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## “Come for the Memes, Stay for Defending the Faith”: Far-Right and Anti-Feminist *Red Pill* Influences in the #DezNat Twitter Hashtag

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**Abstract.** Scholarship on the intersection of Mormonism and the internet has often focused on progressive online voices. However, in recent years, the DezNat movement has challenged the assumption that online Mormonism necessarily trends more liberal than the Latter-day Saint mainstream. In this study, we examine the influence of *red pill* communities—which include far-right and anti-feminist movements on the internet—on DezNat. We collected 1,378 screenshots of tweets containing the #DezNat hashtag (which often included additional data and context) and engaged in open coding of these tweets, guided by our understanding of *red pill* concepts and tropes. We found considerable evidence of far-right and anti-feminist influences on DezNat-tagged tweets, suggesting that it is disingenuous for DezNat defenders to describe the movement as merely about Latter-day Saint orthodoxy. However, interpreting our findings through an *affinity space* framework, we argue that it is impractical—and perhaps impossible—to definitively establish the motivations of all those who participate in the movement. Rather, we suggest that the clear *red pill* references by DezNat participants provide an opportunity to consider overlaps between Mormonism, the far right, and aggressive anti-feminism—as well as the tensions between intentional ambiguity and boundary maintenance in Latter-day Saint institutions.

Scholarship on the intersection of Mormonism and the internet has often focused on progressive online voices. Brooks (2016) described Mormon feminism’s 1990s retreat “to safer, more private spaces like Internet discussion groups” (19), and Finnigan and Ross have described the role of blogs and social media platforms in contemporary Mormon feminist thinking (2013; 2015; Ross and Finnigan 2014). McDannell expanded this emphasis, noting that Mormon populations “marginalized in the eighties and nineties—intellectuals, feminists, gays—gravitated to social media as a safe place to express their ideas” (2019, 174). Along these lines, live-tweeting of General Conferences has

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often been queer-friendly in a way that the conferences themselves have not (Burroughs 2013; Johns and Nelson 2015).

In recent years, the DezNat Twitter hashtag has challenged the assumption that online manifestations of Mormonism necessarily trend more liberal. The headline of Hitt's (2019) *Daily Beast* article describes the movement as "alt-right Mormons," and critics of the movement understand its name to be an abbreviation of "Deseret Nationalism," an interpretation bolstered by the context surrounding the hashtag's creation (see Mary Ann 2020). Indeed, one of the first tweets to ever use the #DezNat hashtag asked readers whether "what you are doing today [is] helping to build Deseret tomorrow," a celebration of—and seeming desire to return to—nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint leaders' near-total political and religious sovereignty over their people in the pre-Utah territory called Deseret.

In contrast, DezNat participants have typically insisted that their sole purpose is to gather orthodox Latter-day Saints and defend the Church against critics. Correspondingly, they see the term "alt-right" as inaccurate and even defamatory; similarly, they argue that "DezNat" is simply a reference to "Deseret Nation." Acknowledging these arguments, Stack's (2021) description of the movement in the *Salt Lake Tribune* concedes that it may "not [be], strictly speaking, an alt-right political group." Thus, in addition to simply being a controversial Mormon movement, DezNat has succeeded in making the purpose and identity of the movement part of the controversy.

To better understand DezNat and better situate it within (online) Mormonism, we document participants' use of *red pill* tropes associated with far-right and anti-feminist movements. We conceive of these tropes as being expressed within a hashtag-associated *affinity space* (Gee 2005; 2017), a conceptual framework that intentionally sets aside the question of social boundaries in order to focus instead on shared practices and identities. We argue that this framing is key to understanding not only DezNat but also its implications for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Indeed, our findings demonstrate that DezNat participants regularly drew on far-right and anti-feminist tropes, suggesting that it is disingenuous to describe the movement as merely about Latter-day Saint orthodoxy. However, even in documenting extremist practices and identities present within this space, we acknowledge that questions about individual and collective purposes may be more complicated; ultimately, we consider these tensions in the context of intentional ambiguity and boundary maintenance.

## Background

In this section, we define and describe core concepts that underpin our examination of the DezNat hashtag space.

### *Red Pill Communities*

Although much of the discourse around DezNat has focused on whether it is appropriate to describe the movement as “alt-right,” we prefer Zuckerberg’s reference to *red pill communities* (2019). The phrase *red pill*—“the alt-right’s number one metaphor” (Wendling 2018, 29)—is appropriated from the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, whose protagonist must choose between taking a (literal) red pill that will awaken him to a hidden reality or a blue pill that will allow him to continue his life as it is. Thus, the *red-pill* “are clear-eyed, truth-seeking heroes—by extension, the *blue-pill* are the intellectually lazy, scale-eyed, soma-taking masses” (30). In short, the alt-right sees itself as aware of a political reality, including “purported biological racial differences, problems associated with racial diversity, and various conspiracy theories about Jewish subversion,” of which the rest of the world is unaware (Hawley 2017, 83; see also Hartzell 2018).

Yet, Zuckerberg notes that the *red pill* metaphor has also been used to (self-)describe those who believe that “society is unfair to men—heterosexual white men in particular—and is designed to favor women” (1–2; see also Ging 2017; Hawley, 2017; Niewert, 2017; Wendling, 2018). Indeed, Massanari and Chess (2018) describe the mid-2010s misogynist Gamergate movement as a precursor of the contemporary alt-right (see also Niewert 2016; Wendling 2018). As Marwick and Caplan write, both the alt-right and the online, anti-feminist *Manosphere* “rely on a white male identity seen as under attack by feminists, SJWs [social justice warriors], and people of color” (2018, 554). Likewise, Kimmel (2018) has documented the ways that far-right movements have appealed to hegemonic masculinity as a recruitment strategy, and Bjork-James (2020) has described how Neo-Nazi and KKK support for the Trump campaign sometimes drew on concerns about gender and sexuality rather than “explicitly racial theme[s]” (58).

We therefore use the term *red pill* to emphasize the convergence of extreme views on gender, race, and politics—on the internet broadly as well as specifically within DezNat. Our use of this general term also acknowledges that both the anti-feminist and far-right manifestations of the *red pill* move-

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ment are loosely organized and go by a number of names (Hawley 2017; Zuckerberg 2019)—though there is also value in distinguishing among manifestations (Hartzell 2018). Given the vastness of the *red pill* landscape (and its various tropes), we will refrain from any more specific explanations of particular communities and tropes except when they become relevant to our findings.

Although it would be inaccurate to describe Mormonism as part of this *red pill* landscape, it is important to note ways that it connects with far-right politics and anti-feminist movements. Perhaps the clearest such connection is Ezra Taft Benson, who helped establish U.S. Mormons as a reliably right-wing population (Harris 2020, Shipps 2016). During Benson's tenure as a Latter-day Saint apostle, he was granted rare permission to engage in politics, serving as Secretary of Agriculture under Dwight Eisenhower; upon his return to full-time ministry, Benson continued to feel a political calling. Influenced by the far-right John Birch Society, he repeatedly described the civil rights movement as a communist conspiracy and even accused Eisenhower of being soft on or manipulated by communism (Harris 2020). He also asked for permission for another leave from ministry in order to run on an ultraconservative third-party presidential ticket with either George Wallace or Strom Thurmond; however, church leaders refused this request, so Benson ultimately did not join the ticket (Harris 2020).

