

“Avoid that pornographic playground”: Teaching pornographic abstinence in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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Abstract

In recent years, many studies have examined conservative Christian responses to shifting societal attitudes about sexuality. In this article we examine official discourse from the LDS Church found in General Conference talks and the official adult magazine of the Church, *Ensign*, to better understand how leaders of the religion have taught the members to abstain from the use of pornography. Using a grounded-theory approach, we noted a pattern to the lessons that included four elements: (1) avoiding dangerous associations, (2) taking personal responsibility, (3) maintaining inner purity, and (4) seeking spiritual treatment. This study extends previous research by examining how Mormon leaders taught their followers to interpret and protect themselves from pornography. As such, our analysis demonstrates the elaboration of religious teachings that may facilitate the negative reactions to pornography researchers have observed in survey and outcome-based research on members of conservative religions.

Keywords

pornography, Mormonism, discourse, sexuality

It may seem to you that we come on too strong with the counsel to bridle your passions, to avoid all forms of pornography, to keep the Word of Wisdom, to avoid unwholesome locations and situations, to develop and maintain your own high moral standards, to adopt a keen sense of personal accountability, to keep your eyes above the crowd and be willing to stand alone when principle requires it. Yes, we may seem too concerned, but let me ask you this: Suppose you saw

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a little brother about to trade his wagon for a popsicle on a hot summer day. Or suppose you saw a child toddling toward a busy boulevard or swift-running stream, not fully realizing the dangers that are so apparent to you because of your age and experience. Of course you would immediately offer aid in both cases. Failure to do so would be irresponsible. (Hansen, 1993)

Like many other religious leaders, W. Eugene Hansen and the other leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, LDS Church, or Mormons) have spent considerable time in recent years teaching their followers to avoid sexual temptation. In fact, LDS elites echo conservative Christian¹ groups including, for example, the Religious Right (Fetner, 2008), Exodus International (Robinson and Spivey, 2007), proponents of abstinence-only sex education (Fields, 2008), and the National Right to Life Committee (Rohlinger, 2006) by expressing significant reservations about sexual liberalization. The struggle between sexual liberalization and conservative Christianity thus unfolds as religious leaders seek to forestall the “contamination” (Sherkat and Ellison, 1997) of their existing theological and institutional traditions by training followers to abstain from expanding sexual options.

Recognizing these trends, much research examines the intersection of religion and sexuality in contemporary society. The implications of these studies include that conservative Christian traditions promote oppositional attitudes to a wide variety of sexual issues, including abortion (Kimport, 2012; Rohlinger, 2006), comprehensive sex education (Fields, 2008; Rose, 2005), homosexuality (Burdette, Ellison, and Hill, 2005; Whitehead and Baker, 2012), and pornography (Patterson and Pryce, 2012; Sherkat and Ellison, 1997). Further, these studies reveal that conservative Christian social movements capitalize on these beliefs to facilitate advocacy for “faith-based” notions of sexual morality (Fetner, 2008). While this line of research has revealed the influence of conservative Christian interpretations on sexual morality, we know far less about the institutional establishment of these interpretations. How do conservative Christian leaders teach their followers to protect themselves from sexual immorality?

We examine this question through content analysis of archival materials from the LDS Church. Specifically, we analyze how LDS leaders—commonly referred to as General Authorities—taught their followers to abstain from pornographic use and influence. The individuals whose teachings we examine make up the highest level of the hierarchy of the LDS Church. While the majority of local leaders of the LDS Church are unpaid lay leaders, General Authorities are paid clergy who have responsibility and authority over the entire church. As a result, their sermons and messages, primarily in global general conferences (bi-annual meetings during which General Authorities share messages with the entire membership of the church) and magazine articles, are recognized as the authoritative teachings of the religion. We therefore consider them to be “elites” within the religion. Our analysis extends research into the intersection of religion and sexuality by demonstrating the importance of critically evaluating the content of conservative Christian teachings about sexual issues as well as the implications such lessons may have for the ongoing conflicts between religious and sexual interests.

Pornography and Christianity

Although historians have traced American pornography as far back as early religious colonies, the pornographic industry has dramatically expanded in the past 40 years (Sarracino

and Scott, 2009). In terms of production, the United States has become the largest producer of pornographic materials in the world, and industry profits have begun to outpace many Fortune 500 corporations (Ezzell, 2008). Similarly, the emergence of online technologies has facilitated an explosion of pornographic distribution, acceptability, and access (Fisher and Barak, 2000). Further, research has demonstrated that pornographic aesthetics and styles have become increasingly common in mainstream media (Attwood, 2011). Although researchers have often focused on abortion, sex education, and same-sex relationships, pornography may represent the most successful—especially in terms of financial power—form of sexual liberalization.

While pornography may be the most financially successful form of sexual liberalization, it is important to note that the political benefits or consequences of these shifting sexual norms remain the source of considerable tension (see, e.g., Attwood, 2011; Ezzell, 2008; Weitzer, 2009 for reviews). On the one hand, some scholars and activists celebrate the sexual expression, diversity, and potential of pornography, and argue these elements of the field significantly challenge cultural and religious norms concerning sexual constraint and privatization. On the other hand, other scholars and activists—especially feminist theorists—have noted the increasing tendency for mainstream pornography to reflect and promote patterns of male domination, sexual violence, and the objectification of women. Amidst these wider socio-political debates, religious leaders and their followers wrestle with the increased prominence and availability of pornographic materials.

Importantly, religious researchers have sought to understand how these shifting sexual norms influence religious individuals. Examining conservative Protestants' moral opposition to pornography, for example, Sherkat and Ellison (1997) found that people committed to moral absolutes and scriptural literalism were more likely to develop oppositional opinions concerning pornography. Similarly, Patterson and Pryce (2012) found that people regularly attending churches with strong oppositional opinions about pornography experienced more negative emotional reactions to pornographic materials than others. Further, Stack, Wasserman, and Kern (2004) found that strong religious bonds significantly decreased the likelihood that individuals would make use of pornography. While these studies have importantly demonstrated a relationship between religious practice and pornographic consumption, they have thus far left the lessons religious leaders teach their followers about pornography unexplored.

