

THE BROKEN SHELVES: EX-MORMON REDDIT NARRATIVES OF
DECONVERSION

by

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ABSTRACT

LESLEY RIVERA WRIGHT. *The Broken Shelves: Ex-Mormon Reddit Narratives of Deconversion*
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What are the reasons ex-Mormons give for why they leave their religion? This study identifies what causes Mormons to lose their religion—or to use an ex-Mormon parlance—causes their shelf to break, by analyzing online deconversion narratives posted on the exmormon subreddit forum from 2015 through 2020. Concurring with Dehlin, Brooks and Riess, ex-Mormons give a variety of historical, doctrinal, personal, and social reasons for why they left. This study additionally shows that they say they leave due to the current LDS administrative and ecclesiastical leadership and what they are learning on the internet, including ex-Mormon online communities like Reddit. This study suggests that the recent institutional changes enacted by the current LDS leaders are causing Mormons to doubt and reject these leaders. Furthermore, this study reveals that the growing influence of online media and ex-religious communities is causing a digital deconversion among Mormons.

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*If any one of you is faltering in your faith, I ask you the same question that Peter asked: “To whom shall you go?” If you choose to become inactive or to leave the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where will you go? What will you do?*¹ – LDS Apostle Elder M. Russell Ballard

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I analyze five years of ex-Mormon Reddit deconversion stories to reveal what reasons the writers give to explain their departure. Scholarship regarding why Mormons leave generally reveal that various historical, doctrinal, personal, and social reasons are consistently cited as issues.² This study of ex-Mormon Reddit supports much of what other scholarship suggests, but also finds two other factors at play that influence the deconverts who frequently visit the exmormon subreddit.

Specifically, I argue that two additional reasons individuals give for why they leave are 1) serious concerns over the current LDS Church leadership and 2) the various internet sites—including the exmormon Reddit site under study here—that provide them with information about their church and a supportive online community of former members. My research asks, what are the primary reasons that Exmormon subreddit users give that led to their deconversion or, to use

¹ M. Russell Ballard, “To Whom Shall We Go?,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 2016.

² The most recent scholarship on why Mormons leave was completed by John Dehlin with his “Understanding Mormon Disbelief” survey, Jana Riess’ book *The Next Mormons: How Millennials are Changing the LDS Church* and E. Marshall Brooks’ book *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-day Saints*, whose work I discuss in this thesis literature review. Dehlin’s and Brooks’ scholarship points to doctrinal issues and church history as the most common reasons why Mormons leave, while Riess’ research reveals that social and personal reasons are more common than historical and doctrinal issues. Additionally Brooks’ study also shows how the LDS institution causes deconversion. Brooks’ research was limited to Utah former Mormons, Riess’ research focused only on American former Mormons, while Dehlin’s research focused on Utah, non-Utah Americans, and international former Mormons.

an ex-Mormon parlance, “broke their shelf.” Mormons have a shelf in their mind where they put all of their questions, concerns and hold their doubts.³ The ex-Mormon community often uses the phrase “my shelf broke” as a metaphor to describe the collapse of their faith, belief, or testimony from the heaviness of their concerns.

The “broken shelf” metaphor originates in a biography of Camilla Kimball, wife of Spencer W. Kimball who served as President of the LDS Church from 1973 to 1985. Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward L. Kimball write:

Camilla had a philosophy about religious problems that helped her children. She said that when things troubled her, she put them on the shelf; later when she looked at them again, some were answered, some seem no longer important, and some needed to go back on the shelf for another time.⁴

When Mormons face doubts, troubling questions regarding their faith, or have concerns with their religion, they often put these items on their shelf. One’s shelf can only hold so much weight, with each concern weighing heavily on the individual, until one’s shelf cannot bear the weight no more. The items that finally cause one’s shelf to break are the causes for one’s deconversion. When describing a broken shelf, one Redditor wrote, “What they mean is that their shelf of doubts and unanswered questions became too full and it broke, in that the weight was too much for their faith to bear...”⁵ When a person’s shelf breaks, their faith and testimony of the LDS Church collapses too.

³ E. Marshall. Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-Day Saints* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press., 2018), 65.

⁴ Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward L. Kimball, *Camilla, A Biography of Camilla Eyring Kimball* (Deseret Book Co., 1983), 110.

⁵ u/Cold208, January 2, 2019, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “Never Mo Here with a Stupid Question.”

I chose to analyze the content on exmormon subreddit as opposed to other ex-Mormon websites because the forum can be easily explored and there are thousands of individual stories where exmormon Redditors state what caused them to doubt or leave. Reddit is a free public website, and as my research was strictly observant and non-interactive, IRB approval was not necessary for this research.⁶ Users in the exmormon subreddit often ask the community questions such as, “what broke your shelf?” and “what made you leave?” These types of questions have been asked and re-asked dozens of times, with each thread containing anywhere from several to hundreds of responses.

Over the last decade, ex-Mormons have formed an online community on Reddit where they can “share news, commentary and comedy about the Mormon church.”⁷ The community has become a place where ex-Mormons and current Mormons can discuss doubts, questions, concerns, and the reasons that lead them to question or leave their faith. The subreddit r/exmormon was created on June 16, 2009. The analytics show that in October 2012, the subreddit had 7,071 subscribers. In a little over eight years the subreddit has grown to 194,467 subscribers today at the time this research was completed, with an average of 263 posts a day and over 2,000 comments each day.⁸ The liveliness of this forum is what initially sparked my interest in conducting research exmormon subreddit.

The subreddit appears to have different types of subscribers that range from ex-Mormons, Mormons in the process of leaving, Mormons who no longer believe but do not

⁶ UNCC’s Office of Human Research Ethics informed me that IRB approval is not necessary for my research, as Reddit is a public site and my research does not require engagement with subjects on the forum.

⁷ “r/Exmormon,” Reddit, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/>.

⁸ “Subreddit Stats,” Subreddit Stats - statistics for every subreddit, accessed April 7, 2021.

plan to leave, Mormons who ask questions and seek guidance, non-Mormons who are investigating or curious about Mormonism, and persons who are not Mormon but have familial or friendship ties with Mormons and ex-Mormons. While Exmormon subreddit was originally intended as a forum for ex-Mormons and those affected by the Mormon church, others who are not Mormon with no ties to Mormonism have also been able to find a home in the Exmormon subreddit community.⁹

Within the subreddit, there are numerous posts expressing gratitude for the forum and the community. Since Reddit users can be anonymous, Exmormon subreddit is a place where anyone can ask questions and express ideas that they might not be able to do in offline situations for any number of reasons. The anonymous nature of Exmormon subreddit makes it a popular place for Mormons and former Mormons to openly discuss their doubts, why they left or why they are leaving and provide support for one another that they may not be able to receive from other social circles.

Along with revealing the four most common reasons ex-Mormons give for their deconversion, my research demonstrates some ways that the internet and online ex-religious communities can influence religious beliefs and their dismissal. In what follows I examine the existent scholarship on deconversion in general and also specifically about Mormons. Next, I discuss my research method, then I discuss the results from my study and the four most common reasons Mormons give for why they leave. Last, I analyze my findings and discuss the growing dislike and distrust in Mormon ecclesiastical leaders and the influence of Reddit, what my

⁹ See, for example, u/TheOreoKiller, "I Am Not a Mormon, but I Want to Thank You Guys," Reddit, August 12, 2019.

research contributes to the scholarship of Mormon deconversion, deconversion in general, and why it is important.

PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP ON LEAVING RELIGIONS AND LEAVING MORMONISM

Sociologists, historians, religious studies scholars, psychologists, and anthropologists have produced scholarship on people leaving—sometimes referred to as deconversion—religious movements, and some have specifically focused on those who have left The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These studies focus on the reasons why individuals leave religions, “types” of leavers, demographics of leavers, and what they do after they leave their religion.

In general, deconversion scholarship shows that leaving a religion is a complex and prolonged process (Zuckerman, 2015). People are not necessarily aware that their decisions are often influenced by their environment and social circles (Zuckerman, 2015), which affects how they tell the stories of their deconversion (Mullen, 2017). Current scholarship also shows how aesthetic experiences and art can intervene with one’s religious identity (Francis, 2017).

Scholarship specifically focused on Mormon deconverts suggests that younger generations are changing the face of Mormonism and Mormons are leaving the church due to a variety of social and personal reasons (Riess, 2019). Some studies have found that learning and studying LDS Church history can actually cause some Mormons to join the ranks of ex-Mormons (Brooks, 2018). One survey has shown that historical and doctrinal or theological reasons were commonly cited as causes of deconversion (Dehlin, 2012). My findings concerning exmormon Reddit posts concur with most of this scholarship. In what follows I detail important deconversion scholarship and note how it informs my own study, but also how my own study speaks back to it.

In his 2015 book focused on why Americans leave a variety of religions, *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, the sociologist Phil Zuckerman finds that the 87 people he interviewed gave nine recurring reasons.¹⁰ The nine common reasons people gave are: (1) having one or more parents who are not committed or somewhat committed to their religion;¹¹ (2) obtaining education and becoming increasingly secular;¹² (3) experiencing pain, misfortune or loss;¹³ (4) exposure to other religions and different points of view;¹⁴ (5) the influence of friends and social circles;¹⁵ (6) political affiliation that alienates them from their religious institution and culture;¹⁶ (7) condemnation for sexual desires or sexual experiences, feeling guilt or shame for sexual urges and desires, and having a sexual identity that is religiously considered unacceptable;¹⁷ (8) the idea of Satan and Hell, which produced fear and other negative emotions leading individuals to escape these emotions by leaving their religion;¹⁸ and (9) the behavior of fellow religious associates, such as witnessing negative behavior or treatment.¹⁹

While these are reasons individuals give for why they left their religion, Zuckerman explains that they are not necessarily causes.²⁰ The reasons people give are subjective and true to them individually but experiencing any of these nine common reasons will not necessarily cause

¹⁰ Phil Zuckerman, *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13, 153.