Another connection may be found in official Latter-day Saint campaigning against the Equal Rights Amendment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, described by Brooks (2016) as one of the more compelling indicators of institutional Latter-day Saint anti-feminism. Given the overlap between far-right and anti-feminist thinking, it is perhaps unsurprising that Radke-Moss (2019) described Benson as the Latter-day Saint leader who “locked Mormonism into an anti-feminist narrative” (197). Yet, these efforts were motivated not just by concern about women's roles but “a whole system that favored heterosexuality” (Petrey 2020, 116). Indeed, Quinn argued that Latter-day Saint organization against the ERA would inform its later “campaign against same-sex marriage” (1997, 403). Institutional anti-feminism (in the service of shoring up heterosexual masculinity) was also strong in the next decade. In a May 1993 address, apostle Boyd Packer described “the gay-lesbian movement” and “the feminist movement” as two of the major threats facing the church (Quinn 1997, 890). Packer was also considered the driving figure behind the high-profile “September Six” excommunications of a half-dozen feminists and intellectuals later that year.

### *Intentional Ambiguity and Boundary Maintenance*

Cultivated ambiguity is a key feature of the contemporary, online far-right. For example, in 2021, far-right figure Nick Fuentes adopted the slogan “White Boy Summer” to describe a series of events he was organizing. Although meant to be understood as a reference to a seemingly apolitical (if poorly titled) music video, the reappropriation of the same phrase by white nationalist and neo-Nazi groups during this same time period emphasizes that Fuentes likely intended his audience to understand a deeper and darker message behind the phrase (Evans and Davis 2021). Other far-right actors have appropriated even more mundane symbols like Hawaiian shirts (Pérez de Acha, Hurd, and Lightfoot 2021) and the “OK” hand gesture (Swales 2019) as messages to those in the know.

This ambiguity can be understood as an attempt to either transcend or redefine maintained boundaries. In this vein, mainstream Republican politicians have used the strategy of “dog whistling”—composing a message so that different audiences hear different things—to appeal to racial panic without using explicitly racist language (Henderson and McCready 2018; Niewert 2017). Bhat and Klein (2020) provide an example from former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who once argued that a culture of work was absent in inner cities. Because Ryan pointedly did not mention race, he was able to respond to subsequent criticism by insisting that his remarks had nothing to do with race but rather family values and poverty; however, terms like “inner cities” and “culture” served as dog whistles to those who hold the racist belief that Black men lack the strong work ethic found in (superior) white culture. This careful language allowed Ryan to appeal to this population without explicitly agreeing with them. Such an approach is intended to maintain boundaries between respectable conservatism and taboo racism—while also reaching beyond those boundaries to obtain support. Along similar lines, Hartzell describes the alt-right as trying to redefine (or even tear down) maintained boundaries by “reach[ing] white folks who might not seek out ‘white nationalist rhetoric’ but would perhaps be sympathetic to white nationalist arguments” (2018, 20).

Latter-day Saint leaders have also sometimes cultivated intentional ambiguity—including in distancing the Church from previous *red pill* associations. For example, although an elderly Ezra Taft Benson continued to privately espouse Bircher views after he became president of the Church, his counselors and colleagues engaged in an “intensive campaign to remake Ben-

son's image" (Harris 2020, 116), supported by Benson's largely apolitical presidency. Thus, since 1985, the Church has papered over Benson's right-wing views while never explicitly denouncing them. Unlike "dog whistle" tactics, the Church's ambiguity is not likely intended to allow right-wing Mormons to read extremist views into Latter-day Saint teachings; however, it is not without that consequence. During Benson's presidency, his counselors' steps to rein in right-wing extremism in the Church led to accusations from Benson supporters that they had usurped power from an ailing church president (Harris 2020; Quinn 1997). Similarly, Harris (2020) has noted that contemporary Mormon figures and organizations such as Glenn Beck (see also Brooks 2010), the Bundy brothers, and apocalyptic prepper movements have not forgotten Benson's views and clearly draw from them today.

This example of intentional ambiguity is also related to boundary maintenance. Efforts to silence Benson's far-right views without casting doubt on his credibility as a prophet of God can be understood an example of Mormon tensions between assimilating into the American mainstream and redefining "distinctive Mormon boundaries" through "new Mormon fundamentalism" (Mauss 1994, xi). Attempts to carve out a unique space for Latter-day Saint identity also extend to the political realm. Despite Mormons' being "the most heavily Republican-leaning religious group in the U.S." (Lipka 2016, paragraph 1), the Church insists it "is neutral in matters of party politics" (LDS n.d.). Latter-day Saint leaders have taken positions on immigration (Stack, 2011, 2016) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Stack, 2021) that have clearly distinguished them from standard right-wing positions in U.S. politics (see also Campbell et al. 2016). This boundary maintenance has sometimes complicated the position of Mormonism in the U.S. political landscape; indeed, Mormons' ambivalence about Donald Trump during his first campaign for president was pronounced enough that state-supported information operations portrayed Mormonism as both insufficiently conservative and insufficiently liberal for their fellow Americans (Greenhalgh 2021).

### **Conceptual Framework**

We argue that the DezNat hashtag and its connections to Mormonism are best understood through an *affinity space* framework (Gee 2005; 2017). This framework is based on Gee's (2005) argument that it is more helpful to focus "on a *space* in which people interact, rather than on *membership* in a community" (214; emphasis in original). Whereas a community-based framework

such as Wenger's popular *community of practice* (1998) invites questions about "who is in and who is not" (Gee 2005, 215), a space-based framework forgoes questions of formal membership and interpersonal ties in order to focus on shared meaning-making practices within a given physical or virtual space. Indeed, as Gee further notes, in online contexts "participation, membership and boundaries" (215) are inherently difficult to define. This is particularly true of the Twitter hashtag, which allows for bad faith (e.g., Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019)—or even accidental (e.g., Greenhalgh, Rosenberg, and Wolf 2016)—participation. Yet, despite the difficulty of defining membership, Gee (2005) has suggested that it remains possible to define the "content ... and social practices" (218) that characterize a given space.

## Methods

This research falls into the broad category of digital methods, "the use of online and digital technologies to collect and analyse research data" (Snee, Hine, Morey, Roberts, and Watson 2016, 1).

### *Research Design and Ethics*

Our respective institutions consider this research to involve public data and therefore as not subject to ethical oversight. However, questions of publicity in internet research are complex (Markham and Buchanan 2012), users do not always understand how public their data are (Proferes 2017), and Twitter users have expressed discomfort with the possibility that researchers would study their posts (Fiesler and Proferes 2018). To navigate these risks and tensions, we adopted the Ethics of Care approach to internet research described by Suomela, Chee, Berendt, and Rockwell (2019), whose work analyzing *red pill* data made this approach particularly relevant.

Guided by a focus on "uneven power relations" (Suomela, Chee, Berendt, and Rockwell 2019, 7), we determined that this study was necessary for drawing attention to DezNat's claiming of and exercising power over others. However, we also hold power over our (largely unwitting) research subjects and have therefore done our best to grant them privacy, including using pseudonyms and lightly editing direct quotes that could be otherwise used to identify Twitter accounts. Similarly, when selecting images of tweets to include as figures, we prioritized since-deleted accounts and tweets, and we obscured account information to reduce the likelihood of user identification. In cases



where we felt that a detailed description of DezNat's harassment was important to demonstrate a point but could potentially identify individuals targeted by DezNat, we obtained explicit consent from those harassed and worked with them to tell their story in a way that represented both our findings and their wishes. Finally, we were attentive to potential negative impacts of a close analysis of these data on us as researchers and discussed power dynamics within our research team, including possibilities that each of us might be at higher risk for retributive harassment in different contexts.