Our analysis extends this line of inquiry by investigating how religious leaders—through the use of institutional meetings and official publications—taught their followers to abstain from pornographic consumption. In so doing, we compliment the aforementioned studies concerning the outcomes of religious teaching about sexual morality (see Sherkat and Ellison, 1997) by demonstrating the ways religious leaders deliver such content to their followers. Before presenting our analysis, we contextualize the efforts of LDS leaders by discussing Mormon theological interpretations of sexuality. In so doing, we outline some of the reasons why pornography represented a challenge to Mormonism, which LDS leaders sought to resolve by educating their followers.

Mormon sexual morality

Echoing many other conservative Christian traditions (see, e.g., Barton, 2012; Fetner, 2008; Wolkomir, 2006), Mormon doctrine defines heterosexual marriage and the families created through such marriages as the centerpiece of God's plan. Specifically, Mormon doctrine

conceptualizes eternity as a three-stage process wherein people exist in God's realm as disembodied spirits prior to birth, emerge into this life through the sexual relations of married adults, and continue their lives with their families in the afterlife. Further, Mormon doctrine asserts that whether or not one will be able to continue into the afterlife with her or his family depends upon one's adoption and performance of divinely inspired moral selfhood while on this plane of existence. How one behaves in this life also determines in which of the differential levels of glory or punishment existing in the celestial realm one will end up. Stated another way, Mormons believe that their eternal circumstances rely heavily upon the types of sexual relations and families they create while on this earth. As such, sexual morality implicitly takes center stage in Mormon doctrine.

To this end, LDS leaders emphasize sexual regulation and restraint (see Ludlow, 1992). Official LDS publications directed at youth, for example, typically stress sexual purity, and define this term as the result of people abstaining from sexual endeavors prior to marriage and then remaining faithful in both thought and behavior throughout marriage (see, e.g., The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011). Similarly, LDS elites have mounted strong public opposition to progressive sexual practices including same-sex marriage and homosexuality in general (Phillips, 2005), abortion (Cragun and Phillips, 2012), and masturbation (Malan and Bullough, 2005). Further, LDS leaders have been among the many conservative Christian voices advocating abstinence-only sex education in schools, and arguing that proper moral sexual education should only be done by the parents (Ludlow, 1992). Considering these institutional stances, it is not surprising that LDS elites find the sexual excess and exploration represented by pornography problematic.

Despite this theological background, previous research suggests Mormons wrestle with the influence of pornography in mainstream society and their local communities. For example, studies have revealed that Mormon lay people often wrestle with conflicts between sexual media and their religious values (see Stout, 2004). As our analysis shows, LDS leaders' condemnation of pornography is extensive and universal. In what follows, we demonstrate some ways LDS leaders taught their followers to abstain from pornography.

Methods and analysis

In order to better understand LDS official teachings about pornography, we collected archives of LDS General Conference talks (1897–2012) and the religion's monthly publication *Ensign* (1971–2012).² In specific terms, the LDS General Conference is a biannual meeting where members and others gather to receive instruction and inspiration from Church leaders. Similarly, *Ensign* is the official adult publication of the LDS Church, which generally contains faith-promoting and proselytizing guidance for followers. In 2007 there were 850,000 paying subscribers to the magazine in the United States, suggesting wide readership among Mormons. Since LDS elites hold editorial power over the release of all official Church documents, the combination of these materials represents a comprehensive record of official LDS teachings about pornography.

In order to specify materials concerning pornography, we utilized a word-search program called *dtSearch*, which allowed us to index text files and rapidly search for specific terms. Doing so allowed us to identify all usages of relevant terms, such as "pornography," "porn," and "sexually explicit material" in order to pull the documents wherein LDS members discussed these issues. After identifying relevant documents, we sorted out articles and speeches concerning pornography, and set these aside for analysis. This process yielded a

final sample of 427 *Ensign* articles and General Conference talks (GC). The earliest reference to pornography occurred in 1958, followed by a handful of references in the 1960s, but discussion of pornography substantially increased in the 1970s, along with the availability and prevalence of pornographic materials in society (see Fig. 1). For reference, prominent pornographic magazines, such as *Playboy* (December, 1953), *Penthouse* (1965 in England and 1969 in America), and *Hustler* (1974) were also founded during this time. Figure 1 illustrates that pornography was discussed in both GC talks (44% of the content we analyzed) but also in *Ensign* articles (56% of the content we analyzed).

Our analysis developed in an inductive manner. Drawing on elements of “grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006), we examined the content for recurring patterns. Aside from noting the growing prevalence of pornography in talks and publications, we observed no distinct pattern in how LDS leaders characterized pornography over time. We did, however, note that they often gave specific advice about how to avoid becoming “stained” by pornography. Following this observation, we sorted these discussions into categories based upon the content of these teachings, and observed that the vast majority of teachings concerned actions members could engage in to protect themselves and concerned ways surveillance (internal and external) could aid such endeavors. Seeking to tease out nuances within these overarching themes that could later be analyzed and theorized systematically through comparison to other cases, we compared and contrasted the specific contents of the lessons in search of finer distinctions. Rather than appealing to pre-existing theoretical insights concerning religion and sexualities, we thus followed traditions of analytic induction by creating categories that captured the nuances within the teachings (see Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006).

To this end, we reexamined all the teachings, and noted that while they stressed some form of agency and surveillance techniques, specific themes emerged in separate sets of teachings. In some of the teachings, for example, LDS leaders focused on external pressures in order to outline ways members could use their agency to avoid pollution (e.g., avoid