¹¹ Ibid, 153.

¹² Ibid, 154.

¹³ Ibid, 154.

¹⁴ Ibid, 155.

¹⁵ Ibid, 156.

¹⁶ Ibid, 158.

¹⁷ Ibid, 160.

¹⁸ Ibid, 161.

¹⁹ Ibid, 162.

²⁰ Ibid, 163.

an individual to leave their religion.²¹ Zuckerman also points out that individual recollections of personal life stories are not always accurate.²² He states:

When looking back on their lives in an attempt to explain their present identities, some men and women may have a tendency to highlight certain details and downplay others—even unconsciously—so as to paint a picture of themselves that makes them comfortable with their current life choices. Some people may inadvertently reconstruct events or embellish memories so that they are not accurate. Others may not even truly know why they are apostates; if Freud taught us anything, it is that people are not always completely or fully aware of their own motives and they are not always readily cognizant of the underlying sources of their decisions.²³

In studying Mormon deconversion narratives on Reddit, one must take Zuckerman's insight to heart that any story one tells about oneself is necessarily incomplete, often stylized, and effected by the environment and media platform it is shared on. People are not always aware of the external factors that affect their decisions, like social circles or online communities. My research found that what ex-Mormons are reading on exmormon subreddit affects their own stories of deconversion. Encountering the opinions and concerns of exmormon Redditors, often created concerns (heavy shelf-items and shelf-breakers), for those frequenting the subreddit which I discuss further below.

Zuckerman found that it is uncommon for a person to have one precise cause for why they leave but typically leaving is a result of many issues, working together and building up over

²¹ Ibid, 163.

²² Ibid, 13.

²³ Ibid, 13.

time.²⁴ My research found this to be true, as most Reddit narratives included more than one reason for their shelf breaking. Several wrote that the process was slow for them, with multiple items or reasons weighing down their shelf until one specific reason caused it to break. Numerous others wrote that their shelf was destroyed abruptly and immediately, though this was almost always in reference to learning something about Mormonism that was previously unknown.

Out of Zuckerman's nine common reasons, my research found that eight of his reasons were present among ex-Mormon Reddit narratives,²⁵ though only two categories were significantly common: education and exposure to other points of view. While Zuckerman refers to secular education (higher education) as a cause for religious deconversion, the Reddit narratives I read that wrote education as a reason for their deconversion, focused primarily on personal study of Mormon history and doctrine through books, internet sites, podcasts, and forums.

Zuckerman's study found education and the exposure to other points of view as separate common reasons for deconversion, though I found these two categories linked and therefore combined them into one category: learning and exposure to other points of view. Common learning resources that Redditors mentioned as a cause for their deconversion were Mormon themed podcasts and online forums such as exmormon subreddit, which reflect various points of view. Podcasts and forums are resources of learning, but they are also resources that expose individuals to other viewpoints.

²⁴ Ibid, 151.

²⁵ The conduct of fellow religious associates, experiencing pain or misfortune, political affiliation, and the idea of Satan and Hell were infrequently mentioned, while a lack of religious commitment from parents was not mentioned at all as a reason for deconversion.

While Zuckerman's work concentrates on the reasons that individuals give for why they leave their religion, the historian Lincoln A. Mullen studies religious conversion and deconversion narratives, detailing how individuals describe these experiences. Mullen argues in *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* that throughout the nineteenth century in America, religious identity "became something that one had to warrant to oneself and justify to others."²⁶ When telling their conversion stories, people described their conversion as an individual choice, though Mullen argues that these stories all fell into general patterns.²⁷ These conversion stories seemed to be influenced by societal expectations and other conversion narratives. Just as Mullen's research revealed, my study found that the sheer existence of exmormon subreddit threads regarding what caused their broken shelf, was evidence that deconversion is something that many ex-Mormons need to justify to themselves and others. Reddit is the platform that many ex-Mormons need to express their doubts, emotions, choices, and there appears to be an unspoken expectation to share one's deconversion story.

Deconversion narratives during the nineteenth century also fell into general patterns and Mullen mentions that these stories were "even more uniform, almost invariably mentioning a distaste for 'organized religion,' political or moral difference, or the evidence of science."²⁸ Patterns can be seen within the broken shelf narratives on Reddit. The term "broken shelf" that Redditors use is one example of the way online ex-Mormon communities influence how individuals speak about their deconversion. My research studied hundreds of different reasons that ex-Mormons gave for their shelf breaking, though as this thesis will show, I also found

²⁶ Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 15.

²⁷ Ibid, x.

²⁸ Ibid, x.

dozens of responses revealing consistently shared reasons. These narratives often used the same words and phrases to emphasize the shelf items that affected their deconversion the most. These patterns are consistent with Mullen's research and also Zuckerman's, as these Reddit narratives show that social circles, in this case online forums, impact how people talk or write about their deconversion.

Contrary to Mullen's research, my study found that ex-Mormons did not express a distaste in organized religion in general, but they did express an aversion to the LDS institution specifically, and this was the most common reason given as the cause of their deconversion. Like Mullen's study, Reddit narratives did mention political and moral differences as well as the evidence of science as reasons for their deconversion, though all of these were not significantly common factors overall.

Mullen also explores deconversion narratives of the first Mormons in the nineteenth century. Mullen states that in the early days of the LDS Church, most of the anti-Mormon effort derived from Mormon converts who left.²⁹ Mullen states, "While every religious group had apostates, Mormon apostates were especially numerous, with even high-placed leaders of the founding generation defecting. And Mormon apostates were especially virulent in their critiques of the group they had temporarily joined."³⁰ Mullen refers to an ex-Mormon named Frank Johnson who published an exposé on Joseph Smith and the Mormon Church. Johnson accused the LDS Church of only being interested in money and not the Gospel. Johnson claimed that Mormon missionaries lied to him and told him that the practice of polygamy had ended but discovered that it was secretly being practiced.

²⁹ Ibid, 169.

³⁰ Ibid, 170.

My research agrees with Mullen's and finds that these two issues, LDS Church finances and polygamy, are still causing Mormons to leave their religion today. Redditors frequently wrote that they left due to the LDS Church's financial dealings, often describing the LDS Church as greedy. Joseph Smith's polygamy is one of the most common shelf breakers for ex-Mormons on Reddit who regularly wrote that they were lied to about Joseph Smith's and other early church member's polygamous relationships. The LDS Church's finances and the lies surrounding polygamy are the two oldest shelf breakers for ex-Mormons.

Religious scholar Philip Salim Francis also studies deconversion narratives but his work is focused specifically on Evangelicals and the influence of art on their deconversion. Francis argues in *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind*, that art can transform evangelical protestant minds and identities into new directions and plays an instrumental role in the process of leaving their religion.³¹ In the aftermath of leaving a religion, art can also play an important part in coming to terms with what individuals perceive as a loss of faith.³²

Francis collected memoirs from Gordon University alumni who participated in the Oregon Extension program and were asked if the program's aesthetic experiences played a role in their leaving Evangelicalism.³³ Nearly all 51 memoirs describe their Oregon Extension Program as "the critical moment when they began to pry themselves loose from the 'fundamentalisms' of their past."³⁴ They all described the aesthetic experience of a novel, poem,

³¹ Philip Salim Francis, *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

³² Ibid, 3.

³³ Ibid, 23.

³⁴ Ibid, 24.

song or image as the source of their flee from fundamental ideas.³⁵ Francis also collected interviews and memoirs of 30 alumni from the Bob Jones University School of Fine Arts, who experienced a revision of their faith at the school.³⁶ Some of these narratives describe their aesthetic experience as a power that interrupted their fundamentalist religion and allowed them to transition into a “true life of faith.”³⁷

The LDS Church shares a similar view with Evangelicals that secular art is suspicious and immoral, and discourages its members from attending, listening, reading, watching, and participating in “inappropriate” entertainment and art.³⁸ Some exmormon Reddit users claim that LDS restrictions on their use of pop culture materials such as movies and music kept them from finding what they considered their “true self.”³⁹ While Mormons and Evangelicals may share similar restrictions on the kinds of art they are allowed to partake in, ex-Mormons on Reddit did not allege that art played a role in their deconversion.

Neither art, music, film, nor poetry were mentioned as a reason for their deconversion, though one form of artistic media was mentioned by three individuals, and that was a South Park episode titled “All about Mormons.” This may fit Francis’ idea of aesthetic experience, although I reason that it was what these Redditors learned from this episode about Mormon history that led to their shelf breaking and not the aesthetic experience itself, since the show was only cited

³⁵ Ibid, 24.

³⁶ Ibid, 28.

³⁷ Ibid, 31.

³⁸ President M. Russell Ballard, Elder Douglas L. Callister, and Elder Robert D. Hales, “Movies and Television,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), accessed October 20, 2020.