### *Researcher Positionality*

Qualitative research requires us to note that the contexts and lived experiences of researchers intersect in ways that may influence research interpretations (St. Louis and Barton 2002). In particular, Decoo (2022) describes the way in which insider and outsider perspectives may influence qualitative research related to Mormonism. We therefore include here a description of each author and their positionalities in engaging in this research. The first author is an upper-middle-class, white, straight, cis-gendered man who holds a PhD in educational psychology and educational technology. He was a practicing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for most of his life and is now affiliated with Community of Christ. The second author is an upper-middle-class, white, straight, cis-gendered woman who holds a PhD in educational psychology and educational technology. She was raised as a Roman Catholic and continues to practice that faith.

### *Data Collection*

The dataset for this study came from our collecting tweets containing the #DezNat hashtag using a series of Twitter Archiving Google Sheets (TAGS; Hawksey 2014). For this study, we limited our consideration to tweets composed between April 3 and April 9, 2019 in order to focus on the April 2019 General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. General Conferences are accompanied by a strong live-tweeting tradition (Greenhalgh, Staudt Willet, and Koehler 2019; Johns and Nelson 2015) and may represent a peak of Mormon activity on Twitter (Kimmons, McGuire, Stauffer, Jones, Gregson, and Austin, 2017). We redownloaded the relevant tweets using the *rtweet* package for the R programming language (Kearney 2019); any tweet deleted between the original TAGS collection and the subsequent *rtweet*

download does not appear in our analysis, providing an additional layer of respect for participant privacy.

We then used the *webshot* package in R (Chang 2019) to capture PDF screenshots of each tweet, which we refer to in this paper as “documents.” Some screenshots revealed that associated accounts had been deleted or suspended prior to this step in the process; we removed these screenshots prior to analysis, resulting in a final dataset of 1,378 screenshots. Studying screenshots afforded additional, helpful context, including embedded media, glimpses of users’ profile pages, and interactions with the tweets; however, this also meant that different screenshots represented different amounts of data. Notably, our data collection methods frequently captured entire threads of tweets (not all of which included the #DezNat hashtag), which facilitated our subsequent analysis. Conversely, we also note that screenshots did not always successfully capture media embedded in single tweets, limiting our analysis. Nonetheless, we generally limited our analysis to only that which was visible in the screenshots. We are aware of further cases in which DezNat participants have had their accounts suspended due to violations of Twitter policies or have deleted tweets or accounts to avoid scrutiny. However, because account suspensions and tweet deletions speak to the controversy of DezNat (and because it would be impractical to review each tweet analyzed in this study), we have decided to not remove these data from our analysis, though we have attempted to protect these users’ privacy in other ways.

### **Data Analysis**

We uploaded all screenshots of tweets to the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. We began analysis with one round of inductive coding in which two researchers open-coded all data (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014), wrote researcher memos, and built a codebook. Then, each researcher independently applied the codebook to half of the data. We wrote research memos and met regularly to discuss our coding; through these conversations, we discussed our interpretations of the data, resolved discrepancies, and refined our codebook (Saldaña 2021). Because of the layers of interpretation required to analyze the meaning of each document, we chose to come to consensus on all of our coding rather than to rely on statistical measures of interrater reliability (Saldaña 2021).

We used multiple methods to address potential issues of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Patton 2015). We

engaged in researcher reflexivity by considering how our assumptions, values, and biases could influence our interpretations. We developed an audit trail by creating researcher memos including notes of our methodological decisions, questions, and emerging insights. Throughout our data analysis, we asked whether there were other explanations for the emerging themes in our data.

## Results

In the following sections, we describe the areas of overlap that we found between data associated with the DezNat movement and tropes present in various *red pill* movements.

### *DezNat and Far-right Red Pill Tropes*

In this section, we describe our findings related to DezNat's self-positioning with regard to right-wing political views. DezNat tweets frequently referenced right-wing figures, ideas, and movements, often combining them with distinctly religious sentiments. For example, one DezNat participant approvingly described apostle David Bednar as "no respecter of feelings" (document 1186), combining the scriptural phrase "no respecter of persons" with conservative commentator Ben Shapiro's catchphrase "facts don't care about your feelings" (which is also referenced in another DezNat tweet; document 293). Echoing a common conservative complaint, another participant expressed concern about the rise of "woke fascism" among Latter-day Saints (document 270). These references to (relatively) mainstream U.S. conservatism were also accompanied by more specific *red pill* references and by an embrace of violent rhetoric.

***Red Pill References.*** Other DezNat tweets reference ideas particular to *red pill* communities. Orthodox Christianity has become popular among the far-right (e.g., Kelaidis 2016; Hawley 2017); thus, when one Twitter user announced his intent to "found a . . . classically American ortho[dox] church with based [i.e., *red pill*] American priests," a DezNat participant responded with an image depicting Joseph Smith, Jr. in the style of an Orthodox icon, inviting the first account to "come home brother" (document 27; see fig. 1). Later in the thread, the same account claimed to be speaking for "many of us in #DezNat" in expressing excitement about blending Orthodox and Mormon influences. This account's profile picture features Groyper, a cartoon frog associated with

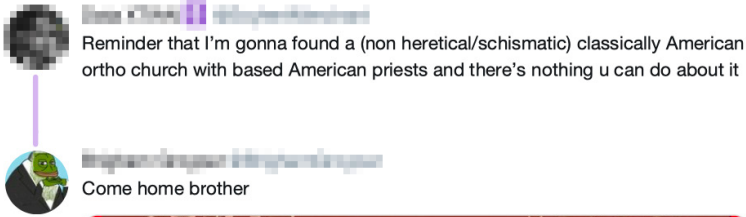


Figure 1. Screenshot of Twitter thread showing #DezNat enthusiasm for Orthodox Christianity.

white nationalism and frequently customized for individual users (Mak 2017); indeed, this particular Groyper is clearly intended to be former Church president Brigham Young.

DezNat's embrace of internet memes broadly (e.g., "come for the memes, stay for defending the faith"; document 177) seems to draw from similar sentiments among the alt-right (Hawley 2017; Heikkilä 2017). In response to progressive concerns that apostle Neil Andersen's sermon on the "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (a 1995 document that serves as the basis for contemporary Latter-day Saint teachings on sexuality and gender) might turn

into a canonization of the Proclamation, one participant rejoiced that “meme magic is real, my #DezNat brothers and sisters” (document 771). *Meme magic* refers to the half-joking alt-right belief that sharing internet memes and content led to Donald Trump’s election in 2016 (Wendling 2018).

Also present in our data is the “[person] did nothing wrong” meme, which a DezNat leader used to defend two different General Authorities (documents 130 and 588). Sometime after the timeframe of this study, the phrase “Brigham Young did nothing wrong” also became popular among DezNat participants. This *snowclone*—a meme consisting of variations on a phrase with a standard structure—began as “Hitler Did Nothing Wrong” in an effort on 4chan (a *red pill*-associated website) to troll a contest for naming a new Mountain Dew flavor (Rosenfeld, 2012).

Some of the clearest references to white nationalism were in response to critics of DezNat. When one account derogatorily described DezNat as “alt-right Mormons,” one partisan (with coded anti-Semitic language in their username) responded by recommending a book written by a 20th-century American fascist (document 234). Another reference came in response to a critical account that frequently employed the mocking term “dezgasm.” Replying to a tweet by that account, one DezNat sympathizer suggested as an alternative the play on words “1488 DezGasEm” (document 32). The number 1488 is frequently used in white supremacist circles (Hawley 2017; Niewert 2017; Wendling 2018) for its combined reference to a 14-word white supremacist slogan and to “Heil Hitler” (because “H” is the eighth letter of the alphabet); likewise, “GasEm” is a clear reference to Holocaust death camps.

