading modes generated by the series' different communication spaces of production, representation, circulation/distribution and consumption.

4.2. *I'm a Mormon* campaign

Initially the *I'm a Mormon* video series was part of a bigger image campaign. The aim of the LDS Church was to relaunch its media presence in an updated and refreshed form. The new media strategy was presented in 2010 via the Internet, television, and billboards, with the Missionary Department in charge of the multi-million-dollar campaign. The following analysis of the series first on a macro-level draws all 184 commercials under the microscope in their space of production and distribution. Then, a close reading of one single video focusses on the space of representation. Finally, the campaign's space of consumption is discussed by mean of its website and how it enhances online activities. The analysis aims at defining possi-

290 For a detailed discussion of the semio-pragmatic model of communication spaces see part I, chapter 2.2.

291 Marie-Therese Mäder, "Auf den Spuren eines Stummfilms. Zwei Filme eine Geschichte," in *Leid-Bilder. Eine interdisziplinäre Perspektive auf die Passionsgeschichte in der Kultur*, ed. Natalie Fritz et al. (Marburg: Schüren, 2018), 52–54; Odin, "Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone," 155.

292 Odin, *Les espaces de communication*, 39.

ble reading modes for the videos, whose self-representation strategy becomes evident.²⁹³

Space of production and distribution of a global campaign

Between 2010 and 2015, 184 commercials using the tagline “I’m a Mormon” were produced, with each lasting between two and four minutes. The shorts were principally distributed through the Internet, and the LDS Church Public Affairs Department assisted with their promotion. All this material can be accessed through the official LDS Church webpage, but it also appears on YouTube and other Internet platforms. Between 2010 and 2012 individual clips were also aired on a number of television channels all over the United States, in consort with a poster campaign on bus platforms and the interior of public transportation in the following cities: Minneapolis-St. Paul, St. Louis, Baton Rouge, LA, Colorado Springs, CO, Rochester, NY, Pittsburgh, Oklahoma City, Tucson, AZ, and Jacksonville, FL. After the success of the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* in New York City, the campaign was launched in June 2011 with prominently placed billboards at Times Square, signs on taxi roofs, and advertisements in the subway.²⁹⁴ The media scholar Chiung Hwang Chen suggests that many observers speculated the campaign paved the way for Republican presidential candidate and Mormon Mitt Romney to repair the image damage from Proposition 8 advocacy.²⁹⁵

In the distribution space the campaign was focused on the Internet in particular, where members of the church with different cultural backgrounds were put in contact. At the end of each short film, a link appeared that facilitated its sharing, and the commercials can easily be downloaded too. In March 2019 the church launched a completely new website, with the *I’m a Mormon* campaign’s webpage reduced to the videos, which are

293 As of June 2019, only 162 of these commercials were available through the Mormon Channel Web site (see Mormon Channel). “I’m a Mormon,” accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/series/im-a-mormon/sort:latest/page:6>. The present considerations refer to the 184 videos available in 2015.

294 Chiung Hwang Chen, “Marketing Religion Online: The LDS Church’s SEO Efforts,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 10, no. 4 (November 18, 2011): 199.

295 Proposition 8 was the successful campaign financed by the Catholic Church and the LDS Church to abolish the law that legalized gay marriage in California. See also the documentary *Proposition 8* (Reed Cowan, Steven Greenstreet, US 2010).

also presented on the LDS Church's YouTube channel, ComeUntoChrist.org.²⁹⁶

One of the biggest stigmas faced by LDS Church members is the widely held view that they are not Christians but rather members of a secret cult. With the results of a survey carried out in 2010 in mind, the church wanted to overcome a "problem of perception" in the United States. Opinions expressed by Americans about the LDS Church were largely negative, with adjectives such as secretive, cultish, sexist, controlling, pushy, and anti-gay dominating descriptions of the church in 2010.²⁹⁷ The *I'm a Mormon* campaign also tried to direct attention away from Mormon theology and toward Mormon people, as Elder S. Hickley explained: "During the past several decades we've used media focusing primarily on what we believe. This effort focuses more on who we are *because* of what we believe."²⁹⁸

Mitt Romney's involvement in the US presidential race in 2012 provided one reason for the campaign.²⁹⁹ Romney's membership of the LDS Church was a significant biographical handicap for a future president. This media campaign sought to overcome prejudices against Mormons through a particular emphasis, as Matthew Bowman has pointed out: "Though Mormonism still embraces personal self-discipline and a certain degree of conformity, the great strategy of mormon.org is instead to project a wholesome diversity, to reflect back to a pluralistic America itself revitalized by the fruits of Joseph Smith's revelations."³⁰⁰ As we shall see, the diversity mentioned in the campaign has its limits, even though the campaign focuses not only on American members but also on Mormons scattered all over the globe.

296 A short text about the protagonist is listed below the video and an inactive link is given for more information. The copied link leads to the new webpage "Discover What's inside | ComeUntoChrist.Org," accessed May 20, 2019, <https://www.comeuntochrist.org/beliefs/book-of-mormon/discover>.

297 Laurie Goodstein, "Mormon Ad Campaign Seeks to Improve Perceptions," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2011, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/us/mormon-ad-campaign-seeks-to-improve-perceptions.html>.

298 "Mormon.Org 'I'm a Mormon' Effort Launches in New York City," [www.mormonnewsroom.org](http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormon-ads-new-york-city), June 16, 2011, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormon-ads-new-york-city>.

299 Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind*, 207–281.

300 Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 2012, 248.

The limits of diversity in the space of representation

In the first year of the campaign, 45 short films were produced, of which 38 portrayed Mormons resident in the United States. The following year only 18 of the 45 members portrayed lived in the United States. The year 2012 saw 58 commercials produced, featuring 40 individuals not resident in the United States. The number of non-US residents featured in the campaign thus rose through these first three years. In 2013 fewer commercials were produced, only 21, with 9 American representatives. As these figures show, even after the 2012 presidential race was over, the church continued its production of the series, and an additional nine *I'm a Mormon* shorts appeared in 2014 and 10 in 2015. Since 2013 the goal of the series has not been to foster one member's presidential campaign but to enhance the Mormon public image in general. And the campaign is also intended to provide support for missionary efforts, to convince non-members to join the church.

An overview of these 184 short films makes the impressive diversity of the people portrayed evident on a number of levels. The geography of the social actors is very broad: they live in twenty-three different countries located on five continents – Europe, North America, South America, Asia, and Australia (table 1).

A closer look at these figures allows us to establish that ninety-four social actors are from the United States and ninety from other countries (table 2). Also worthy of our attention is the fact that seventeen of the ninety-four social actors portrayed in the United States have non-American cultural roots. Overall, therefore, almost two-thirds of the Mormons depicted in this material do not have a U.S. background. The LDS Church seems eager to show its international character or, more accurately, its global diffusion and anchoring throughout a worldwide community. The many languages spoken in the episodes, languages that include Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Mandarin, also demonstrate this globalized self-representation.³⁰¹

Each clip places a single member of the LDS Church in his or her own context by highlighting one specific aspect of that individual's life, perhaps a particular skill. The series not only seeks to show the diversity of the life plans possible within Mormonism but also draws a multifaceted picture of

301 In addition to nationality, spoken language, and cultural background, the gender roles displayed could also be drawn into the discussion, as they give insight into the gender diversity within the clips.

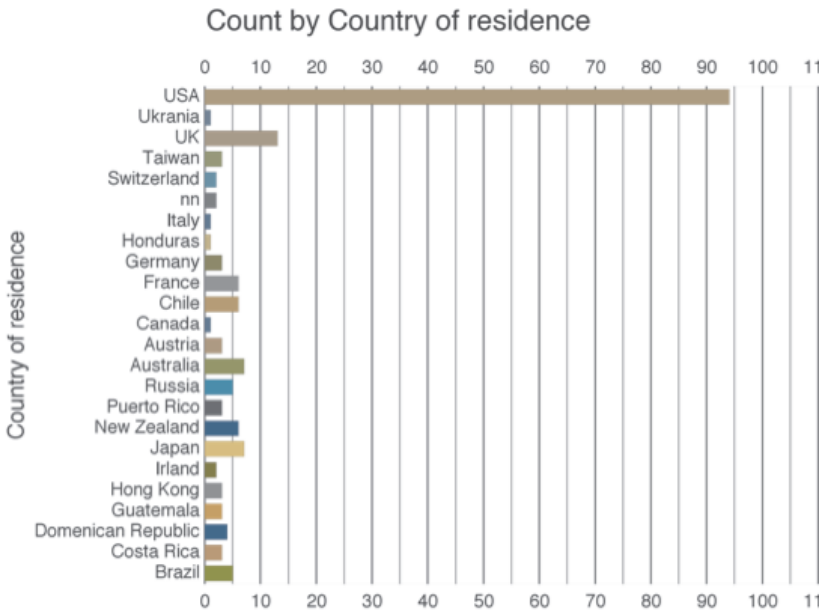


Table 1 Countries of residence.