³⁹ See, for example, u/eternal_lurker2020, October 24, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “Did Anyone Else Have Youth Fire-Sides as a Kid Where You Were Admonished Not to Watch Rated R Movies or to Listen to Inappropriate Music?”.

as a cause of deconversion when referring to this specific episode about Mormonism. If we understand social media like Reddit and other online visual media like YouTube and documentaries to be aesthetic experiences, then my study agrees with Francis', as these forms of "art" played a larger role in ex-Mormon deconversion.

From my research, I have categorized books, podcasts, blogs, online forums and other visual media as learning and exposure to other viewpoints. But if we suppose that these are in fact, forms of aesthetic experiences then this could be considered one of the most common shelf breakers for ex-Mormons, mentioned 251 times on Reddit. Francis would likely not include these mediums as aesthetic experiences since his focus was primarily on music, painting, poetry, and film, but I am considering these mediums as such, since online media can be both consumed and interacted with. While many of these books and online media are educational, relating to Mormon history, if learning about Mormon history through art is the tool needed to free ex-Mormons from their religion, then my work draws the same conclusion as Francis' study, with the theory that one's aesthetic experience, particularly online media, can lead people to question their religious ideas and practices.

While Francis' research is focused on Evangelicals, there are a handful of scholars whose work concentrates specifically on Mormon deconversion and many of those scholars happen to be Mormon themselves. The late Stan L. Albrecht and Howard M. Bahr are Mormon sociologists who created a ten-category system of reasons why Mormons leave based on in depth interviews of 25 former Mormons living in Utah.⁴⁰ In "Strangers Once More: Patterns of

⁴⁰ Stan L. Albrecht and Howard M. Bahr, "Patterns of Religious Disaffiliation: A Study of Lifelong Mormons, Mormon Converts, and Former Mormons," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 4 (1983): 186.

Disaffiliation from Mormonism,” they assert that the ten disaffiliation categories are: (1) maturation; (2) irrelevance; (3) conflict in beliefs; (4) life style conflict; (5) interpersonal conflict; (6) unmet spiritual needs; (7) unmet personal needs; (8) policy conflict; (9) unmet familial needs; and (10) unmet intermarriage needs.⁴¹ Their research concluded that “single-reason” disaffiliates were rare among their interviewees and the most commonly expressed reasons for disaffiliation were conflicts over lifestyle and belief, followed by unmet familial needs, usually a desire for both marriage partners to belong to and attend the same church.⁴² Other common reasons mentioned by nearly half of interviewees, were unmet personal needs such as the need to be accepted, and unmet spiritual needs, like wanting to live guilt-free and laying aside bad habits and memories.

While developing their ten categories, Albrecht and Bahr used existing category systems from sociologist Dean R. Hoge and religious studies scholar David A. Roozen and attempted to combine their categories into a single system of self-defined reasons for why people change their religious engagement.⁴³ Hoge’s study of Catholic leavers revealed six types of dropouts: (1) “family tension” dropouts; (2) “weary” dropouts; (3) “lifestyles” dropouts; (4) “spiritual need” dropouts; (5) “anti-change” dropouts; (6) and “out-converts after intermarriage” dropouts.⁴⁴ Roozen’s study of unchurched individuals determined five main reasons for religious disengagement, which are: (1) individual maturation; (2) personal, contextual reasons; (3) intra-church discord; (4) perceived irrelevance or meaninglessness of religious participation; (5) and a remaining “other” category.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid, 183.

⁴² Ibid, 190.

⁴³ Ibid, 182.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 182.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 182.

While conducting my research, I first attempted to use Albrecht and Bahr's categories as a guideline, but my results did not fit these categories well. General categories that I ended up using were based on the primary sources and include: learning and exposure to other points of view; issues with Joseph Smith; historical issues not related to Joseph Smith; doctrine and theology; institutional issues with the LDS Church; local church ward experience; external causes; and personal and emotional reasons. From these broad categories, I was able to create subcategories which further helped organize my results.

My research found that maturation, irrelevance, lifestyle conflict, unmet familial needs and unmet intermarriage needs were rarely mentioned as shelf breaking items for ex-Mormons on Reddit, while unmet spiritual and unmet personal needs were more common. Policy conflict, which I categorized with institutional issues, was one of the most common reasons for deconversion. There were 61 mentions of ex-Mormons whose shelf broke due to conflicts with LDS policies, specifically policies regarding LGBTQ communities and past policies that affected black and other non-white individuals.

Albrecht and Bahr's contribution to the study of Mormon deconversion and disengagement is important, though my research and other recent studies reveal that there are additional issues that are affecting Mormon deconversion today. In 2011, psychologist and religious faith crisis coach John Dehlin conducted the "Understanding Mormon Disbelief" survey of Mormons who once held a strong belief in the LDS Church but lost that belief in part or whole.⁴⁶ Dehlin has been an outspoken critic on particular LDS doctrines and policies on his

⁴⁶ John Dehlin, "Understanding Mormon Disbelief Survey – March 2012 Results and Analysis," Why Mormons Question, May 21, 2012, <http://www.whymormonsquestion.org/2012/05/21/understanding-mormon-disbelief-march-2012-results-and-analysis/>, 3.

podcast “Mormon Stories” which lead to his excommunication from the LDS Church in February of 2015, years after his survey study was done.⁴⁷ The survey respondents were asked to rank a number of pre-written factors in terms of their influence on losing their belief and the survey found that the general factors that contribute most significantly to disbelief were: doctrinal and or theological issues; historical issues; loss of faith in Joseph Smith; and loss of faith in the *Book of Mormon*.⁴⁸ The survey also found that specific historical issues that contributed the most to a loss of belief were controversies around the *Book of Abraham*, polygamy and or polyandry, and blacks and the priesthood.

The online survey was posted to several sites associated with LDS themed blogs and on social media, garnering a total of 3,086 respondents in the final analysis.⁴⁹ In addition to respondents ranking factors that may or may not have led to their disbelief, respondents were asked in an open response to describe their reason for losing belief.⁵⁰ Common themes that were found in their written descriptions were: studying history; homosexuality; feeling judged; the emphasis that there is “one true church;” unrealistic expectations; and church finances.⁵¹ Dehlin’s research is important as it reveals issues with certain methodologies. When interviewees were given factors to rank, the survey found that historical and doctrinal issues were the most common reasons for their disbelief. Though when interviewees were allowed to

⁴⁷ “John Dehlin, Popular Mormon Podcaster, Excommunicated by Church,” *NBC News Digital*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/john-dehlin-popular-mormon-podcaster-excommunicated-church-n303656>.

⁴⁸ John Dehlin, “Understanding Mormon Disbelief Survey – March 2012 Results and Analysis,” *Why Mormons Question*, May 21, 2012, <http://www.whymormonsquestion.org/2012/05/21/understanding-mormon-disbelief-march-2012-results-and-analysis/>, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 12.

write their own words, the survey finds that in addition to historical and doctrinal issues, social, personal, and administrative issues also led to their disbelief. Dehlin's work shows that individual narratives can give insight that presupposed ranking surveys cannot.

My research on Reddit found all of the same reasons as Dehlin's survey did, though they differed in rank of most common. The four most common shelf breakers for Redditors were: administrative or institutional issues, a loss of faith in Joseph Smith, learning about Mormon history and exposure to other points of view, and a loss of faith in the *Book of Mormon* and *Book of Abraham*. Doctrinal issues, the priesthood ban from black males, LDS finances, and personal reasons like homosexuality, feeling judged, and unrealistic expectations were all found as causes for deconversion but these reasons were not significantly common. My research revealed specific reasons that Dehlin's did not, and that is the sources that ex-Mormons are learning Mormon history from.

In addition to books, Redditors cited a number of online resources as causes for their broken shelf. Many of these websites, videos, blogs, forums, and podcasts aim to teach a Mormon history that many Redditors claim is contrary to what the LDS Church teaches. John Dehlin's podcast was specifically mentioned among others as a reason for their broken shelf. Dehlin's work among Mormons and ex-Mormons, including his well-known survey, have an impact on ex-Mormons who may come across it online. This means that in addition to the internet, even scholarship can be an influence when it comes to deconversion.

Like Dehlin, religious studies scholar and Mormon Jana Riess is interested in understanding the Mormon experience. Riess, along with political science professor Benjamin Knoll study the changing culture of Mormonism among generations in their "The Next Mormons Survey." Based on their findings, Riess reveals in *The Next Mormons: How Millennials are*

Changing the LDS Church some of the reasons that former Mormons give as to why they left their religion. In 2016, Riess and Knoll conducted their public online survey of current and former members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which sampled 1,156 self-identified Mormons and 540 self-identified former Mormons in the United States.⁵² “The Next Mormons Survey” claims to be “the most extensive collection of Mormon attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors collected by independent or academic researchers to date.”⁵³

The survey offered former Mormons in the United States two lists of possible reasons why they left the LDS Church and were instructed to select up to three reasons on each list.⁵⁴ The two lists were broken into two main categories: doctrinal or institutional reasons and personal and social reasons.⁵⁵ The research concluded that overall, social and personal reasons were more common than specific historical and doctrinal issues.⁵⁶ Out of thirty reasons ex-Mormons gave for leaving, the top ten most common are as follows: “I could no longer reconcile my personal values and priorities with those of the Church;” “I stopped believing there was one true church;” “I did not trust the leadership to tell the truth surrounding controversial or historical issues;” “I felt judged or misunderstood;” “I drifted away from Mormonism;” “I engaged in behaviors that the Church views as sinful;” “The Church’s positions on LGBT issues;” “The

⁵² Riess’ research included 66 qualitative interviews, which produced over 340,000 words from interviewees’ personal experiences. None of these interviewees were part of “The Next Mormon Survey,” but served to enhance the survey data.