Other posts may hint at racist ideas among DezNat participants but are more ambiguous. One account laughingly dismissed criticism of the term “Pharisee” as anti-Semitic (document 346) but appropriated the term “blood libel” (derived from anti-Semitic hysteria) to describe a queer Mormon’s criticism of a General Conference sermon (document 583). Although both phrases are commonly used, they could also represent deeper, more explicit anti-Semitic beliefs—especially because the username of the account in question references a prominent Mormon known to have such beliefs. Likewise, DezNat references to measuring foreheads (documents 41, 45, 468, 1317) are not straightforward but appear to be references to phrenology, which was once entertained in Mormon circles (e.g., Bitton and Bunker 1974) and corresponds with the scientific racism popular among contemporary *red pill* communities (Niewert, 2017).

Take your vitamin pills, it's time for  
#GeneralConference  
#DezNat



8 Retweets 46 Likes

Figure 2. Screenshot of #DezNat tweet including an image of a “laser-eyed” Russell Nelson.

*Beyond the Red Pill.* In October 2018, Church president Russell Nelson encouraged Latter-day Saints to “Eat your vitamin pills. Get your rest. It’s going to be exciting” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). In doing so, he inadvertently provided DezNat a metaphor to work with. Building on the existing metaphor of *blue pills* and *red pills*, DezNat participants repeatedly referred to the *vitamin pill* in our data. Tweets described the need to take vitamin pills prior to General Conference (documents 297, 308), suggested that the presence of General Authorities “activated” their vitamin pills (document 1012), or listed “taking daily vitamin pills” as a requirement for divinely approved DezNat participation (document 1417). Evidence of “Vitamin Pill Status” was often visually signified by adding “laser eyes” to a person, a meme sometimes used in right-wing circles (and other contexts) to indicate power (e.g., Lee 2020). Thus, Nelson (see Figure 2) and his counselors in the gov-



erning First Presidency were frequently shown with laser eyes to show their spiritual power (documents 304, 308, 673, 712, 725, 1045, 1047, 1062, 1083, 1085, 1180, 1321), as were former Church presidents Brigham Young (document 844) and Spencer Kimball (document 1411) as well as contemporary apostle Neil Andersen (document 612). Some DezNat participants also added laser eyes to their profile pictures to demonstrate that they, too, had been vitamin-pilled in the same way as General Authorities (documents 1422, 1433).

DezNat participants clearly associated the *vitamin pill* with *blue* and *red pills* in a shortlived-but-widespread meme begun shortly after the conclusion of General Conference. The structure of the meme described inferior things as *blue pills*, acceptable things as *red pills* and superior things as *vitamin pills*, suggesting that DezNat was sympathetic to *red pill* communities but saw themselves (and Mormonism broadly) as an improvement on those communities. Thus, if “President Donald Trump” was an improvement on “President Bernie Sanders,” “President Russell M. Nelson” was superior to both (document 1350). Similar tweets contrasted “Government Education,” “School Choice,” and “Home based, Church Supported” (a reference to a contemporary religious education initiative; document 1351) or “Vox.com,” “FoxNews.com,” and “Newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org” (document 1354). One example that was “liked” by several prominent DezNat accounts (document 1450; see fig. 3) described moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem as merely a *blue pill* position, with the *red pill* alternative being “Retake Jerusalem, Deus Vult,” a Crusades reference popular in racist video game communities (Winkie 2018). However, “Build the new Jerusalem on the American continent” (a distinct Latter-day Saint belief) was judged a superior position to either of those options. In other memes, pills represented different positions within Mormonism. For example, one prominent account described “The Church has made mistakes” as a *blue pill* position, “The Church is true” as a *red pill* position, and “The Kingdom of God or nothing”—a Brigham Young quote in a sermon by then-apostle John Taylor defying an approaching American army and rejecting American assimilation—as the *vitamin pill* position.

**Violent References in DezNat.** In another echo of far-right groups, some DezNat tweets flirted with the idea of violent solutions to perceived problems. Two tweets depicted Church president Russell Nelson as the genocidal Marvel villain Thanos, who had recently been depicted in film as making half the living beings in the universe disappear. Drawing from this imagery, DezNat’s Nelson-as-Thanos was shown as wiping out either perceived “apostates” (docu-

- Blue Pill:  
Move the Israeli embassy to Jerusalem
- Red Pill:  
Retake Jerusalem, Deus Vult
- Vitamin Pill:  
Build the new Jerusalem on the American continent

## #DezNat



**Figure 3.** Screenshot of a tweet using the #DezNat “pill” meme and employing racist references to the Crusades.

ment 673) or progressive Mormons who shared a then-current rumor that the Church would soon no longer forbid coffee (document 1047). This reactionary transformation of a genocidal villain into a hero is not limited to DezNat; Walker, Ramirez, and Soto-Vásquez (2021) describe Thanos as embodying—and fueling—far-right discourses. Indeed, a few months after DezNat’s use of the character, the Trump campaign tweeted a video of Marvel footage edited to superimpose their candidate’s head onto Thanos’s body (Pulliam-Moore 2019). After the villain snapped his fingers, the video showed prominent Democrats being reduced to dust—the same fate these DezNat accounts reserved for their perceived enemies.

Other tweets also included echoes of right-wing violence. One participant (document 1416) described DezNat as sheepdogs serving “the shepherd,” a reference to both Jesus Christ and a popular right-wing metaphor that divides the world into helpless sheep, violent-but-evil wolves, and violent-but-heroic sheepdogs (see Cummings and Cummings 2015). Similarly, a DezNat leader tweeted a link to a story that the Church was building firing ranges for its security forces with the comment “#DezNat summer camp” (document 13). Another participant combined right-wing survivalist thinking and Latter-day Saint exclusivism by expressing hope for the opportunity to raid Mormon fundamentalist compounds after an apocalyptic disaster (document 281). After the congregation at the priesthood session of the April 2019 General Con-



ference sang a Latter-day Saint hymn with militaristic language, First Presidency member Henry Eyring quipped that he “felt like we were ready to go” (Eyring 2019; quote appears only in video). One DezNat account responded with “Ready when you are,” accompanied with a picture of Captain Moroni, a military leader in the Book of Mormon (document 707).

In a separate thread, this same account leveled violent rhetoric against critics of the Book of Abraham, a controversial entry in the Latter-day Saint canon. Attaching an image of the book’s first facsimile, a supposed depiction of attempted human sacrifice, the participant commented, “what I love most about the Book of Abraham is that it contains an instructional diagram showing how to deal with those who criticize the Book of Abraham” (document 186). In a second tweet, the participant made his interpretation explicit, labeling the person doing the sacrificing as “DezNat” and the person being sacrificed as a “retarded ex-Mormon about to be blood atoned” (document 188), a reference to former Church president Brigham Young’s since-repudiated teachings on blood atonement, which held that some sins must be paid for with the sinner’s own life (see Mason, 2019). DezNat critics present in our data suggested that this was not the only account during this time to employ these references (document 239; see also Hitt 2019).