Year	Number of videos	Country of residence US	Country of residence not US	US residence with non-US cultural background
2010	40	38	2	8
2011	45	18	27	4
2012	58	18	40	2
2013	22	10	12	1
2014	9	8	1	2
2015	10	2	8	0
Total	184	94	90	17

Table 2 Cultural background of the social actors in the I'm a Mormon series.

the race, age, and family situations of the church's members. Yet even though the series portrays the great diversity of the Mormon people, its aesthetic strategy and the dramaturgy of the portraits reveal a subtle unity of attitudes and values.

In October 2011, the LDS Church Public Affairs Department announced in the *Mormon Faith* blog that the campaign would be run in

twelve major cities in the United States and Australia. The director of the LDS Church Public Affairs Department, Michael Otterson, suggested that the advertisements were successful “because they show Latter-day Saints as they really are – average people who try their best to follow Jesus Christ.”³⁰² The second part of this analysis considers whether the people portrayed are really as average as Otterson proposes. Both the narrative of the *I’m a Mormon* series and its context are part of a self-representational strategy that seeks to bridge the gap between individual members and a potentially global audience.

In the following case study of the video *I’m a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7* (LDS, US 2012, 2’42) the communication strategies of one commercial are scrutinized on a micro-level to determine how the LDS Church places its self-representation strategy within the logic of the media and how the process of mediatization works.³⁰³

The space of representation in *I’m a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*

At a micro-level, analysis of the commercial *I’m a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7* gives further insights into the representation strategy. The main social actor in our example is Nadja Pettitt, a mother of seven children who lives in Paris. Pettitt was raised in Switzerland and has lived in the United States, the Netherlands, and France. Pettitt explains that she speaks Swiss German and High German, French, Spanish, English, and Dutch. She is constantly on the move, seen to be very busy throughout the whole episode. The editing is fairly fast and includes a cheerful and dynamic music score, and the bright and clean colors support the affirmative atmosphere. Pettitt is represented as a multitasking and vivacious mother who is equipped with endless energy. Her husband and their children are visible mostly in the background and whirling around her, but they stay mute. The analysis here follows the takes in chronological order.

Pettitt is not “only” a mother; she is her children’s chauffeur (fig. 12), a freelance translator, a cook, a housekeeper, and a violin teacher (fig. 13): “Playing or not playing was not an option. But what to play was an option for my children,” she explains. She prepares meals and is the manager of

302 “‘On Faith’ Blog: The Real Mormons Behind TV Advertising,” www.mormon-newsroom.org, October 31, 2011, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/on-faith-blog-real-mormons-behind-tv-advertising>.

303 A detailed discussion of mediatization is provided in chapter 2.2.

her children's education (fig. 14). For much of the episode her children are visible in the background.



Fig. 12 Busy mother Nadja Pettitt as chauffeur (*I'm a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*, 00:00:17).

Fig. 13 Busy mother Nadja Pettitt as violin teacher (*I'm a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*, 00:00:09).



Fig. 14 Busy mother Nadja Pettitt as family manager (*I'm a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*, 00:00:33).

Fig. 15 Busy mother Nadja Pettitt explains: "I could never imagine that somebody else could essentially raise my children" (*I'm a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*, 00:00:53).

But there are three exceptions – in shots at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end – when Pettitt is not moving and speaks directly into the camera. During the first of these moments she explains that she works freelance because, she states, "I could never imagine that somebody else could essentially raise my children." This statement is filmed in a close-up, with the social actor addressing the audience. The fixed camera frame and the distance mark the shot aesthetically as the central message (fig. 15).

Another vital moment is found in the viewer's encounter with the family on the football field. One child is absent, but the remainder of the hap-



Fig. 16 The happy family poses for a portrait (*I'm a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*, 00:02:30).

Fig. 17 “Je suis Maman. Je suis linguiste épanouie. Mon nom est Nadja Pettitt et je suis Mormone” (*I'm a Mormon, Parisian, and Mother of 7*, 00:02:36).

py family is staged in a grouping typical of a photo shoot (fig. 16), with mother and father positioned in the middle and their children around them. The scene is filmed in slow motion and the atmosphere changes from vivid and funny to emotional with a serious undertone. The family picture seems perfect, shot in sharp, bright colors.

Then we hear Nadja Pettitt saying in the voice-over, “Je suis Maman,” and simultaneously the English words fade in, in bold white letters. The shot changes. Pettitt exits an office building through a glass door. Still in voice-over, she states, “Je suis linguiste épanouie.” In the next shot, Pettitt is sitting in the room where the clip started. She is placed on the right side of the frame and filmed in close-up. Again she looks and speaks into the camera, toward the audience (fig. 17): “Mon nom est Nadja Pettitt et je suis Mormone.” The translated words are on the left side of the frame: “I’m a mom. I’m a blossoming linguist. My name is Nadja Pettitt and I’m a Mormon.”

After this statement, the camera zooms even closer and the words fade out. In this moment, for the first time during this clip of 2 minutes and 40 seconds, we see busy mother Nadja Pettitt motionless, and she is not talking. A final smile appears on her face. That smile is warm and authentic. Her confession has been staged most effectively, with its focus on a sympathetic social actor and her statement.

The depiction of Nadja Pettitt confirms and justifies how the everyday life of a successful Latter-day Saints mother looks. According to Chiung Hwang Chen the mother role depicted here affirms a traditional image of motherhood.

Motherhood is portrayed as a major element of women’s identity; most show motherhood in action. Women cook, clean, teach, sing,

and play with their children; they photograph and paint their little ones; they blog about motherhood; and they talk about the joy, worries, and frustration of being mothers.³⁰⁴

Chen's accurate observation analyses the series' narrative of mothers and exactly expresses Nadja Pettitt's attitude. The mothers in the *I'm a Mormon* videos seem to take their joy at being a mother as their highest goal. But women without children are also depicted. In these instances the women are incorporated into proxy families, whether in caring for their sibling's children as passionate aunts (*I'm a Mormon, Viennese Violinmaker, and Fantastic Aunt*, US 2011), in taking care of orphan children (*I'm a Mormon and Mother to 79 Orphaned Children*, US 2012; *I'm a Mormon, Mother, and Caretaker of Bulgarian Orphans*, US 2012), or at least in being happy about the marriage of other couples, who will soon themselves be parents (*I'm a Mormon Wedding Dress Maker and Patron of Beauty*, US 2015).

The aesthetic strategy is similar across all the episodes in this series, providing a recognition factor. The social actors are diverse, but all are photogenic, pleasant, efficient, and successful in their occupations. At first glance the narrative presents them as people like you and me. But in some ways the people in these episodes are also not average. All the Mormons who are depicted in the series are in some respect exceptional, and all are seeking to make a maximal contribution. Thus Nadja Pettitt is no common mother, for she is mother to seven children who are all involved in different activities managed according to Pettitt's impressive schedule.

The *I'm a Mormon* videos show the social actors at work, enjoying their leisure time, and in their homes. These representative Mormons are often presented to us along with their spouses, children, parents, or other relatives. Beyond motherhood, families are themselves key. If there is no family, we see close friends instead. Yet what we are not given, either visually or aurally, is an articulation of their religious community or their religious practices. We do not encounter these social actors when they are involved in church activities, preaching, or addressing theological topics. These activities are kept private. Family, work, and hobbies are public matters; religious practice is not on display. Based on this micro-analysis of a single video and the information gathered in the spaces of production and distribution, we can now explore possible reading modes for this series.