⁵³ Dr. Jana Riess and Dr. Benjamin Knoll, “The Next Mormons Survey,” *The Next Mormons Survey*, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://thenextmormons.org/>.

⁵⁴ The lists given to the survey takers were pre-written and Riess notes that the thirty options given were randomized.

⁵⁵ Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 222 footnotes.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 223.

Church’s emphasis on conformity and obedience;” “Lack of historical evidence for the Book of Mormon and/or Book of Abraham;” and “The role of women in the Church.”⁵⁷

As with Dehlin’s, my research found all of the same causes for deconversion as Riess’ survey did, though these reasons varied by rank. My research also revealed what Riess’ did not cover, and that is the impact that online resources and forums have on Mormon deconversion. My study found hundreds of reasons that ex-Mormons give for their departure, while Riess’ survey results are limited as she asked participants to choose from a provided list of why Mormons leave rather than allowing them to give her the reasons they left in their own words.⁵⁸ By analyzing individual narratives on Reddit, I was able to find detailed and specific explanations for Mormon deconversion that Riess’ preset survey did not.

Riess’ survey finds that there are some similar characteristics among former Mormons and notes in her book that the correlation is not causation.⁵⁹ “There is no single ‘type’ of person who disaffiliates from the LDS Church, though a constellation of characteristics and situations may illuminate larger themes. *In general*, leaving Mormonism is often correlated with being male, politically liberal, less educated, never married, from a divorced family, and/or LGBT.”⁶⁰ It’s important to note that these are demographic correlations and not narrative themes. The survey also found that two-thirds of former Mormons left the religion before the age of thirty with the median age being nineteen.⁶¹ She notes that the survey, to her surprise, revealed that

⁵⁷ Ibid, 223. Note that the top ninth reason was tied for eighth.

⁵⁸ As noted previously, Riess did perform interviews in addition to “The Next Mormons Survey.” Her interviews are not connected with “The Next Mormons Survey” but served to enhance her study for her book. The interviewees were not participants in her online survey.

⁵⁹ These similar demographic characteristics are not narrative themes.

⁶⁰ Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 214.

⁶¹ Ibid, 214.

factors like racial diversity or living outside of Utah did not make a difference in rates of those leaving the Church.⁶²

Among those who have left the Church, the survey reports that the majority retain belief in Christian doctrines of salvation and Heaven, though two-thirds of former Mormons have not reaffiliated to other denominations.⁶³ When it comes to gender differences among Mormon leavers, they are no different than other Americans leaving religion. Men are more likely than women to refer to themselves as “nothing in particular,” agnostic or atheist, while former Mormon women were more likely to describe themselves as “just Christian.”⁶⁴ When it comes to race, former Mormons of color were more probable than white former Mormons to reaffiliate to another Christian denomination or refer to themselves as “just Christian.”⁶⁵ As Reddit is an anonymous forum, my research was limited in understanding the demographic information of Mormon leavers, though Riess’ is thorough in this respect, which contributes greatly to our understanding of Mormon deconversion.

While many modern scholars who study Mormon deconversion are Mormon or former Mormons themselves, non-Mormon scholar and anthropologist E. Marshall Brooks reveals in his book *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-day Saints*, some reasons that ex-Mormons give as to why they left their religion. Based on his ethnographic study of ex-Mormons in Utah, Brooks reveals that some of the reasons that caused ex-Mormons to leave are: the authenticity of the *Book of Mormon* and *Book of Abraham*;⁶⁶ early Mormon

⁶² Ibid, 214.

⁶³ Ibid, 216; Ibid, 221.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁶ E. Marshall. Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-Day Saints* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press., 2018), 83,88.

pioneer violence;⁶⁷ blacks and the curse of Cain;⁶⁸ and plural marriage.⁶⁹ Brooks argues that for some ex-Mormons, researching and learning more about the LDS Church led them to doubt and lose their faith. After digging too deep, “a common refrain among many ex-Mormons was that they had been ‘betrayed’ by ‘hidden’ information that the church ‘lied’ about.”⁷⁰

Brooks writes that the internet plays a role in the deconversion of his research subjects, as they are able to learn about LDS church history from websites, YouTube, blogs, wikis and discussion LISTSERVs, and no longer reliant on using LDS church produced publications.⁷¹ Additionally, Brooks argues that Mormon deconversion is a result of the contemporary LDS Church’s struggle to define itself as it seeks to integrate into mainstream America.⁷² As cultural and religious boundaries recede in modern times, the LDS church’s efforts to adapt its historical identity has resulted in defensive responses, apologetics and a shifting historical narratives that leads Mormons to pursue their own research, leading to deconversion.⁷³

My research is consistent with that of Brooks. The narratives I studied also reflected that plural marriage, learning more about LDS Church and its history, and the *Book of Mormon* and *Book of Abraham* were all common issues related to deconversion. While early Mormon pioneer violence and blacks and the curse of Cain were reasons given, they were less frequently cited than the others. Like Brooks, my research concludes that the internet is a common tool for Mormons to learn about LDS history, which lead to their shelf breaking. My research agreed

⁶⁷ Ibid, 91.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 93.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 95.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 52.

⁷¹ Ibid, 74.

⁷² Ibid, 221.

⁷³ Ibid, 221.

with Brooks that the LDS church's telling and revising of their history not only leads Mormons to pursue their own personal study of Mormon history—often leading them to ex-Mormon online communities—but these actions have created for many ex-Mormons a distrust in the institution which directly caused their shelf to break. What Brooks' study does not specifically mention that my research found was there were many issues that ex-Mormons have with the current LDS institution and administrative leaders that lead to their deconversion. While the LDS Church's white washing of their history was one of the most cited reasons, Redditors revealed that the lack of prophetic messages and inconsistent sermons from top LDS leaders partly lead to their deconversion as well.

Like Brooks' research subjects stated, the narratives I studied often referred to their personal study of Mormon history as “digging too deep.” Specifically browsing the exmormon subreddit was referred to as falling down the rabbit hole.⁷⁴ Brooks also examines the presence of ex-Mormon online communities as support groups for ex-Mormons in the aftermath of deconversion but does not discuss these online communities as a cause of deconversion.⁷⁵ My research found that online communities like Reddit are a virtual social influence that enhances opportunities for deconversion as Mormons expose themselves to different points of view by reading and interacting with the personal stories that former Mormons tell online. While Brooks does not discuss other reasons Mormons leave, like social or personal reasons, his work is consistent with the most significantly common reasons for deconversion that I found on exmormon Reddit.

⁷⁴ See, for example, u/ Oakraider22, July 4, 2019, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What broke your shelf?”

⁷⁵ E. Marshall. Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-Day Saints* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press., 2018), 173.

In his book, Brooks discusses the stigma that Mormons place on those who leave and how they “create a condition of social alienation and marginality for people leaving the church.”⁷⁶ He discusses the growing ex-Mormon movement which consists of “online chat rooms, annual ex-Mormon conferences, and ‘mass resignation’ rallies.”⁷⁷ He states that the ex-Mormon movement is essentially a resistance movement where ex-Mormons band together to fight negative stereotypes and “speak back to their former faith, staking their claim to a space of social personhood defined by its explicit opposition to or even ‘transcendence’ of religion.”⁷⁸ I observed this to be true on exmormon Reddit. Former Mormons are alienated and often do not have a social circle where they can discuss their frustrations so they turn to online communities like Reddit where they can express their feelings and build relationships with those who understand what they have been through and are going through. One example Brooks gives on how former Mormons deal with their transition from Mormon to nonbeliever is the video series, “I Am an Ex-Mormon,” which depicts former Mormons sharing their narratives of their lost faith and exit from the LDS Church. Even after former Mormons officially leave their faith, many remain on the Exmormon subreddit in an effort to deal with their shifting relationship with the LDS Church.

Brooks’ research has geographical limitations as he only spoke with Utah Mormons. He notes, “the vast majority of people I worked with in Utah were lifelong church members, with large, equally faithful extended families, thus their emotional and psychological experiences of disaffection likely differ from former members who either converted to the church later in life or

⁷⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 173.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 173. Brooks does not specifically mention Exmormon Reddit, but this community can be considered part of the ex-Mormon movement.

are living in other parts of the country where church membership presumably takes on a different tone and flavor.”⁷⁹ I was not able to differentiate geographical location or the amount of time former Mormons were part of the LDS Church from the Reddit narratives I studied though I did read a handful accounts that stated that they had been lifelong members. My research fell short in this aspect as these narratives were anonymous and the only demographic information I could gather, was dependent upon what they decided to share in their narratives of deconversion.

While Brooks’ research demonstrated specific reasons why Mormons left, the late Mormon sociologist and scholar, Armand L. Mauss identified three dimensions of religious defection from his participant observation in religious re-activation programs at the ward level in the LDS Church.⁸⁰ The first dimension of disinvolvement he discusses in *Dimensions of Religious Defection* is *intellectual dimension* which “refers to the kind of disinvolvement that is based upon disbelief of certain central tenets of a religion, accompanied, presumably, by a belief in rival secular doctrines.”⁸¹ The second dimension Mauss discusses is *social dimension* which refers to a disintegration of social bonds, unsatisfying social experiences or the development of strong social ties outside the church.⁸² The third dimension is the *emotional dimension* which Mauss insists is the most elusive and subjective dimension as well as the hardest to identify.⁸³ As a possible example of the emotional dimension, Mauss references psychologist Gordon Allport, who studied youthful rebellion against parental religion, and claimed that many young people drift away from religion, “not because of intellectual doubts, but because of a gnawing

⁷⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁸⁰ Armand L. Mauss, “Dimensions of Religious Defection,” *Review of Religious Research* 10, no. 3 (1969): pp. 128-135, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3510739>, 128.