### ***(Partial) Rejections of Right-Wing Affiliation***

Despite repeated references to *red pill* tropes in the DezNat hashtag, many participants rejected any political intent behind the hashtag. Participants were particularly quick to reject any accusation of far-right leanings. One account described accusations of Nazism as a “particularly silly” critique (document 57), and another argued that “calling #DezNat alt-right isn’t just wrong, it’s misleading” (document 235). Yet even this pushback sometimes implicitly acknowledged right-leaning tendencies. One defender of DezNat accused critics of using the label “alt-right” to smear “anyone who’s conservative” (document 776), and another argued that people overused alt-right to describe anyone who “said mean things” but acknowledged that there are “probably no communists on the tag” (document 244). This second post should be read considering the American right’s hyperbolic criticism of the American left as communists, which was also on display in one account’s description of DezNat critics as “commie murmurers” (document 228), implicitly placing the movement in opposition to the left.

Other DezNat sympathizers insisted that the movement had nothing to do with partisan politics. One such account argued that “DezNat is the least

political group of Latter-day Saints on Twitter, outside of politics that grow out of sustaining church leaders” (document 1277), arguing that any shared political beliefs were a function of religious observance. Another described participants as “rarely get[ting] into conservative viewpoints . . . just religious ones” and argued that the group wasn’t “pounding the table for or against Trump or for political solutions to Church challenges” (document 239). In the same thread, which included an argument about whether the terms “Nazi” or “alt-right” were appropriate for describing DezNat, one sympathizer argued that whatever terms critics applied, “the will of God is always right” (document 776), rejecting any political framing of the movement. Similarly, a prominent DezNat account argued that if Mormon feminists went looking for supposed “#DezNat Nazis,” all they would find were Latter-day Saint men in their Sunday best (document 272). Another account suggested that if there was anything radical about DezNat, it was simply the fact that “we actually believe our religion” (document 239).

It is important to note that because of the focus of this study, we are necessarily overlooking the many tweets in our data that are indeed “just” religious in that they have no obvious *red pill* influences. If only those tweets are considered, it might be difficult to distinguish DezNat from mainstream U.S. Mormonism; this is especially true during DezNat live-tweeting of General Conference, an activity that unites a range of different Mormon identities (Greenhalgh, Staudt Willet, and Koehler 2019; Johns and Nelson 2015; Kimmons, McGuire, Stauffer, Jones, Gregson, and Austin 2017). However, this is more than a nuancing of our findings—indeed, it raises questions about overlap between the religious and political identities that DezNat is trying to separate. For example, when First Presidency member Dallin Oaks (2019) gave a General Conference talk suggesting that particular identities were eternally insignificant, one DezNat participant summarized this as “race is trivial in eternal terms” (document 713). Should this post be read as a right-wing attempt to downplay the importance of race, a summary of official Latter-day Saint teaching, or as an example of each informing the other?

Taking a different approach, some DezNat participants acknowledged troubling behavior in the hashtag but rejected critics’ problematizing of that behavior. Some fell back on a “just joking” defense, including dismissing aggressive DezNat in-fighting as humor that others didn’t understand (document 59). Similarly, one DezNat participant dismissed blood atonement rhetoric as “in-group humor” and “just dudes on the internet saying dumb stuff” (document 241). This same participant also suggested that “people can say whatever

they want on Twitter” (document 239), thereby arguing that the whole DezNat movement shouldn’t be held accountable for individual participants’ actions. Another participant took a similar tack in asking not to be judged by “the ‘sins’ of others” (document 288) and relativizing the issue by suggesting that he blocked accounts “on all sides who aren’t Christlike” (document 465). One prominent account took this logic a step further, arguing that because people “are complicated and imperfect and multi-dimensional,” DezNat observers should “value tweets, like people, individually by merit” (document 302).

Like DezNat’s denials of political identity, these arguments are not entirely baseless but ultimately further complicate the question. DezNat did practice other forms of uniquely Mormon humor, including joking about hot chocolate drinking games (documents 888, 1138, 1161, 1179), making fun of General Conference rumors (documents 348, 1262), and proposing over/under wagers on temple announcements (document 1208). Thus, it is impossible to entirely rule out the possibility that references to blood atonement could be distasteful examples of Mormon humor rather than a literal embrace of right-wing violence. Likewise, it is clear from our data that not all who use the DezNat hashtag agree with each other—or even with the movement writ large. We must therefore acknowledge that the behavior of individual accounts is not necessarily representative of the hashtag. However, *red pill* communities are not only characterized by humor and irony but also actively use these tactics as “a weapon and a shield” (Wendling 2018, 75; see also Hawley 2017); that is, members can defend anything as a misunderstood joke and mock their critics for not being in the know. In short, ambiguity and humor are less likely to distinguish DezNat from red pill communities than to emphasize their similarities.

### ***DezNat’s Centering of Masculinity***

DezNat participants regularly drew on anti-feminist ideas and tropes present in *red pill* communities. Ging describes the *red pill* Manosphere as characterized by multiple masculinities united by “a common preoccupation with male hegemony as it relates to heterosexual ... gender relations” (2017, 653). Similarly, Bjork-James argues that the far-right and religious right both engage in “defending hegemonic heterosexuality [as] a way to defend patriarchy” (2020, 59). The overlap with Mormon cultural norms—where “masculine, manly men ... ultimately become [heterosexual] husbands and fathers” (Petrey 2020, 88)—is perhaps obvious. *Red pill* communities villainize feminism

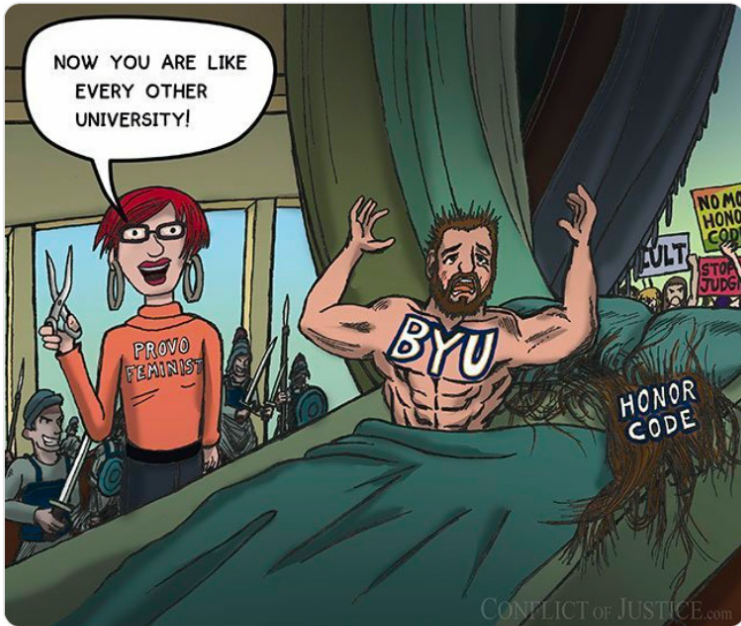
to preserve the centering of masculinity (e.g., Braithwaite 2016; Massanari and Chess 2018), and Latter-day Saint leaders have similarly expressed concern about feminism and other threats to (or failures of) Mormon masculinity (Petrey 2020).

The centering of masculinity in DezNat is evident in speculation about whether Church president Russell Nelson would use the occasion of General Conference to invite adult men of the church to participate in a “social media fast.” Nelson had previously invited youth and women to forgo social media for ten days but had not yet extended such an invitation to adult men. One DezNat participant demonstrated the anticipation that existed around this question: “#DezNat You realize that our social media fast is about to start, right?” (document 677). Note that the author feels no need to say “men, you realize...”: #DezNat participants are already assumed to be male. That DezNat is seen as masculine by default is further emphasized by one participant’s reasoning when no such challenge was issued to men: “the brethren [i.e., Church leaders] need #DezNat to continue supporting the gospel of Jesus Christ with exactness and to fight against the enemy #Apostake & #twitterstake” (document 1291). This tweet frames DezNat as a sort of belligerent missionary organization, needed—as put by another participant—“to cry repentance to Twitter” (document 1073). Thus, like official Latter-day Saint missionary efforts, DezNat activity is clearly understood as a primarily masculine responsibility.