304 Chiung Hwang Chen, "Diverse Yet Hegemonic: Expressions of Motherhood in 'I'm a Mormon' Ads," *Journal of Media and Religion* 13, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 39.

Controlling the reading modes in the space of consumption

In the case of the *I'm a Mormon* series, which is produced by a religious institution, the documentary and moral modes rely on the credibility of the social actors, who are portrayed as likable people with positive personalities.³⁰⁵ They all appear honest, although they have conspicuously similar attitudes as happy, successful people and role models for the LDS Church. Their moral message is that their being a member of the church is the best thing that could have happened to them and that as a result every other issue in their lives is solvable.

Beside these constitutive modes of documentary media, three other reading modes can be identified within the communication spaces: the advertising mode, the identity mode, and the performative mode. These modes, although not shared by every spectator, make up a possible “axis of relevance” that embraces the diversity of the communication space formed within a framework determined by institutionalized religion.

First, the series applies the advertising mode steered by the production space, for it has been produced by the LDS Church specifically to shape its image. The social actors in front of the camera are outstanding representatives of the church who are willing to step up for an institution to which they belong. Most probably they see benefits in presenting parts of their life and sharing their worldview with a broader public. On its webpage the Public Affairs Department of the LDS Church provides additional information on and guidance to the *I'm a Mormon* campaign, explaining:

The ads give a glimpse into the lives of Latter-day Saints from all over the world and refer people to the mormon.org website, where they can read the profiles of tens of thousands of Mormons, chat live with representatives who will answer questions about the faith and watch dozens of videos about members of the Church.³⁰⁶

The quote shows how the producers have sought to shape the consumption space in order to facilitate a communication process in which the audience will share the axis of relevance intended by the producers. The instructions are informal and functional. They appear to operate as a manual

305 Documentary media are defined by applying the documentary and moral modes. See for more detail part I, chapter two.

306 “‘I’m a Mormon’ Campaign Provide Glimpse into Lives of Latter-Day Saints,” www.mormonnewsroom.org, accessed May 21, 2019, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/i-m-a-mormon-campaign>.

rather than as elucidation, an intention that seems all the more reasonable in light of the complexity of a campaign that consists of a variety of commercial forms such as television spots, billboards, and advertisements on buses and on the Internet.

Secondly, the series adopts an identity mode, whereby LDS Church members can identify with the social actors who are portrayed. Here, then, we find self-affirmation, as boundaries are defined between LDS Church members and others, as the title *I'm a Mormon* indicates. The social actors in the campaign's videos offer different life concepts with which an LDS Church audience can identify. Despite the cultural and geographical differences, the narrative suggests that the social actors who are presented are all the same by ending each video with the protagonist introducing him- or herself, while looking directly at the audience, with the sentence "My name is XXX and I'm a Mormon." By drawing symbolic boundaries between the Mormon and the non-Mormon world in the space of consumption, the self-affirming communication strategy of the video makes identification with the represented LDS Church members possible.³⁰⁷

The identity mode was promoted by online interactions between members at least until the webpage was updated in spring 2017. LDS Church members who were registered members of the relevant forum were able to leave comments about the commercials on the LDS Church webpage. These online comments were organized according to "Frequently Asked Questions" selected by the webmaster and then answered by the members themselves. These FAQs referred to Mormon theology and teachings on issues such as the eternal marriage, the afterlife, and the role of husband and wife in a family. The answers originated from "common church members," and we can assume that LDS Church officials – probably from the Membership Department in this particular case³⁰⁸ – had selected and organized the comments. This communication strategy ensured the online discussion involved only members, deliberately excluding non-members. Since spring 2017 these comments have no longer been available. The LDS Church website became less interactive, with more limited possibilities for virtual

307 For more on the distinction between symbolic and social boundaries see Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (August 1, 2002): 138. "But symbolic and social boundaries should be viewed as equally real: The former exist at the intersubjective level whereas the latter manifest themselves as groupings of individuals" (169).

308 According to the interview with a media professional (SA5, 4:108) in Salt Lake City/UT, June 25, 2015. See part II, chapter 6.2.

exchanges between members, and now provides an even more controlled setting.

But the identity mode elicited by online comments can still be processed outside the official church website. The extended links to other commercials that can be accessed through the official website are on YouTube, where both members and non-members can leave comments. For example, by 19 May 2015 *I'm a Mormon, Polynesian Father, and Former NFL Player* had received 2,607 comments,³⁰⁹ with the first two, and therefore the most recent, posted by Mormon.org. By posting regular comments, the LDS Church can ensure its responses remain at the top of the list, together with those of LDS Church members. An overview of the comments suggests that the commentators tend to express either approval or disapproval of the lifestyle and portrayal of ex-NFL player Gabe Reid. Non-Mormons sometimes mention their own religious affiliations or their broader opinions on Mormons or LDS Church members and feel their religious context affirmed through the commercials. The identity mode makes evident the crucial tension between exclusion and inclusion that constructs boundaries.³¹⁰

The series also provides a third mode, a performative mode, in which the social actors participate in the production process. They perform their values, worldviews, and lifestyles in a self-portrait that is then received by friends and strangers, by Mormons and non-Mormons. An impressive number of Latter-day Saints appear before the camera. Prior to the re-launch of the webpage, that number had been extended by profiles that appeared online but without a video. A search mask on the right-hand side of the webpage made it possible to search for Latter-day Saints according to gender, age, and ethnicity (fig. 18); with a click on “more options” that search could be refined to a specific member profile according to criteria such as “gender,” “age,” “ethnicity,” and “previous religion,” general keywords, or “first or last name,” “heritage,” or “country/state/region” (fig. 19). The section “previous religion” lists diverse Christian denominations as well as Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or “no religious background.”³¹¹

309 “Gabe Reid – Former NFL Player, Polynesian Father, Mormon,” accessed December 5, 2017, <https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/series/im-a-mormon/gabe-reid-former-nfl-player-polynesian-father-mormon>.

310 This discussion will be followed up in the section on the *I Am an Ex Mormon* series.

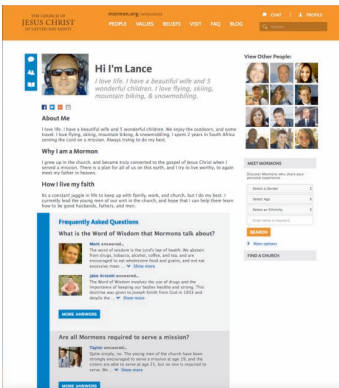
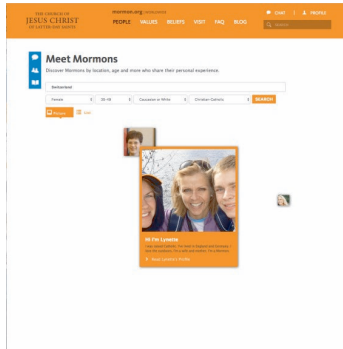
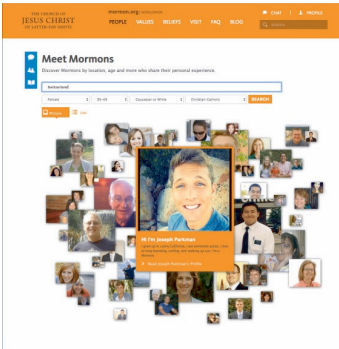
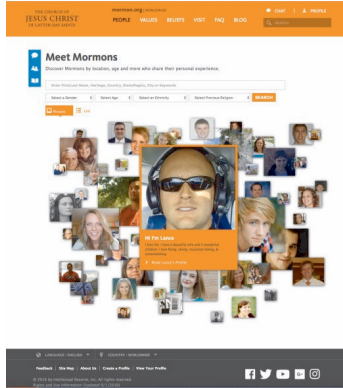


Fig. 18/ Fig. 19/ Fig. 20/ Fig. 21/ Fig. 22 The search mask of the former I'm a Mormon webpage enhanced a performative mode in which Latter-day Saints represented themselves.

The webpage on which the commercials were embedded visually connected the videos with the wider Mormon community to suggest that these portraits are of outstanding representatives of an even bigger community (fig. 20). The webpage provided space in which less prominently portrayed Mormons also presented themselves with photo portraits (fig. 21) that are similarly accompanied by a Q&A section (fig. 22).