⁸¹ Ibid, 129.

⁸² Ibid, 130.

⁸³ Ibid, 130-131.

sense of guilt and shame, due perhaps to sex conflicts.”⁸⁴ Mauss states that not all defection is purely on a single dimension, and combines these three dimensions to understand types of defectors based on their various combinations of the three dimensions.⁸⁵

Among the narratives I read, I found that individuals typically did not fit into a single dimension as most Redditors gave more than one reason for their deconversion and often these reasons could be categorized in different dimensions. Overall, most of the shelf items written of on the ex-Mormon Reddit forum seemed to fit primarily in the intellectual dimension, and second, the emotional dimension. I initially attempted to use these three general categories when recording the results of the narratives I read, but I did not find them to be helpful as they were too broad to capture the rich primary source narratives.

RESEARCH METHOD

My research sample consisted of Redditors who interacted on the exmormon subreddit forum. Within the exmormon subreddit, I specifically searched for threads that contained the questions, “what broke your shelf?” and “what caused your shelf to break?” I limited my sample pool to discussion threads from the year 2015 through 2020. My research examined 702 written individual narratives that describe the reasons for one’s deconversion. These narratives varied in length with most responses reporting multiple reasons for their broken shelf.

My sample pool is void of demographic information due to the anonymity of Reddit. My research method consisted of a qualitative content analysis. Each narrative was carefully read and organized using a spreadsheet. These narratives were classified and coded by common

⁸⁴ Ibid, 130.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 131.

themes which I observed. Separate spreadsheets were used to record each year of Reddit posts, in an effort to identify potential shifting trends. I noticed that from 2015 to 2017, the most commonly cited reasons for Mormon deconversion were historic issues, and during the years 2018 to 2020, the most commonly cited reasons were institutional and administrative. I used a separate spreadsheet to combine the data from each year, which determined the topmost cited reasons that broke the shelves of ex-Mormons.

These narratives were re-read and re-counted for accuracy. I organized the responses into color coordinated broad categories: learning and exposure to other points of view; issues with Joseph Smith; historical issues not related to Joseph Smith; doctrine and theology; institutional issues with the LDS Church; local church ward experience; external causes; and personal and emotional causes. With further categorizing and grouping, my research determined that the most common reasons ex-Mormons say caused their deconversion were institutional and administrative, issues related to Joseph Smith, learning and exposure to other points of view and a loss of belief in Mormon canon.

WHY MORMONS LEAVE

The Reddit narratives revealed hundreds of reasons for deconversion. Among these reasons were unmet spiritual needs, such as feeling unloved by God, let down by God, or unanswered prayers. I also found that unmet personal needs such as being unhappy or unfulfilled as a Mormon were also reasons given. Social reasons such as negative experiences with fellow Mormons, not fitting in, and the influence of friends and social groups were also causes of deconversion. Sexual feelings, experiences, and sexual orientation were also listed as causes. Doctrinal and theological issues, moral differences, institutional issues, and learning were all listed as causes for one's broken shelf. My results were consistent with current scholarship on

Mormon deconversion and non-Mormon deconversion, though the ranking of most common reasons varied. To allow the narratives to speak for themselves, I have included the following excerpts and purposely do not edit these narratives for grammatical or spelling errors.

My research revealed the *most common* reasons that ex-Mormons gave on Reddit as shelf breakers were: 1) distrust in the current LDS institution and administration; 2) the polygamy and immorality of LDS founder Joseph Smith; 3) learning and exposure to other points of view; and 4) a loss of belief that the *Book of Mormon* and or the *Book of Abraham* were sacred scripture.

DISTRUST IN THE LDS INSTITUTION & ADMINISTRATION

Out of 702 narratives, the LDS institution was mentioned 382 times (54% of the narratives) as a cause of their broken shelf from ex-Mormon Redditors. More specifically, there were 293 mentions (42%) from Redditors that the top tier administrative leadership of the LDS Church broke their shelf while there were 89 mentions (12%) that one's experience with their local congregational leadership and church experience is what led to their shelf breaking. The issues that Redditors said they had with the current top administrative leaders varied and some of the reasons were: inconsistent messages, how the church utilizes tithing dollars and other financial decisions, new and changing policies, the church's involvement with politics, distrusting the LDS Church when it comes to teaching and recording church historical events. All of these issues were mentioned more than once, but the two most significantly common issues Redditors wrote of when referring to the administrative leadership is that they did not believe that the current General Authorities were prophets and apostles, and that the LDS church's "whitewashing" of their history broke their shelf.

There were 80 references (11%) from Redditors that indicated they did not believe that the General Authorities were prophets and apostles. The General Authorities are the top administrative and ecclesiastical leaders in the LDS Church. In accordance with Joseph Smith's establishment of church leadership organization, the highest levels of leadership consist of two governing bodies: The Prophet and his two counselors, together known as the First Presidency, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. These fifteen men are regarded as prophets, seers, and revelators. These positions are ongoing, and these positions are chosen from within the group through divine inspiration. Men are expected to and often serve in this capacity for life. In the LDS Church, these men represent the mouthpiece of God and are regarded as prophets and apostles whose role is the same as biblical prophets and apostles. Redditors referred to the General Authorities as false prophets, hypocrites, inconsistent, unchristlike, and not inspired by God. A Redditor wrote:

General conference. Prophet, seers and revelators are suppose to do just that and never have/do? They are suppose to walk and talk with God/Jesus yet NOTHING they say is new and inspiring. YThey never deal with real world issues and LDS is suppose to be world wide church. You would think they could just get up to the pulpit and talk from their interpersonal connection to the Holy Ghost or something. Instead you get soupy talks that professional speech writers write and then the "disciples of Christ" read the talk from a tele-prompter.⁸⁶

This Reddit comment references General Conference, a semiannual event where the General Authorities address the worldwide church with spiritual messages. Many users expressed that the church leaders are supposed to be prophets, yet they do not prophesize anything new. In addition to a lack of new revelation, Reddit users expressed that the inconsistent revelations and behavior of Church leaders are reasons for their shelf breaking. Another user wrote:

⁸⁶ u/holypilgrimage, May 28, 2015, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "Straw That Broke The Camels Back".

...Ultimately, though, Rusty⁸⁷ dealt the final blow. He has clearly demonstrated that none of this is doctrine from God and every part of the gospel is subject to change at any time. All of these awful facets of the church are just products of the personal opinions of whoever was in charge at the time. I was tired of being expected to agree with the status quo and then also change how I feel and what I do based on Rusty's revelation of the day. And for those reasons... I'm out.⁸⁸

Russel M. Nelson, the current Prophet and President of the LDS Church has implemented many recent changes in the LDS Church, including changes to policies, reversals of policies, modifications to Temple ordinances, missionary requirements, among others.⁸⁹ Ex-Mormons wrote that these changes seem to conflict with previous administrative decisions. Redditors often wrote that they did not agree with or like the things that General Authorities say during General Conference and other public speeches. One user wrote:

My shelf broke when Oaks told women all they were good for was popping babies this last conference. No comfort for those who can't or shouldn't have kids. He told us we all have to have kids no exceptions and I have more respect for myself than letting someone tell me I'm solely a human reproduction factory.⁹⁰

This Redditor did not agree with a General Conference talk that was given by the First Counselor Dallin H. Oaks. I gathered from my research that Redditors did not like the way the General Authorities made them feel, which led to them rejecting these leaders as prophets and apostles of God.

⁸⁷ Rusty refers to the current Prophet and President of the LDS Church, Russel M. Nelson.

⁸⁸ u/ laura_coop_hast, March 29, 2019, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "Question: What was the main thing for you that broke your shelf? Why?".

⁸⁹ Sydney Walker, "39+ Announcements and Changes in the Church since President Nelson Became Prophet 3 Years Ago," *Church News: A Living Record of the Restoration*, December 30, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2020-12-30/president-nelson-announcements-changes-church-prophet-200435>.

⁹⁰ u/ RavenWinters56, November 26, 2018, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "What broke your shelf?".

Redditors mentioned 69 times (10%) that what broke their shelf was being lied to by their Church regarding Mormon history. They wrote that they felt that they were deceived and betrayed by the LDS Church, due to being taught an inaccurate and dishonest history. One user stated, “The church's blatant deception was the final straw.”⁹¹ Another user wrote:

Finding out information from the CES letter and cross referencing with PRO LDS sources to find out they knew the whole time. Evidence after evidence that the church whitewashed unflattering facts. I feel like any time you see "..." in a church setting it's almost guaranteed they are omitting information they don't want you to know. The actual church broke my shelf. I've never felt so betrayed in my life.⁹²

This Reddit user mentions the “CES Letter: My Search for Answers to Mormon Doubts,” a letter 83 pages long and written in April 2013 by former Mormon Jeremy T. Runnells to a director of the Church Education System (CES) where he expressed and organized many doubts that he had with LDS Church history and doctrine. Prior to sending his letter to his director, he posted it online to Reddit and Facebook for editing and feedback purposes, which led to the letter circulating among the Mormon and ex-Mormon blogosphere. The CES Letter is well-known within the ex-Mormon community and was cited as a shelf breaking item by many Redditors, which will be addressed below. Another user commented:

I have many, many things; but the single one that ruined the church forever for me was their deliberate, systematic and malicious manipulation of its own history in order to keep its members ignorant and devoted to it. The tithing connection is obvious.⁹³

A Reddit user commented:

⁹¹ u/spicehurled, October 26, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What broke your shelf?”