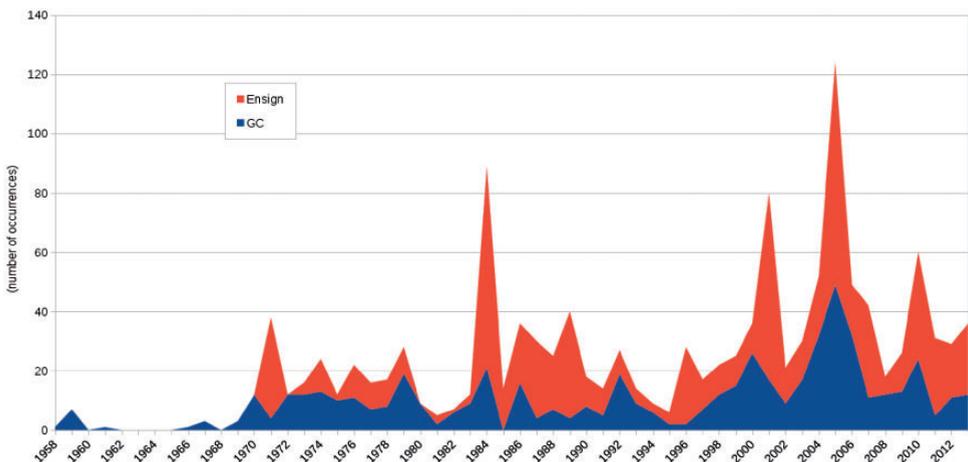


Figure 1. Occurrences of the word “pornography” and variants over time in LDS General Conference (GC) talks and *Ensign* magazine.

dangerous associations with temptation), but in other lessons they focused more heavily on the ways members could manage their internal desires and activities to remain pure (e.g., take personal responsibility for internal temptation). Further, we noted that other lessons focused on the maintenance of purity through concerted means (e.g., maintaining inner purity by guarding against internal and external temptations simultaneously), and a final nuance within the lessons addressed the steps necessary for handling occasions where temptation overcame members (e.g., reaching out for help from the Church). As a result, we created categories to capture the strategies LDS leaders suggested would protect moral people from pornography: (1) avoiding dangerous associations; (2) taking personal responsibility; (3) maintaining inner purity; and (4) seeking spiritual treatment. While these strategies (like many religious teachings) are inherently intertwined, they also reveal nuanced approaches to the conceptualization of pornographic temptation by LDS leaders.

Pornographic lessons

What follows is an analysis of LDS teachings about abstaining from pornographic consumption and influence. First, we examine how LDS leaders taught followers to avoid dangerous associations in the form of the media and friends. Next, we explore how they taught followers to take personal responsibility for their sexual morality by stressing the importance of using personal agency to avoid sinful thoughts and practices. Then, we demonstrate how they taught followers to maintain their purity by becoming staunch guardians against pornography. Finally, we show how they taught followers to seek help from the Church if they became caught in the traps of pornography. While we treat these lessons as analytically distinct, LDS leaders often used more than one at a time.

Avoiding dangerous associations

LDS leaders suggested that sexual morality was inherent within Mormons. This denotes a difference between Mormon and Catholic/Protestant theology in that Mormons reject the idea of original sin and believe children—until the age of 8—are sinless. This belief was used to argue that all good Mormons sought to live sexually pure lives, and as a result, sexual sin originated beyond the confines of Mormon selfhood. As such, they warned followers to avoid dangerous associations. In so doing, they stressed the importance of avoiding the influence of sexually immoral social elements.

LDS leaders were especially concerned about the corruptive influence of contemporary media. In fact, they often suggested that the majority of mainstream media carried implicit or overt pornography. To combat this force, they suggested followers should avoid any engagement with potentially harmful media offerings. The following excerpt from an article by Gordon B. Hinckley provides a typical example of this type of lesson:

I plead with you boys tonight to keep yourselves free from the stains of the world. You must not indulge in sleazy talk at school. You must not tell sultry jokes. You must not fool around with the Internet to find pornographic material. You must not dial a long-distance telephone number to listen to filth. You must not rent videos with pornography of any kind. This salacious stuff simply is not for you. Stay away from pornography as you would avoid a serious disease. It is as destructive. It can become habitual, and those who indulge in it get so they cannot leave it alone. It is addictive. It is a five-billion-dollar business for those who produce it. They make it as titillating and attractive as they know how. It seduces and destroys its victims. It is everywhere.

It is all about us. I plead with you young men not to get involved in its use. You simply cannot afford to. The girl you marry is worthy of a husband whose life has not been tainted by this ugly, corrosive material. (Hinckley, 1998)

LDS leaders also regularly warned of the dangers of a single exposure to this “corrosive material.” As the current President of the Mormon Church, Thomas S. Monson, noted in an article,

Curious exploration of pornography can become a controlling habit, leading to coarser material and to sexual transgression. Don’t be afraid to walk out of a movie, turn off a television set, or change a radio station if what’s being presented does not meet your Heavenly Father’s standards. In short, if you have any question about whether a particular movie, book, or other form of entertainment is appropriate, don’t see it, don’t read it, don’t participate. (Monson, 1990)

LDS leaders thus taught their followers to avoid pornographic offerings, and in so doing protect themselves from disastrous spiritual stains. Further, their assertions—much like those favored by abstinence-only sexual education advocates (see Fields, 2008)—suggested that the slightest exposure to sexual content could irrevocably harm otherwise moral people.

LDS leaders also expressed concern about interpersonal associations, and the damning influence others could have upon followers. In so doing, they often emphasized stories wherein faithful Mormons—especially children—pleased God by resisting such negative influences. Importantly, they never offered a story of this type where the believer actually became corrupted. The following excerpt from a speech by Susan W. Tanner offers a typical example of this lesson:

Recently my own children and their spouses were remembering times through the years when they had stood for correct values in the face of peer pressure. One refused to watch a pornographic movie at a friend’s house when he was only 11; another refused to look with classmates at pornographic magazines. Both were ostracized socially for some time thereafter. In these moments they could have felt alone; but as they stood as witnesses, they felt the companionship and sustaining presence of the Holy Ghost. They also were armed with blessings that come from obedience to God’s commandments. (Tanner, 2008)

Recognizing the possibility of social disapproval, LDS leaders encouraged followers to avoid people who engaged in immoral activities, and in so doing, argued that the Holy Spirit and the blessings of God would serve to ease the loneliness caused by social scorn. In some ways, these sentiments echoed abstinence-only materials warning youth that even though others might find it unpopular, sexual purity carried its own long-term moral and social benefits (Rose, 2005). In this regard, as the following speech by Richard C. Edgley shows, they argued peer pressure represented a conduit to moral and sexual corruption:

I know a young man who was thrilled to be selected for an all-star basketball team to play in a tournament in another state. The first evening at the hotel, the other roommates decided to watch pornographic movies. This boy left the room and walked the city by himself well into the night until the movies were over. I am sure it was embarrassing, lonely, and challenging. But that is courage; that is manhood in its truest sense. (Edgley, 1999)

Followers could thus portray “courage” and real “manhood” by abstaining from the immoral actions others would simply accept and abstaining in the face of peer pressure.