This default masculinity is also seen elsewhere in the way that DezNat talks about itself and its purpose. Users of the hashtag described themselves as “dudes on the internet” (document 241) who “have wives & kids and smile and wear #WhiteShirts and ties,” the uniform of the churchgoing Mormon male (document 272). In response to the latter statement, one female DezNat sympathizer asked “is #DezNat only men?” (document 1324). Once reminded of the possibility, the original writer was confident that women were present. However, in modifying his description, he continued to frame women as extensions of men, referring to participants’ “wives and other strong women” and describing them as “#DezNat Relief Society” (document 1324), a reference to the Latter-day Saint women’s organization that was until recently described as an auxiliary to the exclusively-male priesthood governance of the church.

***Ideal Masculinity.*** DezNat participants described their normative experience as not only masculinity but a certain type of masculinity. Implicit in this perspective is a framing of DezNat’s alleged superiority over progressive Mormons in terms of fidelity to gender—not just fidelity to doctrine. Consider, for exam-

#reformthecode  
#HonorCodeHorrorStories  
#honorcodestories #BYU #TwitterStake  
#DezNat



5 Retweets 26 Likes



Figure 4. #DezNat tweet containing an anti-feminist cartoon critical of BYU protesters.

ple, the following tweet: “If progmos are always so upset about #DezNat being ‘mean,’ how do they feel about people being passive aggressive?” (document 242). The author’s scare quotes around “mean” seem to echo religious conservatives’ “nostalgic vision of aggressive, even violent masculinity” (Du Mez 2020, 54), whereas the condemnation of “passive-aggressiveness” is perhaps seen as a damning, feminine combination of softness and shrewishness. Thus, when, further in the thread, another DezNat participant describes passive-aggressiveness as the “currency” of progmos (document 242), they are criticizing both progressive Mormonism and perceived feminine values by comparing them to each other.

Similar overlap can be found in a DezNat-tweeted cartoon (see Figure 4) depicting protests of the BYU Honor Code that began shortly before General Conference (document 194). The Honor Code consists of strict rules of conduct that govern not only academic behavior but also gender performance (through dress and grooming) and sexual activity (Waterman and Kagel, 1998). The far-reaching and strictly enforced nature of the code has raised periodic controversy, including for its forbidding of same-sex dating and for BYU's treatment of victims of sexual assault as violators of school rules (see, e.g., Tanner and Miller 2019). However, DezNat participants in our data rejected that controversy and defended the Honor Code's institutionalization of Latter-day Saint views on gender and sexuality. Thus, in this cartoon, female Honor Code protestors are branded as "Provo feminists" and made to play the role of the Biblical figure Delilah, who betrayed Samson (here representing BYU) by cutting the long hair that is the source of his power. In the context of the cartoon, the traitorous haircut represents the removal of the BYU Honor Code, though the metaphor is somewhat muddled by the fact that the Honor Code prohibits men from wearing long hair. The Encyclopedia Britannica notes that the name Delilah has "become synonymous with a voluptuous, treacherous woman." While DezNat certainly believed women protesting the Honor Code to be treacherous, this Delilah is not voluptuous so much as short-haired and flat-chested, an "angry androgyny" (Massanari and Chess 2018, 539) understood to be "unattractive, at least according to hegemonic standards of ... femininity" (p. 531). This contrasts with the half-naked, ultra-masculine figure representing both Samson and BYU, whose also-Honor-Code-violating shirtlessness is presumably forgiven because of his impossibly muscled figure. Once again, faithfulness to hegemonic gender norms and to Latter-day Saint teachings and institutions are intertwined with each other; this pattern has a particular history in the context of the BYU Honor Code.

Specific examples of ideal masculine figures are also present in our data. One DezNat participant (document 12) jokingly suggested that Bryce Harper—a successful, attractive professional baseball player—might be called as an apostle. In another tweet (document 1468), this same account compared DezNat participants to Indiana Jones, a film character who combines physical strength, sex appeal, and intelligence. A separate series of tweets similarly emphasized health and fitness as part of ideal masculinity. DezNat participants discussed their workouts (document 1335) and reported attempts to go without soda (document 1420), perhaps recalling ties between the Word of Wisdom and Mormon masculinity (see, e.g., Hoyt and Patterson 2011; Tos-



cano 2020). In another conversation (document 1357), one DezNat participant summarized a General Conference sermon by Church president Russell Nelson as encouraging men to lose weight and dress better, suggesting that this was harder and more important than any social media fast.

Other tweets indicated the importance of virility to this masculine ideal. In one series of tweets (document 1437), sympathizers argued that “DezNat people are better in bed” and quoted a conservative humorist’s quip that no one has fantasies about being “sexually ravished by someone dressed as a liberal” (a rare, indirect embrace of DezNat’s political reputation). Later in the thread (document 1443), participants also linked the ideal masculine with having children, boasted about “the art of multiple orgasms” associated with the *vitamin pill*; and interpreted the previously mentioned Nelson sermon as counseling men to “put out more” for their wives.

This ideal masculinity was sometimes contrasted with *subordinate* approaches to masculinity. In conservative evangelical (Du Mez 2020) and Latter-day Saint circles (Hoyt 2020), it is the role of men to lead and the role of women to submit. Thus, when one DezNat partisan—Charles—drew the ire of the rest of the movement, one tweet bemoaned that he only “lasted 5 days after being engaged to a feminist” (document 39), implying that this couple had inappropriately traded gender roles. Another participant, responding to a request to provide examples of women in DezNat, quipped that they “used to have Charles ... We miss Charles dearly” (document 1324).

This metaphorical emasculation of the *subordinate* male was echoed in one DezNat partisan’s joking about the possibility of divine emasculation (document 1399). They referenced a 1963 speculation by then-apostle (and future Church president) Joseph Fielding Smith that sexual characteristics were only eternal for residents of the celestial kingdom, the highest tier of heaven in Latter-day Saint theology. Because the Latter-day Saint theology of the afterlife presumes embodiment and—more ambiguously—sexuality for all humanity, Smith’s speculation was an attempt to rule out the possibility that “unmarried males and females [could] have illicit sex in the afterlife” (Petrey 2020, 43). Although Smith’s 20th-century speculations stand in tension with 21st-century Latter-day Saint (and DezNat) views about the eternality of gender (officially understood as synonymous with biological sex), they remained useful for this DezNat participant to argue that only the most God-fearing of men would continue in their manliness (and the most God-fearing of women in their femininity).

For all of DezNat's embrace of masculine excess, the example of Charles demonstrates that there remains what Toscano (2020) describes as "tensions in the notion of 'true masculinity' that Mormon men are urged to achieve" (581). For example, Haglund writes of crying as a "ritual [act] among Mormon men" (2012, paragraph 3; see also Brooks 2010), noting that it is common for men to shed tears while giving sermons. Thus, DezNat participants were not shy to suggest that they were crying in one thread responding to a specific sermon (document 398). Despite clear *red pill* influences on DezNat, these distinctly Mormon views of masculinity should not be overlooked. Indeed, DezNat's disagreement with Charles was focused on a discussion about the appropriate level of physical intimacy for an engaged couple. Much of the argument took place outside the timeframe of this study, but our data suggest that the DezNat consensus fell along the lines set by one participant (document 35) who argued for "exact obedience" to General Authorities' warning against "passionate kissing" before marriage. In short, if DezNat participants were to embody sexual prowess and virility, they were to limit those talents to the bonds of matrimony; if they were to wield aggression and violence, they were to also retain some level of subordination to their ecclesiastical leaders.