⁹² u/Controller87, December 23, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “Favorite Shelf-Breaking Fun Facts”.

⁹³ u/ReasonFighter, July 3, 2016, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What's the one thing that broke your shelf?”

Being lied to by the church about the translation of the BoM. The gold plates were not used at all in the translation. The lying and whitewashing of church history is what hurts the most. I could probably weather other issues, but misinformation, dishonesty, gaslighting, these are non starters for me. The Book of Abraham is verifiable complete bullshit, Kinderhook plates, the real reason Joseph Smith burned down the Nauvoo Expositor (they were publishing the truth about his practice of polygamy), and the way the church dramatically spins and lies about all of these things.⁹⁴

In addition to the lying and whitewashing of church history, this user references the Kinderhook plates and the Nauvoo Expositor. The Kinderhook Plates were six brass plates that contained what resembled ancient script that a group of men brought to Joseph Smith for him to translate. These plates were actually forged by the group of men who brought them to Smith and did so with the intention to prove Joseph Smith a fraud and not a Prophet who has spiritual powers to translate ancient writings. It has been documented that Smith suggested the plates contained a history of a descendant of Ham from the Bible, though the LDS Church disputes that Joseph attempted a revelatory translation of the plates.⁹⁵ “The Nauvoo Expositor” was a newspaper that printed an article regarding Joseph Smith on June 7, 1844.⁹⁶ On June 10th, Joseph Smith ordered a marshal to destroy the printing press and it was burned down.⁹⁷ Some users feel that the LDS Church hid from them the reasons why Joseph ordered the paper’s destruction. Another user wrote:

The period of Church History from Joseph F. Smith to Joseph Fielding Smith. So much editing, whitewashing, erasing, and gaslighting during that time. Granted, it worked

⁹⁴ u/Portmantupelo, October 4, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “There will likely be a ton of semi-active lurkers here this weekend due to conference”.

⁹⁵ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Kinderhook Plates,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/kinderhook-plates?lang=eng>.

⁹⁶ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Nauvoo Expositor,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/nauvoo-expositor?lang=eng>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

really well for awhile since that time period clearly defined the LDS narrative most of us are familiar with, but that is when I learned that Church leaders had real issues with church history so it was ok for me to also have real issues with it. Age 40.⁹⁸

Ex-Mormons stated that they felt manipulated, betrayed, and lied to when they learned historical claims regarding the LDS Church that they had been completely unaware of. One user wrote, “Realizing that the history I was taught and taught others for 2 years was inaccurate. When your church lies to you how does the shelf not come crashing down?”⁹⁹ Redditors blame the LDS Administration for what they were and were not taught because the administration is responsible for producing materials and creating and approving lesson plans that are taught at local levels in church and at LDS schools such as BYU.

JOSEPH SMITH AS IMMORAL POLYGAMIST

Out of 702 Narratives, there were 275 mentions (39%) by Redditors that Joseph Smith caused their shelf to break. Specifically, Joseph Smith’s involvement with polygamy was cited 146 times (21%), while his moral character and other actions outside of Polygamy were mentioned 129 times (18%) as shelf breakers. Ex-Mormons described Smith as a liar, manipulator, predator, and deceiver, and often wrote that because of his immorality, they could not believe or accept that he was a prophet. One Redditor states:

Learning the truth about Joseph Smith was the last straw: that he practiced polygamy in violation the law of the land especially after announcing to the world that Mormons were law abiding; that he lied privately and to the whole world publicly as a matter of policy about his polygamy in violation of the commandments and common decency; that he "married" other women without Emma's consent in in violation of his own supposed revelations; that he "married" already married women in violation of his own supposed revelations; the way he practiced polygamy (by isolating young girls and financially

⁹⁸ u/TheRoadshowWarrior, December 30, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What was your Final shelf Breaking Fact Lie?”.

⁹⁹ u/jbredd27, September 4, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What caused your Shelf to break?!”.

dependent women and then propositioning them; sending men on missions and then propositioning their financially vulnerable wives; and his slandering the women who turned him down); that he was indicted on charges of fraud during the time he supposedly was being prepared to receive the Book of Mormon; that he changed his view of the nature of Godhead over time despite supposedly having definitive experience in the "sacred grove" at age 14; that he joined a church after the supposed "first vision" but before he started the Mormon church in violation of the instructions he supposedly was given in the "first vision." Most of this I never knew. The rest I found out after I started learning. This was the last straw, I could not push it to the back burner along with concerns about the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham (things I had known or become aware of years and years before) There was no more room on the back burner. Or, to use the metaphor popular here, "my shelf broke."¹⁰⁰

Another user commented:

Finding out that Joseph Smith sent men on missions and then married their wives is what made me start researching. And the more I read, the more problems there were. And finally (after about a week of studying mormonthink.com), I decided that there's no way JS was a prophet. And, as Pres. Hinkley once taught, if JS¹⁰¹ wasn't called of God, then the Church can't be "true". Really, for me, it was every awful thing I learned about JS, but also just that there are so many problems. It's not one specific thing, it's that there's a pile of stinky shit as high as the great and spacious conference center. And the more you learn, the higher that pile gets.¹⁰²

Another user wrote:

Joseph conned people out of their money with a rock and hat by claiming he could locate buried treasure with them until he was taken to court at which time he changed locations and changed the con to producing a book of "scripture" and starting a church with the same rock and hat. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. He was also quite capable of getting people to lie for him and with him about polygamy. I wonder how long he'd been practicing that talent because we rely heavily on those 11 witnesses.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ u/taanstafl, November 2, 2017, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "The last straw".

¹⁰¹ JS is abbreviation for Joseph Smith.

¹⁰² u/Chica3, October 3, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "There will likely be a ton of semi-active lurkers here this weekend due to conference".

¹⁰³ u/brokenmormonshelf, December 22, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "Favorite Shelf-Breaking Fun Facts".

These narratives which cite Joseph Smith as a cause for their deconversion were rarely short lists but consisted of many issues surrounding his moral character and polygamy was often at the core of these narratives. A Reddit user wrote:

I vividly remember the moment my shelf came crashing down because it felt like I got punched in the stomach. It was about 3 and a half years ago and I had read about Fanny Alger and Helen Kimball. Before that point I had heard about polygamous teen brides but it never really hit me until I read those specific stories. I was angry that Joseph used his position of spiritual leadership to coerce Helen into marrying him. I was angry that Joseph basically raped Fanny in the barn. She may have consented but she was a minor under his employ. I had been carrying guilt for many years due to my premarital transgressions. When I found out that Joseph had no problems with putting his dick wherever he wanted, that removed any doubt for me about his status as a prophet. All the other evidence against the church only solidifies my conclusion that it is false.¹⁰⁴

This user writes of Fanny Alger and Helen Kimball, who were both teenage polygamous brides of Joseph Smith.¹⁰⁵ Smith's polygamy was an issue for many Redditors, but specifically there were 46 mentions that Smith's relations and marriages with underage girls was what bothered ex-Mormons. Other concerns exmormon Redditors had regarding Joseph Smith's polygamous relationships was that he also had married women who were already married. A user commented:

It took 5 years total, from start to finish, to finally decide that I could no longer believe. The beginning of those 5 years, I had common doubts. I wondered why the church didn't want us looking so closely into the history. I figured my testimony is STRONG...it couldn't be *that* bad. I was so very very wrong. Learning about polyandry (JS marrying other men's wives) for the first time as a 30 year old COMPLETELY disrupted my life. It destroyed me!!! I cried for WEEKS. I even remember hugging my baby in my arms so tight and crying my eyes out because I didn't know what was real anymore. I learned much more about the history, and it all bothered me a LOT—but the polyandry was always at the forefront of my mind. Over time, I realized that there were two possible

¹⁰⁴ u/ LDSatheist, July 3, 2016, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "What's the one thing that broke your shelf?"

¹⁰⁵ "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed February 28, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

reasons for the polyandry/polygamy: A) it was REALLY important to God that JS be with these women (in fact, it was so important that an actual angel came to enforce it), even though God mostly seemed to stay quiet about other things like child cancer, the homeless and hungry, and other people that may be suffering. Or B) Joseph lied. I refuse to believe in a God that could make something as beautiful as the Grand Canyon, and have such messed up priorities. Simply not possible, in my opinion. And that's a devastating realization....¹⁰⁶

The Mormon apologetic narrative is like that of many new religious movements that practice polygamy—that Joseph Smith did not want to practice polygamy, but it was the will of God, so much that he sent an angel with a drawn sword to threaten Joseph to partake in polygamous practices or else he would lose his priesthood authority or possibly his life.¹⁰⁷ Redditors wrote that they could not believe that Joseph Smith's polygamy was the will of God, and believed that more than likely, Joseph made it up and he was not a prophet as he claimed to be.