Another positive impact of these extended profiles created by Latter-day Saints was that they directed traffic to the mormon.org site, increasing the church's search ranking. The campaign not only presented its members in a positive light but also enhanced the LDS Church's activity according to Search Engine Optimization (SEO).³¹²

The relaunch of the web site on which the *I'm a Mormon* videos were presented fundamentally changed the performative mode. In the former version the web site not only had the potential to strengthen the community experience but also increased the possibility that non-Mormons would meet Mormons online with whom they shared similar attributes, such as heritage, (previous) religion, or geographic origin. On the new site, as noted, these options are no longer available. The performative mode in the current version thus provides few bottom-up activities whereby the members of the church can engage individually in online conversations with other members.

Currently the *I'm a Mormon* videos appear followed by other Latter-day Saint portraits on non-transparent algorithms.³¹³ The webpage of the videos provides only sparse information and refers visitors to the relaunched site, www.comeuntochrist.org, which embraces the church's on-

311 As a side note: most converts to the LDS church were previously affiliated with another Christian denomination. The predominance of members in historically Christian countries comes, according to Rodney Stark, because "people want to preserve their religious capital" (25). Stark's approach is based on rational choice theory. He explains that people with a Christian background but with few or no active connections to any religious group are most likely to convert to Mormonism. Most conversions take place in a private setting, with few a result of missionaries' approaching people on the street by chance. A more detailed discussion of Stark's rational choice argument is provided in chapter 3.4. See Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, 25.

312 Chen, "Marketing Religion Online," 200.

313 "I'm a Mormon," accessed November 6, 2017, <https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/series/im-a-mormon>.

line mission.³¹⁴ On some pages a form appears where visitors can fill in a name and phone number to order a free copy of *The Book of Mormon* and are informed that they will be contacted by church representatives. A pop-up menu allows visitors to schedule a visit with a missionary, to chat online with church representatives, or to use a search to locate a nearby church. This new way of communicating controls the interactions between church representatives and visitors to the website, be they Mormon or non-Mormon.³¹⁵ Compared with the older version, it reduces the possibilities of the performative mode to a rather passive endeavor.

To sum up: the identification of communication spaces and reading modes in the *I'm a Mormon* campaign enables us to flesh out different axes of relevance present in the media. In the case of the LDS Church video series, the advertising, identity, and performative modes explain the various practices and attitudes performed within the spaces of communication. As we shall now see, the less generously produced *I Am an Ex Mormon* video series engages the reading modes differently.

4.3. *I Am an Ex Mormon initiative (US 2010–15)*

With its 44 videos produced between 2010 and 2015, the *I Am an Ex Mormon* can be understood as an answer to the LDS Church's image efforts and in particular to its global campaign *I'm a Mormon*. In light of this purpose, the analysis of the communication spaces of the *I Am an Ex Mormon* videos focuses more fully on the interactive dimension. This is done by examining in detail the online discussion about the video, analyzed in the close reading section, and an additional analysis of a video that addresses possible participants in the Ex-Mormon series. The analysis of the communications spaces that follows fleshes out the reading modes: the advertising video seeks to recruit future protagonists and the data collected in the process of systematizing the videos gives access to the production space. A single video is analyzed in the space of representation and, finally, the space

314 The LDS Church seeks to highlight the presence of 'Jesus Christ' within the official name of the church as a means of fostering Christian associations and at the same time deemphasizing the term 'Mormon'.

"The Correct Name of the Church," accessed June 11, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/the-correct-name-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

315 The church has promoted its online efforts by changing the webpage's address to ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

of consumption is characterized by evaluating the online comments about this specific video on the series' website.

Space of production as a private initiative

The producers of the *I Am an Ex Mormon* initiative provide information about their activities in a post from May 21, 2011, that announces more videos:³¹⁶ “We are currently filming in Utah – in the meantime ... enjoy a missionary story with Stuart.”³¹⁷ A social actor named Stuart then tells a story about his time as a missionary in England in which he criticizes the way in which missionaries all but walked into houses uninvited and turned on their projectors to show a film about Mormonism. According to Stuart, this method was called “being bold” and was typical of how he was taught to proselytize. At the end of Stuart’s mission story, the producers thank viewers for their support of the video series and the end credits announce new videos that will be available in June.

Below the video, an announcement of and a link to a mini-series about sexuality in Mormonism is provided. Stuart and his wife Kerri talk very openly about the repressive sexual policies of the church. Here the Ex-Mormon platform is used in a performative mode. Stuart and Kerri not only recount their experiences of sexual repression in the LDS Church but also explicitly explain how that policy can be improved. Another video, entitled *Seeking participants*, on the webpage is indicative of how the producers look for participants by applying an advertising mode (fig. 23).³¹⁸

The video compiles clips from the *I Am an Ex Mormon* series and short statements by the social actors. Statements like “the depressions I had suddenly went away” are combined with titles used by the producers to summarize their message: “Life after Mormonism” (shot of social actor 1) “can be full of joy” (shot of social actor 2) “can be full of growth” (shot of social actor 3) “full of hope” (shot of social actor 4) “full of beauty” (shot of social actor 5) “full of discovery” (shot of social actor 6) “full of healing” (shot of social actor 7) “full of ... love, fulfillment, truth charity, peace free-

316 The campaign is financed by donations, as indicated on its webpage: “Help us create more videos!” with a button that links to PayPal.

317 “Filming in Utah – More Videos in June! | I Am an Ex Mormon,” accessed December 4, 2017, <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/2011/05/filming-in-utah-more-videos-in-june/>.

318 “Seeking Participants | I Am an Ex Mormon,” accessed December 5, 2017, <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/2011/04/seeking-participants/>.



Fig. 23 Image from the webpage *i-am-an-ex-mormon.com*, where further participants are sought.

dom, balance, conviction, opportunity, enthusiasm, excitements...authenticity [...].” Many positive terms are quickly superimposed one after the other, making it impossible to catch them all. Then comments fade in with references to the website or the video series such as, “‘Love the series ... they’ve been a great source of comfort and support me.’ -Anonymous” or “Sometimes I still feel alone,” the title superimposes “Thank you” then “for creating this website”, then “It gives hope. – Jeff.” The protagonists highlight how much the series has helped them overcome the difficulties and fears associated with leaving the LDS Church. At the end of the video the title suggests: “Our purpose is not given to us”, superimposed by “by authority – our purpose comes”, superimposed by “comes from within.” Then a wipe with light bubbles in green white introduce the title “i-am-an-ex-mormon.com – now seeking participants – go to iamanexmormon.com/join-us.” When the link is clicked, the production explains its aims and the concept behind the series. The instructions reveal how the producers intend to shape the function and effect of the videos:

If you want to be in a video, please keep in mind the following:

- We want to highlight personal struggles and success about your exit story from Mormonism.
- We are not trying to focus on doctrinal issues, although we will not shy away from them if you feel it is important to your story.
- We want our videos to avoid the tone “this is why the church isn’t true” but rather “this was my experience and this is what I struggled with.”

- We want to highlight areas that many Ex-Mormons struggle with during their transition out of the church. Divorce, shunning, loneliness, fear etc. How did you deal with these things?³¹⁹

As the first three instructions show, the producers are not interested in the theological argument. Their focus is on personal and psychological experiences. The reason for leaving that is most often mentioned in the video is that the church is not true (17 times). At the same time the protagonists recount their personal challenges and the fears surrounding their departure. Ex-Mormons who were educated in the church and served the mission would likely feel secure talking about doctrinal issues, but that rhetoric would not have the same personal edge. Personal struggles and experiences provide an emotionally richer narrative that is at the same time also more engaging for the audience.

“What have you gained from leaving the church? What advice do you have for others going through this transition? We want to give hope to those who might feel there is no joy in life after Mormonism.”³²⁰ These questions show one of the purposes of the videos. The participants should be role models and experts with experiences from which others can benefit. This idea is supported by the search mask on the webpage which lists church functions: *BYU student, Mormon Institute Teacher, Relief Society Instructor, Stake Mission Presidency, Ward Clerk, Young Men’s Counselor, Veil Worker, and Young Women’s Teacher* are only a few of the 83 categories. The aim of the videos is not only to communicate how life is after Mormonism but also to accompany Latter-day Saints as they leave the church. On that score, the videos may support the detachment process by applying the performative mode intended to activate their audience.