Expanding on this idea, H. Burke Peterson noted,

Now beware of loose thinkers. The subtlety of their influence can be disarming and destructive. Regardless of what others may do, we should not view or talk about suggestive movies. Shun them as you would the plague. A good movie with only a little pornography or vulgarity is not good. (Peterson, 1984)

Echoing ex-gay ministry (Robinson and Spivey, 2007) and abstinence-only (Fields, 2008) arguments that improper role models, methods of gender socialization, and environmental influences could derail proper sexual development, LDS leaders thus taught followers to remain pure by avoiding the potential negative effects of less moral others.

In practical terms, instruction to avoid temptation also means members of the LDS Church have to be very careful about the media they consume. The discourse we analyzed did not explicitly define pornography, which is admittedly difficult to do. However, that may have been intentional as pornography can therefore be inclusive of anything seen as prurient or contrary to the sexual norms and mores of the religion. This broad perspective on pornography combines with other explicit directions leaders provide to help their members remain morally pure. For instance, members are specifically told to avoid R-rated movies, regardless of the reason why the movie is rated R (and many do; see Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012); they are also encouraged to be very careful about PG-13- or PG-rated movies (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011). Movies with a G rating are generally considered safe. Since PG, PG-13, and R-rated movies can contain sexual content, by avoiding these movies, members of the LDS Church can avoid exposure to any sexual content, regardless of how mild or explicit the sexual content is. Mormons are also encouraged to carefully screen TV shows, avoiding any that reflect values that do not align with the teachings of the religion. This led the NBC affiliate in Salt Lake City, KSL-TV, which is owned by the LDS Church, to initially not air a show about a gay couple living in Los Angeles, *The New Normal* (Day, 2012). Surveys have also shown that Mormons have a greater distrust of Hollywood than do members of any other religious group in the USA because they do not believe Hollywood-produced media aligns with their values (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009).

In sum, LDS leaders suggested followers could protect themselves from pornography by monitoring the associations in their lives, and striving to avoid immoral activities promoted and affirmed by media offerings and other people. Speaking about the emergence of sexual desires among teenagers, for example, Boyd K. Packer noted, “These desires can be intensified, even perverted, by pornography, improper music, or the encouragement from unworthy associations” (2000). LDS leaders thus argued that the influence of unsavory others could spoil the inherent moral purity of Mormons.

Taking personal responsibility

Contradicting to some degree the notion of inherently moral Mormons outlined in the last section, LDS leaders also stressed the importance of agency in the lives of followers. Specifically, they argued that Mormons would be tempted by the wiles of pornography, and that as a result, each person had to take personal responsibility for their sexual purity and strive to remain clean. Rather than strictly focusing on external sources of temptation, they argued that followers had to work to protect themselves, and hold themselves accountable for moral failures (for a discussion of “personal responsibility” discourse in

conservative Christian thought, see Emerson and Smith, 2000; Fields, 2008; Rohlinger, 2006).

LDS leaders stressed taking responsibility for sexual actions. Specifically, they instructed followers to use their own moral agency to abstain from pornography. The following excerpt offers an illustrative example:

How can we responsibly deal with the flood of erotic and pornographic images, which we find on every side? On the personal, individual level, we have the agency to avoid it. If we know something is poisonous, we are careful not to eat it. If we know a certain drug is highly addictive and would have a noxious effect on our body, most of us would avoid its use. Likewise, we can make a personal decision to avoid pornography, resisting the temptation to take that first look—to see what it's all about. But what can we do if we are exposed to inappropriate materials through no fault of our own? We can resist the temptation to go back for the second look. We have the agency to choose not to indulge in explicit images that might eventually “hook” us. These will be times when no parent, bishop, or stake president³ will be present. We will be on our own; the decision will be totally ours to make. It's up to us to act in our own self-interest. (Cline, 1984)

Similar to early Protestant notions of moral self-determination (see Weber, 1922) and contemporary campaigns promoting sexual abstinence outside of marriage (Fields, 2008), LDS leaders instructed their followers to decide to avoid pornography. As Gordon B. Hinckley noted,

That is the way pornography is. This sleazy filth is like corrosive salt. It will eat through your armor if you expose yourselves to it. I cannot emphasize this too strongly. The makers and marketers of this slimy stuff grow wealthy while the character of their customers decays. Stay away from it. Stand above it. It becomes addictive. It will destroy those who become its slaves. (Hinckley, 1996)

Echoing this notion, L. Edward Brown advised followers to “Avoid that pornographic playground. The same self-discipline is required relative to the materials you choose to read and the videos you may select to view. Pornography is poison” (2000). This mirrors the ways some anti-abortion Christian groups advise expectant mothers to realize their moral potential and responsibility (Rohlinger, 2002).

LDS leaders also stressed the importance of regulating sexual thoughts and desires. They encouraged followers to focus on the powerful promise of rewards awaiting those who remained pure (for similar rhetoric in abstinence-only campaigns, see Rose, 2005). The following excerpt by Gordon B. Hinckley offers a typical case:

You live in a world of terrible temptations. Pornography, with its sleazy filth, sweeps over the earth like a horrible, engulfing tide. It is poison. Do not watch it or read it. It will destroy you if you do. It will take from you your self-respect. It will rob you of a sense of the beauties of life. It will tear you down and pull you into a slough of evil thoughts and possibly of evil actions. Stay away from it. Shun it as you would a foul disease, for it is just as deadly. Be virtuous in thought and in deed. God has planted in you, for a purpose, a divine urge, which may be easily subverted to evil and destructive ends. (Hinckley, 1997)

In lessons like this, they taught members to forego their earthly desires in order to be worthy of the “divine” purpose of the Lord. As Russell M. Nelson explained, “Purveyors of pornography would enslave you by making their addicting snares seem desirable. But don't put all the blame on the media. The person who patronizes smut must bear ultimate

accountability for the consequences of his or her own choices” (1991). Echoing these sentiments, L. Edward Brown noted, “If you allow this pornographic disease a place in your heart, the Spirit withdraws itself and, ere you are aware, you are left alone and vulnerable” (2000). Similar to anti-abortion arguments concerning the automatic regret that follows immoral and irresponsible decision-making (see Kimport, 2012 for a summary and refutation of this rhetoric) or fear-based discourses that posit shame as the automatic result of deciding to have sex outside of marriage (see Rose, 2005 for a summary and critique of this practice in abstinence-only campaigns), LDS leaders defined pornographic consumption as a choice followers would ultimately wish they never made. In so doing, they stressed the importance of becoming responsible representatives of God’s will.