LEARNING AND EXPOSURE TO OTHER VIEWPOINTS

The third most common thing that broke the shelf of ex-Mormons was learning and exposure to other points of view. Out of 702 Narratives, there were 251 mentions (36%) that increased knowledge and learning is what broke their shelf. While secular knowledge such as science, theory of evolution, and taking a class was mentioned 36 times out of the 251 (5%), Redditors wrote 215 times (31%) that what they learned from Mormon related books, podcasts that interview ex-Mormons, and internet sites were the cause of their shelf collapse. The majority of these responses did not include what precisely they learned from these things that led to their shelf breaking, but they instead listed the books, podcasts, or websites as *the* reason.

¹⁰⁶ u/TheOfficeFan8, October 4, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “There will likely be a ton of semi-active lurkers here this weekend due to conference”.

¹⁰⁷ “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed February 28, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

Mormon-themed books that were frequently mentioned as a cause for deconversion were *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* by Richard Bushman, *No Man Knows My History* by Fawn Brodie, and *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* by Jerald and Sandra Tanner.¹⁰⁸ These books focus on Mormon history and are not produced by the LDS Church. However, many Redditors did cite LDS Church-approved resources as a cause for their broken shelf. The “Gospel Topics Essays” were mentioned by Redditors 50 times.

Referring to the “Gospel Topics Essays,” one user wrote:

The Essays.¹⁰⁹ Released 5 years ago...never heard about them. They contradicted everything I had ever been taught. All the anti-mormon lies I fought against on my mission were quietly confirmed as truth on lds.org. Suddenly, I could no longer accept the church as a reliable source of truth. I mourned the loss of my faith like the death of a child. It still stings.¹¹⁰

Another user commented:

In a word - essays. I cannot understand how anyone who reads them and truly understands what they are saying can remain in the church. They are damning as they contradict basically everything that has been taught in TSCC¹¹¹ for the last several decades.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ See, Brodie, Fawn McKay. *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945. Bushman, Richard L. *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007. Tanner, Jerald, and Sandra Tanner. *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* Salt Lake City, UT, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1963.

¹⁰⁹ The Essays is a shorter way of referring to the Gospel Topics Essays.

¹¹⁰ u/Bednar_Done_That, November 26, 2018, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What broke your shelf?”

¹¹¹ TSCC is an acronym Exmormons use for the LDS Church and it stands for “the so-called church”.

¹¹² u/truthRealized, October 9, 2016, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What broke your shelf?”

The “Gospel Topics Essays” are a collection of essays produced and published by the LDS Church on their website.¹¹³ The LDS website states, “Recognizing that today so much information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be obtained from questionable and often inaccurate sources, officials of the Church began in 2013 to publish straightforward, in-depth essays on a number of topics.” It appears from Redditors that these essays discuss historical controversies that the LDS Church did not openly discuss prior to 2013. The “Gospel Topics Essays” are an approved source for Mormons to learn of their history, yet it has become one of the most common resources that Mormons on exmormon Reddit say are causing them to leave. Along with the “Gospel Topics Essays,” the “CES Letter” which was previously mentioned in this thesis, is another resource for learning that ex-Mormons said caused their deconversion. The “CES Letter” was mentioned 46 times as the cause of one’s broken shelf. One Redditor wrote:

The CES letter. Most of the questions are about undisputed facts that the apologists can only hope to spin positive interpretations from. Seeing all of the questions in one place, so organized, finally allowed me to see past individual trees and become aware of the whole forest...¹¹⁴

Another Reddit user wrote regarding the CES Letter:

...I remember vividly while reading the Late War section of the CES Letter that it snapped, and I realized it was all a fraud. I wanted to throw up, yet at the same time the weight of the world was lifted off my shoulders, and a universe of possibilities outside the cult opened up to me. Possibly the most powerful real spiritual experience of my life.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ “Introduction to Gospel Topics,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/intro?lang=eng>.

¹¹⁴ u/Cripplecreek2012, September 4, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What caused your Shelf to break?!”

¹¹⁵ u/perk_daddy, November 26, 2018, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What broke your shelf?”.

Along with the “CES letter,” which provides many historical and controversial issues in one place, ex-Mormons wrote 18 times that the subreddit r/exmormon caused their shelf to break. A user wrote, “Coming to the subreddit is what broke it for me. I came in with that determination of ‘if I see anything and I’ll exit out of it’, but then I started reading comments and stories and it all just clicked.”¹¹⁶ This user curiously visited the exmormon subreddit with caution and yet the things learned from the forum and the narratives they read, caused their shelf to break. Another user wrote:

This sub. I installed reddit and somehow this sub came up as a suggestion within like 3 days and I got curious and fell down the rabbit hole. Started learning so many things that were never taught and one by one I got more disappointed and then angry that I had been lied to...¹¹⁷

This user did not intentionally seek out exmormon Reddit, but it was suggested to them by the application or website itself. Once on Reddit, this user described their experience of learning about the many things they were not taught about Mormon history or doctrine, as falling down the rabbit hole, an expression used often on Reddit.

Other learning resources that Redditors cited were podcasts such as Radio Free Mormon, Mormon Expression, and Mormon Stories. These podcasts feature Mormons and ex-Mormons as well as discussions about Mormon history. These online resources are not just sources of learning, but they also provide exposure to other viewpoints which affected how I categorized these learning sources. I decided to combine learning and exposure to other viewpoints as one category for this research. Since Reddit, Mormon-themed blogs and podcasts are not only places

¹¹⁶ u/TuesdayTastic, July 3, 2016, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What’s the one thing that broke your shelf?”.

¹¹⁷ u/ Oakraider22, July 4, 2019, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What broke your shelf?”

where ex-Mormons learn, but places where they can hear from other individuals, gaining insight to their opinions, views, and personal feelings.

DOUBTS ABOUT *THE BOOK OF MORMON* AND *BOOK OF ABRAHAM*

The fourth most common shelf-breaking item for ex-Mormons was a loss of belief that the *Book of Mormon* and or the *Book of Abraham* were books of ancient scripture. Out of 702 narratives, it was mentioned 197 times (28%) that Redditors shelf broke after learning or deciding that Joseph Smith did not divinely translate the *Book of Mormon* and or the *Book of Abraham*, and that these books were not ancient writings or sacred texts. There were 114 responses that mentioned specifically the *Book of Mormon* (16%), and there were 83 mentions of specifically the *Book of Abraham* (12%).

The Book of Mormon is regarded by Mormons as a sacred scripture that contains an account of ancient inhabitants of the American continent and their dealings with God.¹¹⁸ This account was allegedly written on gold plates and buried in a hill near Joseph Smith's family farm.¹¹⁹ Smith claimed that he was visited by an angel named Moroni who informed him that God had a work for him to do, and that he would translate the gold plates from their ancient language into English.¹²⁰ Many ex-Mormons stated that they no longer believe in the *Book of Mormon* or that Joseph Smith translated it from gold plates.

There are 114 mentions that the *Book of Mormon* was the cause of one's shelf collapse. There were many reasons given for why the *Book of Mormon* became an issue for Redditors. Out

¹¹⁸ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Book of Mormon Translation," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, December 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

of 702 narratives 53 of them mention the anachronisms, possible plagiarism and the Biblical quote translation errors contained in the *Book of Mormon*. Thirty of the narratives mentioned the lack of evidence supporting the *Book of Mormon* as well as the DNA evidence that proves that Native Americans are not Middle Eastern descendants as the *Book of Mormon* states. Three of these narratives mentioned that they rejected the teachings in the *Book of Mormon* and expressed a disbelief in the testimony of the witnesses who allegedly held the original gold plates that the book was translated from. Twenty-eight of these narratives conveyed doubt in the manner in which Joseph Smith allegedly translated the *Book of Mormon*, with a seer stone in a hat. One user commented:

The church essay on the seer stone. I had always heard “rumors” and read unofficial texts, but when the church admitted it, I lost it. I know it seems like a small issue, but it’s at the heart Mormonism for me. The book is truly a historical record that came off some plates or it didn’t. Guess what, it didn’t. Some jamoke looked at a rock in a hat and told some stories. And let’s be clear, that’s not what I was taught, it’s not what I was asked to teach as a missionary, and it’s not what people bear their testimony of from the pulpit. They lied. And anytime an organization lies, one should reconsider the nature of their relationship with that organization. And then I read Fawn Brody. An imperfect book, but it does lay out some very concerning ideas. But I was already out before ready No Man Know My History. I didn’t leave because I was offended or because leaders aren’t perfect, I left because it’s all predicated on a lie.¹²¹

This user is referring to the “Gospel Topics Essays” that the LDS Church released online regarding certain controversial topics in LDS history and doctrine. The essay titled “Book of Mormon Translation” was published on the LDS Church’s website in December of 2013 and revealed information regarding how the *Book of Mormon* was translated by Joseph Smith, that this user states was information that they or other Mormons were not taught. This user also mentions reading the non-hagiographic biography *No Man Knows My History: The Life of*

¹²¹ u/furlburpinmcgeggie, November 1, 2017, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “The last straw”.

Joseph Smith by American history professor Fawn M. Brodie, which presented concerning ideas for this Redditor.