***Femininity as Deference to Masculinity.*** DezNat's ideal feminine was also expected to be subordinate to masculine Church leaders—but not in the same way. When Church president Russell Nelson encouraged married men to prioritize their wives and take their advice, one female DezNat participant reframed this as a feminine "responsibility to become more temperate and wise" because women "can't help men get better by just existing" (document 753). If the default masculinity of the DezNat space is seen as an acceptable stepping-stone to the masculine ideal, this tweet demonstrates the way that the default ("just existing") feminine is seen as deficient and needing to be overcome—in this case, by self-improvement at the invitation of and for the benefit of men. Similarly, another DezNat participant (document 1156; see also fig. 5) distinguished between "Latter-day Saint Women," who were grateful to Nelson for their social media fast, and "Mormon Waahmen," who complained that men were not asked to do the same. This tweet frames reasonable default behavior (asking about a discrepancy in treatment) as a corrupt femininity, as whining rather than valid criticism. In contrast, deferring to the ideal masculine serves as a redemption of the default feminine. When one DezNat participant tweeted about his wife's interest in apostle Neil Andersen's remarks on gender roles, another participant replied, "your wife is an immediate follow then." The wor-



Latter-day Saint Women: "I'm so grateful that Pres. Nelson invited us to do a social media fast. I learned so much."

Mormon Wahmen: "The men werent told to do social media fast? No fair!"

#WomenvWahmen #KnowtheDifference

#GeneralConference #DezNat #TwitterStake



Figure 5. #DezNat tweet mocking women critical of gender disparities in Nelson's ministry.

thiness of the participant's wife was implied to be a function of her acceptance of Church leadership and teachings (document 594).

A similar example can be found in tweets that responded to one of the few sermons given at General Conference by a woman. Because General Conference speakers are selected from the leadership of the Church, and because Church leadership is overwhelmingly male, there has long been a severe gender imbalance in General Conference sermons. For example, even setting aside the all-male priesthood session, the general sessions of the April 2019 General Conference saw 23 sermons given by men and two by women. Although Mormon feminists have often expressed concerns about this disparity, DezNat participants in our data (unsurprisingly) did not. However, Becky Craven's talk—which emphasized obedience to church leaders—prompted responses like "Okay, yes more women speakers please lol" (document 390). That is, more women speakers would be desirable so long as they shored up masculine authority in the Church. The same account went on to repeatedly refer to Craven as a "matron saint" of #DezNat (documents 387, 755), a play on the concept of protecting and interceding patron saints in Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Anglicanism. In those traditions, the term "patron saint" applies to both male and female saints, but this variation on the term intentionally invokes femininity, highlighting that there is something particular and different in having a female who protects and intercedes for DezNat.

The homosexually community seems to cause so many problems everywhere they go. They state endlessly they just want to be treated equally, but it will never be enough. Look how they view conference and the gospel, it ALWAYS has to be about their issues. #DezNat

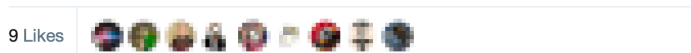


Figure 6. #DezNat tweet depicting queer Latter-day Saints as monopolizing General Conference.

**Queerness as Threat.** Homosexuality has long been seen in in Mormon circles as a corruption of ideal masculinity (Petrey 2020), and queer approaches to gender challenge the deferential binary at the core of DezNat thinking. In keeping with these views, DezNat persistently frames queerness as a threat to the Church and to civilization more broadly. Affiliated accounts depicted a prominent queer Mormon as the devil (document 1446) and accused him of trying to supplant God and invite worship of himself (document 649). Other tweets described him and associates as “evil” (document 1166), suggested they had been “raked over the coals ... in #GeneralConference” (document 779), and argued—quoting a General Conference sermon—that “time is running out” for them to repent (document 1148). More broadly, DezNat accounts described queer communities as posing an aggressive, unrelenting threat, taking over the agenda of the Church (document 1345; see also Figure 6) and never being satisfied with changes (document 246). Continuing in this vein, one DezNat tweet quoted former Church president Spencer Kimball describing homosexuality as a rampant, threatening evil (document 1410).

### ***Harassment and Trolling of Gendered Communities***

Masculine-oriented *red pill* communities perceive feminist—and often queer—communities as threats to masculinity and therefore as legitimate targets for harassment and trolling (e.g., Braithwaite 2016; Marwick and Caplan 2018). DezNat engaged in similar harassment; for example, one account used implicit references to the Latter-day Saint endowment ceremony to compare

one feminist to the devil (document 255). Another account provided (publicly known) information about another feminist so that DezNat could “do with that information what they will” (document 1372). This can be understood as a junior version of *doxxing*, the *red pill*-beloved practice of releasing private information about a person in order to coordinate harassment (though we note that activists have also doxxed certain anonymous DezNat accounts). In the rest of this section, we describe two sustained instances of DezNat harassment that correspond with *red pill* patterns.

**Social Media Fasts.** In the mid 2010s, feminist communities responded to accusations of misandry with joking references to “drinking male tears” (Marwick and Caplan 2018), and by Donald Trump’s 2016 victory, the meme of “drinking liberal tears” had been reappropriated by members of *red pill* communities (Duncan 2017). In the leadup to the April 2019 priesthood session of General Conference, one DezNat partisan expressed hope that Nelson would not challenge men to a social media fast, “not because I don’t wanna give up social media, but because I want to drink the tears of apoplectic feminists” (document 672). When his hope was realized, the user announced that “Conference dreams do come true” (document 748) and asked, “has the meltdown started yet?” (document 760). Later, after complaints about the discrepancy had begun, he quoted one such tweet, crowing that “Feminists need some new moves. It’s almost not even fun anymore #waaaambulace” (document 1070). In these tweets, he included several Mormon hashtags—including the official General Conference hashtag—in his tweets, eager to share his glee with most of Mormon Twitter.

**Feminist and Queer Events.** Preceding and presaging the public emergence of the alt-right, Gamergate was a *red pill* movement that aggressively and systematically targeted feminist critics of video games and pop culture (Braithwaite 2016; Massanari and Chess 2018; Niewert 2016; Wendling 2018). In a similar vein, one DezNat account used threatening language to troll two feminist events happening around the same time as the April 2019 General Conference. One such event was a retreat for writers at *The Exponent*, a Mormon blog and feminist periodical. Nancy Ross, a regular contributor to the blog and an ordained minister in Community of Christ, tweeted about her plans to prepare communion for the retreat, drawing attention to her denomination’s ordination of women. In response to perceived transgressions of gender and orthodoxy, this participant quoted Ross’s tweet with a threat to crash the party: “See

you there #DezNat” (document 489). Through “likes” and replies, five other DezNat accounts demonstrated their support for the trolling.