Similar to various anti-abortion (see Rohlinger, 2002, 2006) and abstinence-only (see Fields, 2008; Rose, 2005) campaigns, LDS leaders taught their followers to abstain from sexual deviance—like pornographic consumption and influence—by emphasizing moral responsibility. In so doing, they suggested that followers were given inherent urges to please God, and that pornography represented one of the many ways Satan attempted to misdirect their divinely inspired sexual morals. Rather than simply avoiding the detrimental endeavors valorized in the rest of society, they suggested that followers should strive to enhance the moral fiber within themselves by fashioning internal defenses to immoral pressures.

Maintaining purity

Like many conservative Christian traditions, Mormonism places a high premium on sexual purity. To this end, LDS elites warned followers of the dangerous repercussions of sacrificing the sexual purity God expects from believers. Echoing abstinence-only sex education advocates (Fields, 2008; Rose, 2005), they often accomplished this by teaching followers to maintain their sexual purity at all costs. Specifically, they suggested that the loss of purity could separate followers from God and relieve them of their own agency.

LDS leaders taught followers to maintain sexual purity by defining the use of pornography as an action that could separate believers from the divine. Specifically, this tactic rested on the argument that sexual immorality offended God in such a manner as to render the perpetrator unworthy of divine attention, love, or respect. As Gordon B. Hinckley noted,

You cannot afford in any degree to become involved with pornography, whatever its form. You simply cannot afford to become involved in immoral practices—or to let down the bars of sexual restraint. The emotions that stir within you which make boys attractive to girls and girls attractive to boys are part of a divine plan, but they must be restrained, subdued, and kept under control, or they will destroy you and make you unworthy of many of the great blessings which the Lord has in store for you. (Hinckley, 1992a)

By situating “sexual restraint” within the context of a divine plan, they suggested pornography could separate followers from God. As Hinckley noted in another speech the same year, “Transgression is incompatible with divine authority. Avoid pornography as you would avoid the plague. Avoid sexual sin of any degree” (1992b). In statements like this, LDS leaders defined pornography as wholly oppositional to “divine authority.” The following excerpt illustrates this recurring theme:

My dear young friends, do we not mock him anew if we come to the sacrament table with unclean hands and impure hearts as we administer the emblems of his sacrifice? As deacons,

teachers, and priests, you cannot afford to sit around telling and laughing at dirty stories, reading pornographic literature, watching pornographic movies, abusing yourselves sexually, or stooping to immoral behavior of any kind. (Hinckley, 1973)

LDS leaders thus suggested that one improper moment with pornography could simultaneously revoke sexual purity and remove one from the good graces of God.

LDS leaders also suggested that the use of pornography could relieve followers of their moral agency. Specifically, these lessons conceptualized pornography as automatically—even after one quick glance—addictive, and suggested followers—once they were exposed a single time—would lack the will to avoid pornography or reclaim sexually pure lives. The following excerpt illustrates this theme:

Every person has his free agency. He may steal or curse or drink; he may defile himself with pornographic material; he may laze away his life, fail to do his duty, commit sexual sins, or even take life. There is no force, but he must know that sin brings its proper punishment, sooner or later and in total, so that one is stupid indeed to choose to do the wrong things. Every person can fail to attend his meetings, fail to pay his tithing, fail to fill a mission, ignore his temple obligations and privileges, but if he is smart, he must know that he is the deprived one. (Kimball, 1974a)

Echoing this sentiment, Gordon B. Hinckley explained, “We cannot indulge in unclean thoughts. We must not partake of pornography. We must never be guilty of abuse of any kind. We must rise up above such things. ‘Rise up, O men of God’” (2006). Similarly, Spencer W. Kimball explained,

We urge, with Peter, “. . . Abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.” (1 Pet. 2:11.) No indecent exposure or pornography or other aberrations to defile the mind and spirit. No fondling of bodies, one’s own or that of others, and no sex between persons except in proper marriage relationships. This is positively prohibited by our Creator in all places, at all times, and we reaffirm it. Even in marriage there can be some excesses and distortions. No amount of rationalization to the contrary can satisfy a disappointed Father in heaven. (Kimball, 1974b)

Rather than simply a minor transgression, LDS leaders thus defined any engagement with pornography as an automatic destruction of sexual purity that would lead to further immorality. Echoing “slippery slope” arguments mobilized by abstinence-only sex education advocates in the past 20 years (Rose, 2005), LDS leaders suggested that maintaining sexual purity required steadfast, constant vigilance and total abstinence. However, LDS discourse also goes beyond behavioral guidelines and recommends that individuals control their thoughts. A growing body of neuroscience research suggests that it is virtually impossible for humans to always and continuously control their thoughts, as conscious thoughts are often triggered subconsciously by environmental cues (Sie, 2009; Weiden, Aarts, and Ruys, 2013). By burdening members of the LDS Church with the responsibility for always controlling their thoughts, leaders of the LDS Church are setting up the members to sin and fall short of moral ideals.