The comments section on the webpage allows additional exchanges about the videos and reinforces their counseling function. The audience consists not only of Ex-Mormons but also of doubting Latter-day Saints: “We want our videos to help Mormons avoid stereotyping ‘Ex Mormons’ and we want to provide strength and support to those exiting the church or just beginning to have doubts.”³²¹ What is the stereotype of an Ex-Mormon? The stereotypical Mormon is the Mormon missionary with white

319 “Be in a Video! | I Am an Ex Mormon.” Accessed December 23, 2017. <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/join-us/>.

320 “Be in a Video! | I Am an Ex Mormon,” accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/join-us/>.

321 “Be in a Video! | I Am an Ex Mormon.”

shirt, tie, neat haircut, and a friendly smile.³²² The stereotypical Ex-Mormon maybe then be drawn *ex negativo*, as lonely, excluded and lost, or in any other way the opposite of the image propagated by the *I'm a Mormon* campaign. That preconception is a fear that might hinder Mormons from leaving the church and provides the axis of relevance that the campaign wants to counter, as analysis of the videos reveals.

A close look at Ex-Mormons in the space of representation

These videos usually portray one social actor – the exceptions are two couples and one family with two children – in single setting, for example, in front of an LDS Church temple, in their home, or in an unspecific outside area. They mostly speak into the camera, without any further activities shown. The videos are in a testimonial style, in which social actors provide witness of their personal experiences.³²³ The Ex-Mormons are filmed in close-up or at least in a medium shot that shows the upper half of their bodies including their arms. The straight camera angle gives the impression that the person is in front of the spectators addressing them directly. Their words provide a direct explanation, without detours, as to why they left the church.

The videos cover four distinct age groups.³²⁴ Those aged 18–29 are represented by 10 social actors; the age range 30–45 is the biggest group, with 19 Ex-Mormons; 10 people aged 46–65 speak about having left the church; only two protagonists are older than 66. Two social actors have wished to remain anonymous. The professions of the social actors – they include students, mothers and fathers, nurses, and musicians – are not deemed significant and sometimes are not even mentioned. The gender distribution is more significant, with 27 male and 14 female Ex-Mormons taking part, along with two heterosexual couples and one family with two children (boy and girl). The lack of ethnic diversity is striking. Only one person is non-Caucasian – Michelle from the Caribbean, as she introduces herself – and three protagonists are not US Americans (German, Canadian, British).

322 One of many examples of stereotyping Mormon missionaries is found in the series *Breaking Bad* (AMC, US 2014–16) when one of the protagonists, high on crystal meth, considers Mormon missionaries to be Hells Angels (*Cancer Man*, season 1, episode 4).

323 Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 151.

324 The age of the protagonists has been estimated on the basis of their appearance.

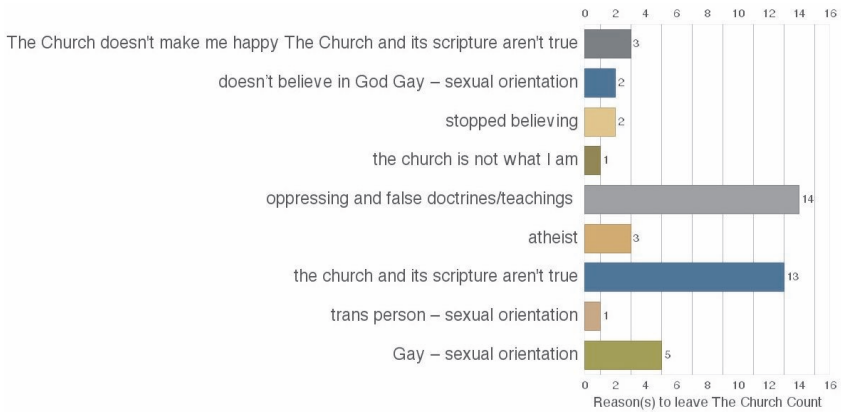


Table 3 Reasons given for leaving the LDS Church.

Finally, most of the participants (33 in total) were born into the church, with three converting as children, one as adult; in 7 instances we are not told with certainty.

The reasons for leaving the church are also diverse, but they do intersect. As table 3 indicates, most of the participants mention “The church and its scripture aren’t true” combined with “The church doesn’t make me happy” or as single reason “The church and its scripture aren’t true” (13+3). “Oppressing and false doctrines/teachings” is a similar claim and is cited by 14 social actors. In six of the 44 videos sexual orientation is given as a reason for leaving the church, with gay and trans people having felt excluded, suppressed, and discriminated in the LDS Church. In such instances, the social actors use their appearance in the *Ex-Mormon* videos to reveal not only that they have left the church but also their sexual orientation. Some of these social actors are using the public platform of the video to inform family and friends of their decision.

The Ex-Mormons often mention that they started to doubt the church’s teachings and to question its history but found the church leaders unable to answer their questions. Other similar reasons, as illustrated in table 3 are the loss of belief in the truth of the church, inconsistencies in the scripture that the church is defending, or beginning to learn and read about the church that result in realizing that the church isn’t true. The decision to leave the church was usually the participant’s own, although sometimes they speak of being motivated by others.

Some general observations reveal strategic traits that might be part of the broader concept behind the videos. For example, the social actors nev-

er cry. While a few seem moved as they narrate their experience, they largely describe their happiness after leaving the church. Family is a vital issue. Many of the Ex-Mormons fear losing their family and friends, which is also the reason for two of them staying anonymous. They also fear losing their jobs or being excluded from their universities because their education is supported by the church or they study at the LDS Church-affiliated Brigham Young University. In the following section, a close reading of one Ex-Mormon video will consider the documentary strategy of the series.

The space of representation in *My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon*

The title of the video (LDS Church, US 2015) on YouTube and on the webpage <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/> summarizes the main message of Heather's story: "I'm happier than I've ever been in my entire life and I am an Ex Mormon."³²⁵ In most of the narratives, indeed, the social actors talk about their life after leaving the church and of how this life change improved their personal and emotional well-being. The bottom line is that because life without the LDS Church is so much better, it is worth leaving the community. The social actors present themselves as "cured", as feeling now very different from how they felt as members of the LDS Church.

The video and the webpage text provide biographical information that is part of Heather's narrative.³²⁶ Heather is about forty years old, a mother of six children aged between seven and eighteen. She and her ex-husband left the church at the same time and then divorced. Four years before the video was produced she remarried, with her husband Jeff another Ex-Mormon whom she met on the Ex-Mormon online message board. At the time Jeff was also in the process of divorcing. Heather writes on the webpage: "We have just celebrated our four years anniversary and are living an authentically happy, family-centered life."

The video's editing pace is rather fast. There are forty cuts in 190 seconds, which results an average shot length of 4.75 seconds. Heather tells

325 [iamanexmormon](http://www.iamanexmormon.com/), *I'm Happier than I've Ever Been in My Entire Life and I'm an Ex Mormon*, accessed November 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vW-p9l0qTFC0>.

326 "My Name Is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon | I Am an Ex Mormon," accessed November 26, 2017, <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/2011/07/my-name-is-heather-and-im-an-ex-mormon/>.

her own story and is the only voice heard during the video. In one half of the takes she speaks to the camera while sitting on her sofa, and during the other half she is preparing a barbecue dinner, grilling sausages and hamburgers and setting the table with her children helping. These two situations alternate in the editing. During the preparation for dinner, Heather continues her story off screen in the voice-over and becomes the first-person narrator.³²⁷ In contrast, she talks on screen while sitting on the sofa. The extra-diegetic music score, where the sound source is not in the image, supports the emotional atmosphere of Heather's story. When she talks about her difficult time during her marriage and about how unhappy she was, the sound slows down and is melancholic. As soon as she starts to talk about her newfound happiness, the music changes to a faster pace and becomes cheerful. Music plays in the background during the whole video, linking the shots and supporting the rhythm of the editing.