This same DezNat partisan used verbatim language to troll the Twitter account of a Utah-based Women’s March organization organizing an event in support of LGBTQ+ Latter-day Saints (document 260). Seemingly in response, multiple accounts associated with the organization expressed concern that DezNat partisans would disrupt the event and provided an email address where supporters of the organization could request training to help defuse potential incidents. The troll responded with an extended thread demonstrating a combination of 1) mocking the organization’s concern (“Uh oh #DezNat might show up ”; document 280); 2) accusing it of being the persecutor (“Creating a boogeyman out of people you don’t know doesn’t seem very tolerant”; document 1317); 3) continuing the trolling that had caused the concern in the first place (“Training requested!”; document 1317); and 4) mocking the idea of the training (“Because of the vigorous email training we received, I was able to find and eject all those smiling #DezNat agitators”; document 1317).

### Discussion and Implications

As described in the introduction to this article, much of the popular and media discourse around the DezNat movement has focused on whether it can accurately be described as “alt-right.” Our findings in this study contribute to this discussion in two ways. First, they establish that during the timeframe of this study, there were regular and consistent references to far-right individuals and ideas. Second, they broaden the question; rather than focus on alt-right influences, we have identified a breadth of *red pill* tropes present in DezNat activity—including those related to masculinity, anti-feminism, and queer-phobia. These two contributions suggest that it is disingenuous for DezNat participants and defenders to describe the movement as merely about Latter-day Saint orthodoxy.

However, it is important to note that strictly speaking, our findings do not answer the question being asked. That is, while we have found ample evidence of *red pill* tropes within the DezNat hashtag, we stop short of determining whether DezNat is conclusively a *red pill* movement. Indeed, the *affinity space* framework we have employed (Gee 2005; 2017) intentionally focuses on meaning-making practices present in porous, overlapping spaces rather than asking difficult questions about formal membership within or sharp boundaries between those spaces. This stance should not be misinterpreted as a de-

fense of DezNat. Indeed, we have documented how the movement uses the ambiguity of online spaces to defend itself from controversy, which further demonstrates the overlap between DezNat participation and *red pill* ideas. Rather, this stance is a concession that the very nature of online spaces—as described by Gee and Twitter researchers in particular (Greenhalgh, Rosenberg, and Wolf 2016; Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019)—makes “hashtag ontology” an unproductive pursuit.

Yet, if the affinity space framework refrains from certain observations, it is only to draw attention to other phenomena. Thus, we set aside the question being asked by many DezNat observers to ask other questions that we argue are more important for understanding the movement in the context of (online) Mormonism. Whatever the ontology and purpose of the DezNat movement or its individual members, the presence of meaning-making practices common to both *red pill* communities and to mainstream Mormonism suggests that this hashtag is a space in which the affinity spaces associated with both groups overlap. While this conclusion is limited to discussions about a single Twitter hashtag, our framework also invites us to ask about other shared practices and overlapping spaces. For example, when BYU religion professor Hank Smith used his Twitter account to call a gay BYU student “Korihor” (a reference to a Book of Mormon anti-Christ; see Tanner 2021), it was in implicit approval of DezNat participants’ criticism of the same student. Smith’s seeming support for a DezNat argument thereby raises questions about the extent to which mainstream conservative spaces on Mormon Twitter overlap with DezNat—which, in turn, clearly overlaps with far-right and aggressively anti-feminist spaces on the internet.

When, the following year, Smith approvingly (but seemingly ignorantly) endorsed a white nationalist Twitter thread praising Mormonism (see BHodges 2022), this raised further questions about overlap. (It should be noted that Smith apologized for both events and deleted associated tweets.) It is understandable that a mainstream Latter-day Saint Twitter user would approve of the “run-of-the-mill LDS exceptionalism” (BHodges 2022, paragraph 6) present in the thread, but it remains concerning that a BYU professor would not be able to identify the boundaries between Latter-day Saint thinking and far-right thinking. As previously described, however, the Latter-day Saint leadership has been loath to define these boundaries in the context of Ezra Taft Benson (Harris 2020), leaving Church members unpracticed at doing so. Similarly, in the context of the 2022 television series *Under the Banner of Heaven*, some Lat-

ter-day Saint academics specifically identified DezNat in public commentary, seeing the group's rise as a consequence of the Church's resistance to acknowledging and wrestling with its history of violence (Petrey 2022; Stack and Noyce 2022). Finally, Brooks (2020) has argued that Mormonism's shoring up of prophetic authority—the public and explicit goal of DezNat—is an important component of its complicity in white supremacy. In short, the DezNat hashtag (and related examples) suggest that the consequence of all these actions has been to allow for continued overlap between Latter-day Saint and *red pill* affinity spaces. While the Church has described DezNat as neither affiliated nor endorsed by Latter-day Saint leadership (see Stack 2021), such a statement also stops short of condemnation, allowing for further ambiguity—and overlap of spaces.

Perhaps more pressing are questions about overlap between the approaches to gender and sexuality advanced by DezNat, *red pill* communities, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Despite tactical ambiguity regarding their past positions, Latter-day Saint leaders' recent condemnations of white supremacy and political violence suggest an intent to distance themselves from the modern far-right. Indeed, a Latter-day Saint spokesperson cited these condemnations when asked for comment on DezNat (Stack 2021). However, this framing sidesteps an important emphasis of this paper—that *red pill* movements are broader than just racist and political views and that DezNat draws from all this breadth. DezNat participants imply—or outright argue—that Latter-day Saint doctrine justifies their harassment and trolling of female and queer Mormons, and official Church distancing from the movement has not said anything to the contrary. Indeed, despite tentative efforts to back down from explicit anti-feminism (e.g., Stack 2013), Mormonism has both “clung to and struggled to discard in recent years” (197) the anti-feminism it embraced in the 1980s, as Radke-Moss argues (2020, 197). While it would be inaccurate to describe aggressive—and often violent—*red pill* views on gender and sexuality as identical to Latter-day Saint teachings, our conceptual framework for this study invites us to consider where these broader social spaces overlap—and our findings suggest that DezNat participants already see compatibility between the two.

Because our work has emphasized ambiguity and overlap, future work may benefit from an approach that teases out more distinct patterns related to red pill views within Mormonism. Whitehead and Perry (2020) provide a possible model for this work in their exploration of Christian nationalist views in

the United States. Echoing the various overlaps between red pill views, mainstream conservative Mormonism, and DezNat, they have demonstrated that only about 7% of (U.S.) Americans entirely reject Christian nationalism and only about 1% fully embrace it, with the remaining, vast majority falling somewhere along a “widely distributed” (9) spectrum. However, these statistics are only possible thanks to a clear operationalization of “Christian nationalism,” which Whitehead and Perry demonstrate to be “intimately intertwined with” (154) but ultimately distinct from race, racism, partisan affiliation, or denominational membership. Being able to make these measurements and distinctions in the context of Mormonism would certainly lend further insight into phenomena like DezNat.

### Conclusion

Social media platforms such as Twitter allow Latter-day Saints to engage in a wider variety of practices and display a wider variety of identities than Latter-day Saint institutions (Greenhalgh, Staudt Willet, and Koehler 2019). In this study, we have considered the DezNat movement, which presents itself as a defender of orthodoxy but which we have shown to be heavily influenced by the far-right and anti-feminist ideas present in online *red pill* communities. A number of studies have considered the role of online spaces in fostering a liberal Mormonism; participants in these spaces are often in open disagreement with Church leaders and outside of the approved bounds of Latter-day Saint faith. In contrast, this examination of DezNat highlights ambiguity present in Latter-day Saint boundary policing. Participants believe their *red pill* practices to be compatible with Latter-day Saint orthodoxy, and Church leadership has made few, if any, explicit statements that would suggest otherwise. In this way, DezNat raises important questions about the boundaries of identity and practice in the contemporary—and future—Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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