LDS leaders thus advocated complete—physical and cognitive—abstinence from pornographic influence as the only way to maintain sexual purity. Importantly, they did so by echoing the lesson plans of abstinence-only educators in public schools and legislative debates (see also Elliott, 2012). Considering that research continues to show that abstinence-only programs facilitate more negative sexual behaviors (see Rose, 2005), LDS leaders

might inadvertently facilitate pornography consumption by Mormons, as abstinence-only advocates often do with sex, leading followers to see pornography as simultaneously frightening and, as a result of fear, intriguing. For example, researchers regularly find that teaching people to abstain from sex and ignore sexual desires generally turns sexual activity into both a prize and a shameful act (Fields, 2008). As a result, abstinence-only programs tend to lead people to seek out sexual activities, but keep these endeavors secret, which limits their opportunities to learn important lessons about sexual health, desire, and technique. Since Mormon leaders suggest a similar abstinence-only approach to pornography, they may inadvertently make pornography more appealing to their members while encouraging members to feel shameful and cultivate secrecy concerning this appeal. Although there is no available data to evaluate if this in fact occurs, their focus on sexual purity ultimately reproduced unsuccessful approaches to sexual regulation attempted by conservative Christian groups in many other contexts (see Elliott, 2012; Fields, 2008; Rose, 2005). Considering that the creation of fear around sexual ideas appears to lie at the heart of these failures (see Rose, 2005), it might be wise for conservative Christian groups—Mormons as well as others—to reconsider the use of fear to regulate sexuality.

Seeking spiritual treatment

Finally, LDS leaders suggested that followers who had fallen victim to pornographic influence could recover their former spiritual value by seeking treatment from Church leaders. Although they never mentioned whether or not these actions could restore sexual purity, they advocated spiritual treatment as an option capable of healing the sexual immoralities wrought by pornography. LDS leaders thus suggested people harmed by pornography could always find a home and proper help in the Church.

LDS leaders taught their followers that pornographic influence could be overcome or left behind through the guidance of the Savior and the Church. Specifically, they argued that followers afflicted with pornographic sin could find solace and treatment as long as they completely abstained from future consumption and repented for past transgressions. The following excerpt provides a typical illustration of this type of lesson:

If you are already caught in the pornography trap, now is the time to free yourself with the help of the Savior. There is a way out, but you will need His help to escape. Your complete recovery will depend upon your complete repentance. Go to your bishop immediately. Seek his inspired guidance. He will help you put in place a plan of repentance that will restore your self-esteem and bring the Spirit back into your life. The healing power of the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ reaches all afflictions, even this one. (Clayton, 2007)

LDS leaders taught followers that even pornography could be overcome through God's grace. Further, their efforts may in fact be creating the negative experiences of followers that engage with pornography. By defining pornographic use as something to feel guilty or shameful about in the first place, their sexual lessons may be creating the shame and fear that followers who consume pornography later experience (see also Elliott, 2012; Wolkomir, 2006). Their own teachings may therefore provide the Church with a ready source of members who need help dealing with negative emotions (created by Church teachings) that only the Church can provide. As a result, their efforts to define pornography as sinful may ultimately justify the existence of the Church as well as its authority to provide the

(emotional and spiritual) care members require. As Gordon B. Hinckley explained in a speech later published in *Ensign*,

If there be any within the sound of my voice who are doing so, then may you plead with the Lord out of the depths of your soul that He will remove from you the addiction which enslaves you. And may you have the courage to seek the loving guidance of your bishop and, if necessary, the counsel of caring professionals. Let any who may be in the grip of this vise get upon their knees in the privacy of their closet and plead with the Lord for help to free them from this evil monster. Otherwise, this vicious stain will continue through life and even into eternity. (Hinckley, 2004)

LDS leaders thus taught that one can overcome pornographic influence by completely submitting to God and asking for forgiveness and strength.

Expanding upon this theme, LDS elites also offered step-by-step instructions for followers suffering from pornographic influence. These lists generally outlined a set of steps that blended spiritual negotiation with public activities that could rid the afflicted (person or society) of immoral impulses or desires. The following excerpt provides a typical illustration:

My brethren who are caught in this addiction or troubled by this temptation, there is a way. First, acknowledge the evil. Don't defend it or try to justify yourself. For at least a quarter century our leaders have pleaded with men, and also with women and children, to avoid this evil. Our current Church magazines are full of warnings, information, and helps on this subject—with more than a score of articles published or to be published this year and last year alone. Second, seek the help of the Lord and His servants. (Oaks, 2005)

In statements like this, followers were first instructed to face evil, and then seek the transcendent capabilities of the church (see also Weber, 1922). Following this line of reasoning, Dallin H. Oaks continues,

Third, do all that you can to avoid pornography. If you ever find yourself in its presence—which can happen to anyone in the world in which we live—follow the example of Joseph of Egypt. When temptation caught him in her grip, he left temptation and “got him out” (Gen. 39:12). Don't accommodate any degree of temptation. Prevent sin and avoid having to deal with its inevitable destruction. So, turn it off! Look away! Avoid it at all costs. Direct your thoughts in wholesome paths. Remember your covenants and be faithful in temple attendance. The wise bishop I quoted earlier reported that “an endowed priesthood bearer's fall into pornography never occurs during periods of regular worship in the temple; it happens when he has become casual in his worship” (letter of Mar. 13, 2005). (Oaks, 2005)

Following disclosure and the committed search for treatment, followers were instructed to begin following the strategies outlined in the previous sections by avoiding any association with pornography, using their agency to abstain from and prevent sin, and seeking to remain sexually pure “at all costs.” Further, LDS leaders suggested “regular worship in the temple” was an essential part of accomplishing these goals. Importantly, these statements suggest that collective surveillance, represented by public worship activities, rather than personal restraint—often defined as the essence of moral selfhood (see Weber, 1922; for an illustration within the context of conservative Christianity, see also Barton, 2012)—lies at the heart of moral sexuality. Similar to classic religious narratives concerning moral failure and redemption (see Weber, 1922), LDS leaders taught followers to overcome their sin by engaging in processes of spiritual disclosure, regulation, and participation that could realign them with God.