In the last 50 seconds of the video, the editing, frames, and Heather's performance communicate a story of success with a happy ending. Sitting on a sofa in her living room, Heather recounts that she finally left the church. The following 12 film stills and quotes show how the takes are combined with Heather's story in the voice-over and on-screen (fig. 24–35):

The video puts Heather at the center of the narration and makes the audience believe that her story is authentic and find it compelling. There are six close-ups showing her face (fig. 27) and two extreme close-ups (fig. 31). The close-ups enhance the intimacy and immediacy with the protagonist at the end of the video. She looks into the camera lens over and over again and by doing so remains in eye contact with the audience. The viewer is sitting across from Heather in her living room and follows her into the kitchen. Heather and the viewer are like close friends.

Her children are present in the harmonious kitchen setting and warmly interact with their mother. The situation shows Heather as a relaxed, caring, and loving mother. She cooks and sets the table for her children, who bustle around her and are obviously happy. We see how tenderly Heather interacts with them. The following situation is typical. Her daughter, helping her mother in the kitchen, gazes into the camera with a smile (fig. 36). She looks at her mother. Heather is smiling back (fig. 37) and approaches her, wiping a piece of hair from her face (fig. 38).

The audiovisual dramaturgy sells the Ex-Mormon message efficiently and emotionally. It is supported by the music score, rhythm of the editing,

327 Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 43–49.



Fig. 24 “And I was allowed to act for my own happiness ... (My Name is Heather and I’m an Ex Mormon, 00:02:19).

Fig. 25 ... and so I ended my fifteen-year marriage (My Name is Heather and I’m an Ex Mormon, 00:02:23).



Fig. 26 [voice-over by Heather] And I’ve never been happier, mmh ... (My Name is Heather and I’m an Ex Mormon, 00:02:25).

Fig. 27 I got married four years ago to the man of my dreams. He is wonderful. He loves me in a way I never knew people could be loved. And he has made me happier than I ever could have imagined. I can’t imagine ... (My Name is Heather and I’m an Ex Mormon, 00:02:30).

focus, and use of blurred images to signal her despairing search for happiness. The person-centered narration obscures that the video is part of a campaign which has its own aims. As first-person narrator Heather is in charge of the narrative. The film theorist Sarah Kozloff explains the function of a first-person narrator:

films often create the sense of character-narration so strongly that one accepts the voice over narrator as if he or she were the mouthpiece of the image-maker either for the whole film or for the duration of his or



Fig. 28/ Fig. 29 [voice-over Heather] ... still being in that place where I had to endure being in a marriage that makes me unhappy. I did not think that this ... (My name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:02:48/ 00:02:55).



Fig. 30 ... type of marriage existed. I really didn't. And I have it now (My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:02:56).

Fig. 31 My name is Heather (My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:03:00).

Fig. 32 [voice-over Heather] I am a nurse, I am a mother, I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life ... (My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:03:03).

her embedded story. We put our faith in the voice not as created but as creator.³²⁸

Heather brings credibility to the *I Am an Ex Mormon* campaign, which is a crucial mode for the documentary advertisement series. The audience believes her story even though they may not share her opinions. Only at the end of the narration, when reference to the *I'm a Mormon* series is made with the statement "I am a nurse, I am a mother, I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life and I am an Ex Mormon", does the video reveal that its reading mode is to counter the LDS *I'm a Mormon* campaign. The

328 Kozloff, 45.



Fig. 33/ Fig. 34 ... and I am an Ex Mormon (My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:03:07/ 00:03:08).



Fig. 35 Finally, the logo of the campaign is superimposed. (My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:03:11).

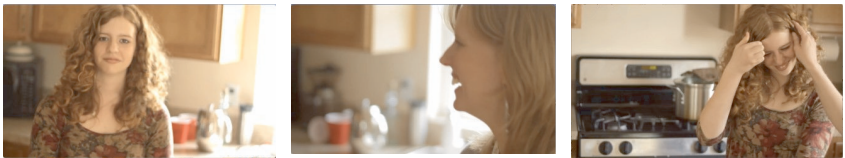


Fig. 36/ Fig. 37/ Fig. 38 The audiovisual dramaturgy highlights the warm relationship between Heather and her children (My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon, 00:02:12/ 00:02:14/ 00:02:17).

comment section on the webpage below each video allows us to access viewer reactions.

Online comments in the space of consumption

The YouTube comments on *My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon* have been posted steadily since the video was published in July 2011. By

	female	male
#opposing/reacting to previous comment	23	11
Contra LDS Church		
contra: affirmative comment	11	5
contra: congrats Heather	1	1
contra: critic of LDS/Mormonism in general	16	5
contra: defends Heather	4	2
contra: Ex-Mormon	2	1
sum contra	34	14
Pro LDS		
pro: critics of Heather	2	1
pro: critics of the video	0	1
pro: defends LDS	10	6
pro: LDS Church affiliated	6	2
sum pro	19	10
sum of all comments	76	35

Table 4 Pro and contra comments.

November 22, 2017, the video had received 42,985 views, 709 comments, 480 likes and 66 dislikes. Commenting on YouTube is still possible, whereas the comment section on the *I Am an Ex Mormon* webpage below the video has been closed since July 11, 2016. The comments on the latter site are in general more differentiated and more comprehensive than on YouTube, and in comparison with other videos, Heather’s video received a more substantial number of comments, with, according to the webpage, 111 responses.

a) More female participants in the online comments

The overview of the comments (table 4) reveals that entries made by women are more engaged, both in terms of number and content. 76 contributions by women stand against 35 contributions by men. Women reacted twice as often (23 times) with an immediate response that resulted in a conversation, were three times more likely to criticize Mormonism (16 female/5 male) and at the same time also defended the LDS Church more often (10 female/6 male). In sum female participants criticized Mormonism and/or the LDS Church 34 times, whereas male participants wrote 14 critical comments.

Less difference is reflected in the pro LDS/Mormonism section, with 19 comments by women and 10 comments by men. That Heather's story revolves around her role as a wife and mother is mirrored in the comments. The video's target audience is obviously female Ex-Mormons and Mormons. It is not necessarily clear whether the 19 women who defend the LDS Church are Mormon, but they seek to spare the LDS Church from responsibility for Heather's miserable marriage:

Karen, JULY 6TH, 2011 AT 12:08 AM

First of all, there are many happy marriages within Mormonism, so the fact that you married the wrong guy has nothing to do with the religion you chose. Second, I find it difficult to believe 5 bishops told you to stay in a miserable marriage. I know of plenty of bishop-supported Mormon divorces, and people find happier relationships, and stay happily Mormon. Maybe you were telling your bishop you wanted to work things out and he expressed what he felt you needed to hear to that end? You seem to be faulting your former chosen religion for your happiness or lack of happiness. If you are happy now, it might just be something else entirely, but this is a straw-man soft-gloved attack of Mormonism which you blame as the cause of your unhappiness, rather than seeing your choices as your own all along.³²⁹

Karen calls Heather's explanation for her happiness a "straw-man soft-gloved attack of Mormonism." Her argument is rather defensive but impressively elaborated. She provides a well-crafted explanation of various reasons for unhappiness in marriage, an argument that is surely valid. Heather's reasoning is weakened, for a divorce can be multicausal. As additional pro-Mormonism comments argue, there are many happy Mormon couples too. Strictly speaking, Heather's video does not prove a case against Mormonism; it simply shows a very happy Ex-Mormon mother who encourages doubting church members to quit the institution in search of a happy ending like hers. The video works less on the basis of sound argument and more as an emotional and authentic message in support of Ex-Mormons and doubting Mormons.

329 "My Name Is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon | I Am an Ex Mormon."

b) Drawing religious and social boundaries

Comments by women are more likely to support and affirm Heather's story, as in the case of the following comment by Jean, which congratulates Heather for her courage:

Congrats Heather for having the courage to leave both an unhappy marriage and the LDS Church. We are coerced as human beings to comply with our tribe's expectations and it looks as though you did a good job. You stayed active and believing in the LDS Church and stayed in an unhappy marriage just because it was 'the right thing to do'. It wasn't right for you; you recognized it and got out. That takes so much courage especially when you have 6 children. I imagine there were times when you said to yourself, "what the heck am I doing?" We cannot predict with certainty where any decision will take us, but we can be reasonably assured that if what we have 'been doing' has brought us doubt and unhappiness that it will continue unless we make some scary changes. You did it! Congratulations are as much in order for you as they are for someone who overcomes an addiction.³³⁰

The focus of Jean's affirmative reaction is not criticism of Mormonism, although she does congratulate Heather for having the courage to leave the church. This type of supportive and diplomatic comment, of which there are 16, is not so much critical of the LDS Church as enthusiastic about leaving the church. This approach is in accord with the producer's concept in seeking to show the advantages of living as an Ex-Mormon rather than focus on blaming the LDS Church for a miserable existence. But there are also many harsh critics of TBM ("true believing Mormons"), like Shantenelle

When you don't believe something is true, you generally distance yourself from it. TBM's tend to not open their minds enough to realize that those of us who use our free agency to live a life outside of Mormonism have a new, grander perspective on life as well as the afterlife. It's not limited to commandments and kingdoms! Heather will be with her new husband and all of her children forever if that is what she wants/desires/believes. She "gets it" even more now that she doesn't have the filter of Mormonism clouding her spectacles!