While examples of this type of lesson appeared as early as the mid-1970s, it is important to note, as the above illustrations reveal, that these lessons intensified and became more explicit in the past decade. Considering that researchers have noted widespread expansion of pornography throughout American society in recent years (Attwood, 2011) as well as increased rates of religious exiting (i.e., apostasy) from the Mormon Church since 1989 (see Phillips and Cragun, 2013), LDS leaders could be responding to potential failings of their other lessons regarding sexual morals. Even if this were the case, however, increased religious exiting among Mormons is likely due to multiple social factors including but not limited to other sexual (see Sumerau and Cragun, 2014a) and gender (see Sumerau and Cragun, 2014b) conflicts taking place within the church over the last decade. On the other hand, research has shown that overall religious affiliation in the USA has also been declining in recent years (Funk and Smith, 2012) and that pornographic expansion has occurred throughout the world over the last 40 years (Ezzell, 2008), which means they could simply be responding to broader religious and sexual patterns taking place throughout the entirety of the years captured in our data. While it is beyond our capabilities to ascertain the specific relationship between these phenomena, LDS leaders' intensification of lessons stressing treatment suggests that broader societal changes play some role in religious teaching about pornography.

In fact, their incorporation of "treatment" into their continued calls for pornographic abstinence since the early 1990s also mirrors shifts in conservative Christian sexual education movements and programs (Fields, 2008) as well as their own responses to homosexuality during this time (Sumerau and Cragun, 2014a). In the former case, abstinence-only movements have increasingly recognized the tendency for abstinence-only lessons to fail, and in so doing offered ways people may reclaim their moral standing (and in some cases their symbolic virginity or purity). In the latter case, Mormon teachings on homosexuality have increasingly suggested that lesbian, gay, and bisexual members could reclaim their moral standing with God and the Church by seeking to abstain, treat, and/or modify their same-sex desires. Similar to their teachings about pornography, such adjustments within and beyond Mormonism suggest at least the potential realization that abstinence-based approaches and notions of automatic impurity related to sexual desires and practices are unsustainable (see also Fields, 2008).

Discussion and conclusion

In recent years, many studies have examined conservative Christian responses to shifting societal attitudes about sexuality. In so doing, researchers have found that members of conservative Christian traditions mobilize vehement opposition to many controversial sexual issues including abortion (Rohlinger, 2002), comprehensive sex education (Fields, 2008), homosexuality (Burdette, Ellison, and Hill, 2005), and pornography (Sherkat and Ellison, 1997). However, these works do not provide a clear understanding of exactly what conservative Christian leaders are teaching these members about sexual issues. The current study extends previous research by examining how Mormon leaders taught their followers to interpret and protect themselves from pornography. As such, our analysis demonstrates the elaboration of religious teachings that may facilitate the negative reactions to pornography researchers have noted in survey- and outcome-based research (see Sherkat and Ellison, 1997).

In some cases, LDS leaders taught their followers to protect their sexual morality by defining others as unsavory influences upon the inherent morality of good Mormons.

Echoing other conservative Christian notions about the capability of others to contaminate divinely inspired traditions (see, e.g., Fetner, 2008; Barton, 2012; Sherkat and Ellison, 1997), they taught their followers to actively avoid the tarnished values of others, and to find solace in the embrace of the divine. In so doing, however, they suggested that people with different sexual values and beliefs were automatically suspect and inconsistent with divinity, which may explain why Mormons tend to have very low rates of religious diversity across their personal relationships (see Putnam and Campbell, 2012).

At other times, LDS leaders seemed to lose sight of the inherent morality of Mormons, and thus argued that followers needed to fortify their internal strength in order to avoid the trappings of this world. In so doing, they suggested that moral value had to be built through conscious activities, and, in much the same way anti-abortion groups simplify reproductive experience (Kimport, 2012) and abstinence-only groups vilify sexual diversity (Fields, 2008), defined people that engaged in pornographic use—even one time—as examples of moral irresponsibility rather than sexual agency. As a result, they reproduced dominant discourses defining diverse expressions of desire as utterly lacking in social and moral value (see Warner, 1999).

Although studies have shown that simplifications of sexual options and desires—as well as calls for total abstinence—are often ineffective at best and psychologically and emotionally dangerous in many cases (Fields, 2008; Rose, 2005), our analysis reveals that LDS leaders drew heavily upon concerns about sexual purity. Specifically, they taught their followers that only total abstinence from pornography—arguably an impossible condition in today’s “pornified” culture (see Sarracino and Scott, 2009)—could maintain their sexual purity and their connection to God’s divine plan. As a result, their lessons may have placed followers in an incredibly difficult position in relation to the fulfillment of both sexual and spiritual desires. Leaders of the religion may be setting up members to both feel constant guilt at their inability to shield themselves completely from pornified culture and to fail, spiritually and religiously, which increases their dependence on the religion for redemption, forgiveness, and exaltation (see also Moon, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006).

Rather than explicitly addressing the possibility that their longstanding lessons on pornography and other forms of abstinence may produce “rebound” effects like those observed in abstinence-only sexual education (see Rose, 2005), LDS leaders—like many abstinence-only advocates (see, e.g., Fields, 2008)—have amplified their discussions about treating and saving followers affected by pornography, and in so doing suggested that “sin” may not automatically result in the loss of spiritual worth. To this end, LDS leaders explicitly teach followers that pornographic affliction may be treated—and possibly cured—by sincere efforts at confession, prayer, and participation in the Church. They thus suggest that pornographic consumption might not automatically lead to moral destruction, so long as the individual changes his or her ways, resolves to never consume pornography again, turns to Jesus and the Church, and then follows through on the resolution by no longer consuming pornography. Rather than changing their lessons about pornography in the face of its continued societal expansion, LDS leaders have—like abstinence-only advocates (Fields, 2008)—simply continued to assert the same lessons about pornographic abstinence they developed in the 1970s in more emphatic tones. The emphasis on avoiding pornography has grown along with the spread of Internet access (see Fig. 1), though there was notable concern about pornography in prior decades as well. The more frequent references to pornography in LDS leaders’ discourse in the early 2000s (2006 had the most occurrences of our key terms) may be the result of even easier access to pornography through the Internet.

It is important to note that the overall focus of these combined lessons relies upon a conceptualization of pornographic use (even one time) as a “slippery slope” that will automatically lead to destruction. While we note this facet of the teachings above when they are most explicit, their implicit existence throughout Mormon teachings about pornography suggests a very simplified view of sexualities. By conceptualizing pornographic exposure as an automatic path to ruin, LDS leaders leave no room in their instruction for sexual moderation, temptation, or experimentation. Considering that each of these elements are increasingly common in contemporary society, LDS leaders thus create a zero-sum game their followers have little chance of winning. These findings suggest scholars may gain important insights into the interrelation of spiritual and sexual conflicts, experiences, and problems by exploring the ways religious people manage and interpret these “slippery” sexual “slopes.”