330 "My Name Is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon | I Am an Ex Mormon."

Don't you see? After realizing the falseness of the church, her temple sealing, the covenants, the endless hours of dutifully fulfilling a variety of callings over the years seems so unimportant and meaningless in hindsight. Not that those things should be unimportant and meaningless to you! Because maybe you need the church. But Heather doesn't. And so many like her do not.³³¹

Shantenelle accuses TBMs of being narrow minded. She also speaks of "those of us who use our free agency to live a life outside of Mormonism" and locates herself in the Ex-Mormon group. The "us" is important in the conversation, which is largely framed by two opposing groups. The comment section serves to define in-groups and out-groups, with commentators identifying with one of them and readers' own identifications supported by the content of the comments. The Swiss anthropologist Andreas Wimmer ascribes these characteristics to the practice of boundary making:

A boundary displays both a categorical and a social or behavioral dimension. The former refers to acts of social classification and collective representation; the latter to everyday networks of relationships that result from individual acts of connecting and distancing. On the individual level, the categorical and the behavioral aspects appear as two cognitive schemes. One divides the social world into social groups – into "us" and "them" – and the other offers scripts of action – how to relate to individuals classified as "us" and "them" under given circumstances. Only when the two schemes coincide, when ways of seeing the world correspond to ways of acting in the world, shall I speak of a social boundary.³³²

The comment section can be understood as a field in which religious and social boundaries are defined. The participants describe what it means to no longer practice Mormonism in a particular social dimension: Shantenelle, for examples, writes of what it is "to live a life outside Mormonism." The categorical dimension is expressed with the use the first-person plural "us" or in statements such as: "Because maybe you need the church. But Heather doesn't. And so many like her do not." Shantenelle highlights that Heather is not alone, for she is embedded in a wider group of like-minded people. They are different in that they no longer need the

331 "My Name Is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon | I Am an Ex Mormon."

332 Andreas Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multi-level Process Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 4 (2008): 975.

church. Most of the comments are located within one of these two groups. The definition of boundaries in the comments steers an identity mode that is similar to that in the *I'm a Mormon* series and is dominant in both series. But other communication modes are also engaged.

c) Linking Ex-Mormons and Mormons in the comments

My Name is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon is linked to other videos structured by the participant's function in the LDS Church:

posted by D. William Johnson (admin) on Saturday, July 2nd, 2011 at 7:50 am in Home Making Leader, Mormon Mother, Mormon Primary Presidency, Mormon Primary Teacher, Nursery, Relief Society Instructor, Uncategorized, Visiting Teaching Coordinator, Young Women's Advisor, Young Women's Teacher³³³

The keywords determined by function in the LDS Church allow former members to find people in similar situations or with similar experiences of activities within the church. The webpage thus seeks to connect non-Mormons with doubting LDS Church members. Additionally, the social actors from the videos participate in the online discussion. Heather provided six detailed comments on July 10 and August 18, 2011. One of her comments fed the discussion with further details about her reason for leaving, the process that led her to this decision and why she participated in the video series:

Those of you who think that my point is “the church made me do it” didn't really listen to what I was saying in my story. Leaving the church happened because I found out that it wasn't true. I prayed for TWO years to regain my testimony. I was a choice daughter. I was living a genuinely LDS life. I attended the temple regularly, and I faithfully exercised the callings that were handed to me (when I was a mother with babies who worked full time). I BEGGED for my testimony to come back to me, literally. But if Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were child molesters and exploiters of women and families, in my mind, they can't be prophets. What you see in this video is a fortunate side effect, for me, of leaving Mormonism ... genuine happiness. Those of you who say that the church did not make me marry a dis-

333 “My Name Is Heather and I'm an Ex Mormon | I Am an Ex Mormon.”

gusting idiot when I was nineteen are correct but the culture and DOCTRINE of the church pushes you in that direction as soon as you feel any love toward a possibly viable candidate. President Benson's talks were very strongly worded in that direction as was the recent talk in General Conference encouraging young singles not to wait for their perfect soul mate but to get to the business of breeding ASAP.

The entire reason I volunteered to do this is to illustrate that people can be happy when they leave the church. We can become our genuine selves. We can make the right decisions based on who we are and not based on what the prophet or the scriptures say. We are GOOD PEOPLE and not evil, lost souls who will burn in hell. My quest for happiness was not my reason for leaving the church, but gaining it was a really fabulous side effect.³³⁴

Again, Heather describes the fortunate side effect of leaving Mormonism as "genuine happiness." She also criticizes Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, first and second prophets of the church, as "child molesters" and "exploiters of women" and the church's practice of encouraging members to marry at a young age. Administrator Dan Johnson also contributes to the comments, defending Heather's position by condemning the church's practices or moderating the conversation. His nine comments are on the following model:

Karen, you can't possibly know Heather and the details of her story. I find it interesting that you seemed to have jumped to your own judgment of the situation regardless of this obvious lack of information.³³⁵

Each video is tagged to link it with similar narratives from the series. Heather's video is tagged with the following keywords: *church, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, deconversion*,³³⁶ *Ex Mormon, exmormon, God, Latter-day Saints, LDS, Marriage Equality, Mormon, Religion*.³³⁷ These keywords allow viewers to find other videos that include the same topics and

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336 Most of the tags are self-explanatory; only "deconversion" requires explanation. Heather converted to become a Latter-day Saint. "Deconversion" in this context means that she left the church after having converted. The tags and keywords help visitors to the site to orient themselves and to be redirected to videos with the same topics.

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promotes the performative mode that encourages interaction between the participants.

Eliciting sympathy in the reading modes

To sum up: the *I Am an Ex Mormon* series engages the documentary mode with references to credibility and authenticity to elicit sympathy through additional reading modes in its spaces of communication. With the series a private initiative, the social actors do not have institutional support for their participation and therefore take a significant risk. For this reason, a few prefer to stay anonymous, fearing the response of their family and friends.

In light of the risk of such significant consequences of participation in this series, such as exclusion by families and Mormon friends, the moral mode is very present in the series' space of representation. The message is: "Because this church is so bad, I am ready to take a big risk and inform people about what really happens there." In voluntarily shouldering this responsibility and taking a personal risk, the participants bring a significant credibility to the production. The Ex-Mormons take on an authority that enables them to control their future lives, activating an identity mode in which they redefine themselves as Ex-Mormon and distinguish themselves from Mormons.

An emotional mode comes into play in the space of representation and consumption. Two of the close-ups of Heather are extreme close-ups, connecting audience and protagonist. This specific frame advances Heather's newly found happiness. The same is the case with the music score, which works simply but effectively in the background and amplifies the narration's emotional undertone. When Heather talks about her unhappy marriage, which she sees as a result of being forced to marry too young, the music is slow and the melody sad; when she talks of her life after the LDS Church, the music carries a brighter rhythm. The emotional mode is also employed in the space of consumption. Participants in the comment section recount their own feelings as members of the church and after leaving. All of them seek to show how their lives without the church are more satisfying and happier than before. They highlight that it was worth taking the risk to quit and start a new life. With the institutional church less evident as a defining presence, the emotional mode in the online comments is instead personal and individual.

And, finally, the identity mode is also applied in the space of consumption. As demonstrated, the comments distinguish their writers as pro or contra the video. The comment section allows these writers to be involved in a public discussion. Technically, the comments are anonymous, as real names are not required nor evidence of the author's identity. But in being vocal about their opinion, the commentators draw boundaries between members, non-members and ex-members. The comment section groups people with the same views and provides space in which individual opinions can be expressed. For obvious reasons, the space of the *I Am an Ex Mormon* website privileges the aims of Ex-Mormons and their reading modes.