Building on previous treatments of religion and sexuality, our analysis reveals the intricacies embedded within conservative Christian teaching concerning sexual morality. Rather than simply offering blanket condemnations of sexual practices, for example, LDS leaders targeted specific aspects of followers’ lives, such as associations, decisions, aspirations, and failures, and offered guidelines whereby followers could shape each dimension in ways that avoided pornographic “contamination” (Sherkat and Ellison, 1997). Similarly, they repeatedly stressed practical, everyday strategies followers could adopt to prepare themselves to face explicit exchanges with immoral thoughts, behaviors, and desires. Our analysis suggests that critically evaluating the sexual lessons offered by religious leaders may significantly expand our understanding of conservative Christian—as well as other religiously motivated—opposition to shifting sexual norms and values.

Our outline of LDS teachings concerning pornographic abstinence also offers an interpretive framework for exploring conservative Christian teachings concerning other controversial sexual issues and practices. The four themes that emerged from our data reflect three components for how to address existential sexual threats. First, the existence of these threats must be established, as well as how they can “infect” Christians. Exposure to existential sexual threats can come through contact with unsavory others, but believers are personally responsible for how they respond to such exposure. Second, these sexual practices make Christians spiritually impure, and spiritual purity is important for salvation. Finally, in order to return to spiritual purity, Christians must forswear involvement in these sexual practices and utilize the saving graces of both Christ’s sacrifice and the tools their specific religion provides. Through these three components conservative Christian leaders may thus diagnose and propose spiritual remedies for a wide variety of sexual controversies that may arise within their communities.

Considering that LDS elites echoed conservative Christian interpretations of other sexual issues throughout their speeches and articles and that representative samples of conservative Christians reveal similar reactions to pornography, it stands to reason that other conservative Christian leaders could be offering similar advice to their own followers about protecting themselves from sexual corruption. Whereas only systematic empirical research can unveil the variations and similarities of such lessons across religious traditions, previous literature suggests that other conservative Christians may learn to avoid specific associations (Barton, 2012), develop particular notions of sexual responsibility (Rohlinger, 2002), receive powerful messages concerning sexual purity (Rose, 2005), and receive important guidelines concerning treatment for sexual sin (Robinson and Spivey, 2007) from their religious leaders. As a result, we suggest there is much to learn from the content of religious lessons concerning sexual morality and sexual sin (see also Rose, 2005).

Our findings also support recent observations concerning religious leaders' uncertainty over controversial sexual issues (see Cadge et al., 2012), and extend this research by revealing some ways religious elites may handle uncertainty. LDS leaders, for example, did not remain consistent in their interpretations or their lessons about sexual morality. Rather, they devised four distinct lessons for avoiding sexual sin that spoke to specific issues followers might face. Although the first two—avoiding dangerous associations and taking personal responsibility—are somewhat contradictory, it is likely the followers did not notice the inconsistency. Even so, we would expect that followers, like many other religious people (see Barton, 2012), focused on the lessons that were most pertinent to their own concerns—such as protecting their own or their children's sexual purity or managing their own or a spouse's pornographic consumption—without much regard for lessons that did not directly apply to their lives. As a result, our findings suggest that religious leaders may manage uncertainty or change concerning controversial sexual issues by teaching followers a variety of lessons in response to the differential sexual concerns that exist.

Our analysis also suggests that religious leaders may give little thought—if any—to the efficacy, clarity, or consistency of their teachings. Following Cadge et al. (2012), religious leaders may simply be attempting to resolve the conflicts between institutional and theological demands on the one hand and emerging controversies on the other. In so doing, however, they may, as the LDS leaders did regarding pornography, promote sexual notions—such as total abstinence—that have been shown to be ineffective. Whereas they could adopt these approaches—regardless of ineffectiveness—to avoid doing the ideological work necessary to revise existing theological traditions (see Wolkomir, 2006 for an example of conservative Christians attempting this type of revision), they could also simply be attempting to maintain long-standing conceptualizations of sexuality—such as the emphasis upon purity and chastity—at all costs. In either case, they may be doing their followers a disservice by granting sexual lessons divine authority without considering the effects such lessons may have upon their spiritual, social, and sexual lives.

Despite these insights, it is important to note that our analysis relies upon one specific religious tradition, and as such, simply begins to shed light on this area of religious and sexual scholarship. As a result, we suggest that other researchers should draw upon the strategies found in this case to expand and refine ongoing investigations into the relationship between religion and sexualities in contemporary society. Researchers could, for example, systematically examine the sexual teachings promoted by religious elites in various conservative, mainline, and liberal faith traditions within and beyond Christianity. Further, researchers could utilize survey instruments to test the responses of followers to the sexual lessons offered by their religious leaders. In so doing, researchers could clarify the impact as well as the content of sexual lessons promoted across different societal groups, and possibly compare these findings to the political actions and outcomes of religious and sexual interest groups. To this end, our analysis suggests insights into the complexities of contemporary sexual and religious relations, which continue to permeate and influence our shared political and social realities.

Notes

1. While we follow previous research by referring to conservative Christian movements and culture as a primary or collective reference point, it is important to note that much variation exists within terms like “conservative Christian,” and that many theological and structural nuances exist within different Protestant, Catholic, and other Christian-identified traditions.

2. It is important to note that while General Conference talks and *Ensign* publications both contain the official teachings of the Mormon Church, many Mormons consider General Conference talks to be analogous to sacred scripture, and thus these hold significant authority within the Church. That said, General Conference talks after 1971 are published in *Ensign*, and we utilize these published versions of post-1971 talks. In fact, 44% of our total data points are drawn directly from General Conference talks given or published by LDS leaders. Finally, it is important to note that while we have access to two forms of post-1971 General Conference talks, we only use and count each talk once, and thus our total data points reflect the number of distinct talks and publications.
3. A “stake president” in the LDS Church is similar to a Catholic bishop. He (it is always a man) is responsible for overseeing several local “wards” or congregations, which are aggregated into a “stake.”

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