4.4. *Spaces of communication in competition*

Where does the experience of watching the whole series of 184 *I'm a Mormon* and 44 *I Am an Ex Mormon* video-ads leave us? In the conclusion of this chapter, the differences and possible interactions between the advertisement series will be explored by comparing the diverse reading modes in the communication spaces of production, representation, circulation / distribution, and consumption.

Four aspects define the reading modes of both series. While the documentary and moral modes evidently belong to the generic strategy of the videos, the identity, advertising, emotional, and performative modes embrace the specificity of each series, on which the concluding thoughts will focus.

In the space of representation two differences are notable. The family, a core unity of the LDS Church, is consistently at the center of the narration of the *I'm a Mormon* series.³³⁸ While also part of the workforce, every man or woman stresses the importance of family, of having a husband or wife and of being a mother or father. If the portrayed members are not (yet) parents or married, they are often shown with their parents and sometimes with close friends who function like family. The relationships are consistent with the core beliefs of the church, which exclusively supports heterosexual marriages. Here the series specifically engages an advertising mode that praises the religious institutions by promoting their member as role models who, hopefully, will evoke an identity mode.

338 Chen, "Diverse Yet Hegemonic."

The *I Am an Ex Mormon* videos are less concerned with the core family. The protagonists often refer to family in a negative way, fearing exclusion because they no longer belong to the church. Beside Heather's story, only one additional family (*We are the Leavitt Family*, US 2011) and two couples are depicted, one with children (*Our Marriage Has Survived a Crisis of Faith*, US 2011) and one in which the wife is pregnant (*Maria and Henning Schnurr – We are German Ex Mormons*, US 2011). In the latter video, the German couple Maria and Henning Schnurr state that one reason for their decision to leave the church was that they had started to question their faith that they wanted to hand down to their child(ren). The reference to family in the *I Am an Ex Mormon* videos therefore seeks to elicit an emotional mode that raises the audience's sympathies for the protagonist's decisions.

Secondly, Mormon beliefs are not discussed in the *I'm a Mormon* ads and religious practices are absent from both series. The former series shows many other forms of activity, often leisure based. The life of members of the LDS Church seems very busy and involves sports and many activities out of doors. They are healthy, energetic, and optimistic people. They are successful not only in their work but often also in their leisure time. Many representatives are current or former professionals in sports, the arts, or entertainment. Religion is presented as a lifestyle and as an attitude and, implicitly, as a reason for their success. Here lies a vital strategy for communicating the LDS worldview, one that engages the performative and advertising modes in terms of what is included and what is left out. As we have seen, the videos share an audio-visual style and the social actors' lifestyles are standardized too. Presented as role models, the protagonists advertise for and recruit followers who would like to adopt and perform their lifestyle as members of the church.

By contrast, the *I Am an Ex Mormon* initiative is focused on the narrative of why its social actors left the church. The narrative engages identity and emotional modes. The social actors often refer to the teachings, doctrines, and also the history of the church to explain why they no longer were able to believe in the church. We don't see them extensively with their families or enjoying leisure time. Some are filmed during a walk or while they are cooking at home, but they are rarely filmed at work or in the public sphere. It almost seems as if they have to confess in a private or even hidden setting.

Thirdly, a colonization strategy is evident in the production space of the *I'm a Mormon* commercials. On this level the performative and advertising modes interact to build a uniform LDS image. The Mormon lifestyle is

transferred into and implemented within other cultures and other countries. Even though the cultural background of the members who are presented is diverse, their representation tends to conform to a repetitive pattern. A recognition factor is crucial if the commercials are to carry a corporate identity. The portrayed individuals function as signifiers of the unique LDS Church. The episodes relate an image and sell a product. That product is the church, represented by individual members who are buttressed by their families and friends. The social actors perform the LDS image as a norm within a greater geographical diversity. Within that diversity, the episodes recount a remarkable unity in the lives portrayed and the attitudes of the social actors. This unity is reinforced in a variety of ways that include an aesthetic strategy that produces familiar camera work, scoring, lighting, and staging across the episodes. This uniformity in style leaves less freedom of expression to the Mormons on-screen, with the Missionary Department apparently in control of the production from beginning to end.

In contrast, the *I Am an Ex Mormon* campaign is more diverse in the space of representation and applies an emotional mode in addressing its audience. The protagonists played an active part in the production process that adapted the audio-visual narrative to the protagonist's story. This resulted in the videos diverging in terms of length, film style, and narration. Diversity also comes into play in sexual orientation, but to a lesser extent with race, for the social actors are mainly Caucasians. As noted, seven of the Ex-Mormons are gay or transgender persons. Furthermore, the space of production is more transparent than the space of production generated by the LDS Church, providing further support for the emotional mode. The advertisement video, the only video on the website that applies an advertising mode, is frank about its own strategy and provides evidence of the difficulty of finding participants for the project, with only 44 videos having been made since 2010.

The advertising mode of the *I'm a Mormon* campaign in the space of production seems to have great chance of success, for a number of reasons. The LDS Church could finance the campaign generously, a financial viability not replicated for the *I Am an Ex Mormon* series: Mormons tithe; Ex-Mormons and their supporters only donate. Further the social actors for the former production are socially and psychologically rewarded by the large community of Mormons. The LDS Church has more members than there are ex-members, and the ideological support for its campaign is therefore greater. Additionally, participants in the *I Am an Ex Mormon* series are taking risks and surrendering something, as we have seen in the

discussion of the emotional and identity modes. The Ex-Mormons who appear in the series are certainly appreciated by other Ex-Mormons, but they may be ignored or even despised by Mormons.

And, finally, in both series happiness plays a key role, as we have seen in the discussion of the reading modes. In the LDS Church campaign happiness is a product of being a Mormon, and in the counter campaign happiness is a product of being an Ex-Mormon. Only outstanding people find a place in the standardized religious communication space created by the LDS Church-produced videos. We encounter no one who has failed or is unhappy, no one who talks of discrimination. Success is defined differently in the *I Am an Ex Mormon* series. The participants' main achievement is their decision to leave the church. The Ex-Mormons often comment that their lives altered completely with that decision, from being unsatisfying and fearful into being buoyant and happy.

With the *I'm a Mormon* videos the LDS Church's missionary department efficiently and professionally created a person-centered campaign using documentary media and the possibilities of digital technology to relaunch the public appearance of the LDS. This new face of the religious community reflects how existing ideas and values could be adapted and communicated through mediatization. In the case of the *I'm a Mormon* campaign, performative, advertising, and identity modes shape a religion and its community, which need to adapt to the rules of a Westernized neoliberal society and its public sphere. The *I Am an Ex Mormon* initiative takes part in this media discourse and provides its own version, of being an ex-Mormon, by applying emotional, identity, and performative modes. And as the term *Ex-Mormon* indicates, Mormonism remains its point of reference. The initiative is legitimized by reference to the LDS Church campaign. The stylistic allocations in the title, the person-centered dramaturgy, other style elements like music, and the happy performance mode are significant enough to put the two accounts in conversation. Each side can profit from and is limited by the other. Although the LDS Church does not allow comments on its webpage, the Ex-Mormon page provides space for conversations between Mormons and Ex-Mormons. Here they are connected to each other in the space of communication as they overlap on each level of production, circulation / distribution, representation, and consumption to a certain extent. By identifying the partly overlapping and specific reading modes, it has been possible to examine the aims and audience response of both series.

This chapter demonstrates how the *I'm a Mormon* image campaign is shaped by the consumption space within which it is received. It further

highlights how the consumption space responds to the space of representation by applying different reading modes. One of these numerous reading modes is articulated in the production of the *I Am an Ex Mormon* videos, which produced further reading modes. These complex processes of producing, distributing, circulating, consuming, and reproducing documentary media are located in spaces of communication that efficiently exchange, transform, and reproduce religious worldviews. New forms of religious communication will influence and alter a community and its aims. In the current case, that transformation includes the targeted audience of members, non-members, and ex-members who take part in the mediatization processes of growing religious communication spaces.