Regarding the translation of the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith claimed that he translated it by the gift and power of God, and this is what many exmormon Redditors reveal to be what they were taught, though Smith also indicated that he used two instruments during the translation.¹²² One instrument is called “interpreters” in the *Book of Mormon*, and also known as the “Urim and Thummim,” which Smith claims he found buried in the hill with the plates.¹²³ The second instrument that Smith claims he used during the translation is called the “seer stone,” and was a small oval stone that Smith found in the ground many years before he obtained the gold plates and used to look for buried treasure and other objects.¹²⁴

Besides concerns with how the *Book of Mormon* was translated, other users mentioned that a lack of evidence of the book’s characters and events led them to believe that it is not a historical or scriptural account. One user wrote:

For me it was the overwhelming evidence that EVERY part of it was at best, deeply problematic. When I looked at the timeline and discovered that the nephite/Lamanite civilization happened at the same time as the Roman Empire, and both were of the same size, I was done. We have SO much evidence of the Roman Empire. Their money, buildings, art, writings etc. Yet there’s not a single piece of archeological evidence to show the BoM¹²⁵ happened. Everyone on earth knows about the Romans, but only TBM’s¹²⁶ know about the Nephites. The only way they existed is if God took it all away when they died. If God did that, then how can we be expected to believe? How can we be expected to have blind faith in that? To just decide in our minds it’s true when it’s just as

¹²² The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Book of Mormon Translation,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, December 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ BOM is abbreviation for the *Book of Mormon*.

¹²⁶ Exmormon Reddit users refer to faithful Mormons as TBM’s which stands for “true believing Mormons”.

likely that the Flying Spaghetti Monster is real. Add in all the corrupt shit TSCC¹²⁷ has done in His name, and the lack of good TSCC does with its hundreds of billions and I've that I can do far more for my fellow humans without TSCC, and can have just as good of a relationship with God without them telling me science is evil.¹²⁸

This user references the *Book of Mormon*'s two main groups of people known as the Nephites and Lamanites and questions why there is no evidence of their existence if they lived during the time of the Roman Empire. While lack of evidence for the *Book of Mormon* was a common shelf breaker for exmormon Redditors, others mentioned that they no longer could believe the book to be divine due to biblical passages included in chapters of the *Book of Mormon* that contain the same translation errors as the *King James Bible*.

Many Redditors stated that they believed that the *Book of Abraham* was a fraudulent text. The LDS Church claims that the *Book of Abraham* is a record of the biblical prophet Abraham that the church embraces as scripture.¹²⁹ The *Book of Abraham* is a translation by Joseph Smith of an Egyptian papyri that a group of Latter-day Saints purchased along with four mummies for the LDS Church in the summer of 1835.¹³⁰ Joseph Smith began the translation of the papyri in the summer and fall of 1835 and alleged that the papyri was an ancient record of Abraham, written by his own hand.¹³¹ The *Book of Abraham* was mentioned specifically by Redditors 83 times. One user wrote:

¹²⁷ Exmormon Reddit users refer to the LDS Church as "TSCC" which stands for "the so called church", as "The Church" is how Mormons and their leaders refer to the LDS Church.

¹²⁸ u/ Rotornoob, October 4, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "There will likely be a ton of semi-active lurkers here this weekend due to conference".

¹²⁹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, July 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Finding out the papyri JS translated the BOA¹³² from has absolutely nothing to do with Abraham, dates thousands of years after his life, is a standard funerary text buried with the dead, and the facsimiles were translated entirely wrong. That, on top of everything else, was when it hit me like a ton of bricks that it was all made up.¹³³

After Joseph Smith's death, the Egyptian papyri were divided up and sold to various parties by Smith's family in 1856 and ten papyrus fragments ended up in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who returned these fragments to the LDS Church in 1967.¹³⁴ These papyri were studied by scholars who dated the fragments between the third century BCE and first century CE and concluded that none of the characters on the fragments mention Abraham's name, or any events recorded in the *Book of Abraham*.¹³⁵ Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists have concluded that the fragments did not match Joseph Smith's interpretations, but rather represent standard funerary texts that were deposited with mummified bodies.¹³⁶ Another Redditor commented:

The Book of Abraham. It's a smoking gun that proves that Joseph Smith made it all up. Even with the argument that the scrolls were a catalyst for him to receive the text for the BoA by inspiration, it would have been brought about by a completely dishonest means by God, which would make God and Joseph and essentially all prophets liars. That would completely undermine the concept of God being perfect and honest, and bring up even more questions. Once it was obvious that the BoA is complete fiction, that caused me to look at the BoM with a more critical and discerning eye. That book doesn't stand a chance when you start to look at the questions it causes (KJV bible errors, good plates story, anachronisms, absolutely no evidence of said anachronisms even in modern times, etc.). Bam. My shelf was down in just a few hours. Granted, it was already barely hanging on thanks to the Prop 8 and the November policy, but the BoA was the critical hit. My head was spinning for days when that happened. I think I spent a solid 3 days reading Exmormon and trying to make sense of it all. In the end, I have nothing but

¹³² BOA is abbreviation for the *Book of Abraham*.

¹³³ u/AllInFavorOfReason, May 28, 2015, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, "Straw That Broke The Camels Back".

¹³⁴ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, July 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

gratitude that it went down and for all of you fellow heathens who have the courage to stand for actual truth.”¹³⁷

Another user wrote:

I had come home from church on a particularly trying Sunday. I Googled "Why do mormons leave their church?" Up popped John Dehlin. He mentioned a list of problems that the church has. He didn't go into detail. I Googled one problem he mentioned. The book of Abrham. MormonThink.com seemed like a good place to start. The truth hit me like a brick. I was 52, fifth generation, and then I was out. I never went to church again after that Sunday.¹³⁸

Like many other comments, this user wrote that the *Book of Abraham* was the reason for their broken shelf, but also outlined the path that led them to learning about the *Book of Abraham*. In instances like these, there are more than one reason being given by the author of the comment and therefore both reasons were recorded individually.

The top four frequently cited reasons that Redditors give regarding their deconversion are consistent with what current scholarship on Mormon deconversion has found. Joseph Smith, his polygamous practices, and the *Book of Mormon* and *Book of Abraham* are consistently referred to as causes for deconversion in Mormon scholarship. This thesis sheds light on two reasons that other studies do not focus on in the same way: the current LDS administration and Mormon-themed online sources that expose the viewer to different points of view.

DISCUSSION

My examination of ex-Mormon narratives on Reddit support what current scholarship says about Mormon deconversion. Historical issues with Joseph Smith, the *Book of Mormon*, and

¹³⁷ u/zMerovingian, March 29, 2019, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “Question: What was the main thing for you that broke your shelf? Why?”

¹³⁸ u/DarlinClemintine, December 30, 2020, comment on Reddit, r/exmormon, “What was your Final shelf Breaking Fact Lie?”.

the *Book of Abraham* continue to be affecting Mormon deconversion. I have found that additionally Mormons are rejecting the idea that their administrative and ecclesiastical leaders are prophets and apostles partly due to their religious discourse but mostly their efforts to transform the identity of the LDS Church. I conclude that the discovery of previously unknown details of LDS history are due in large part to one's exposure to ex-Mormon online material and communities.

LDS Administration

My study of ex-Mormon narratives on Reddit indicated that there is a growing dislike and distrust of the current LDS administrative and ecclesiastical leaders. As noted previously, from 2015 to 2017 ex-Mormon Redditors most frequently cited historical issues as causes for their deconversion, and during the years 2018 to 2020, the most commonly cited reasons were institutional and administrative. The current prophet, Russell M. Nelson, was set apart as the 17th president and prophet of the LDS Church on January 14, 2018.¹³⁹ This correlation does not prove causation, though my research may perhaps lend itself as evidence that this may partly be the case.

When Redditors cited LDS General Authorities as the cause of their deconversion they specifically wrote of two individuals, the prophet Russell M. Nelson and his First Counselor Dallin H. Oaks. The new administration under Nelson's direction has implemented various changes within the church which they claim to be divine revelation, to which Redditors expressed that these modifications have caused them to believe that the long-standing policies and ordinances were never divine, since they can be changed when a new prophet is called. The

¹³⁹ "Russell M. Nelson," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/russell-m-nelson?lang=eng>.

prophet Russel M. Nelson has received the mocking nickname “Rebrand Rusty” in the exmormon subreddit due to the many recent adjustments since his presidency began, showing that ex-Mormons do not see these changes as divine revelation, but strategic marketing to alter the imagine of the LDS Church.

The ongoing transformation of the LDS Church is a factor in why Mormons leave. It is not that ex-Mormons do not welcome or like the adjustments to policies, rules, and ordinances, but these changes are causing them to question whether the LDS Church is led by God through a chosen prophet or led by uninspired men. The attitudes, speeches, and decisions of the administration are all factors that contribute to ex-Mormons rejecting these leaders as prophets and apostles, leading to many broken shelves.

Exmormon Subreddit as a Disaffected Virtual Community of Influence

Speaking at General Conference in October of 2016, LDS Apostle Elder M. Russell Ballard asked Latter-day Saints, “If you choose to become inactive or to leave the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where will you go?”¹⁴⁰ They go to exmormon Reddit. The exmormon subreddit is designed to be a place where individuals go to find information about the LDS Church. Not only from the threads and comments, but the exmormon subreddit page provides lists of learning resources. From the homepage of exmormon subreddit there are four tabs: Wiki, References (non-LDS), References (pro-LDS), and LDS Essays. The wiki index provides a list of links to podcasts, blogs, book recommendations, and upcoming events for ex-Mormon meetups in cities in Western states like Utah, California, Oregon, and Nevada. These sources are mainly educational for Mormons and former Mormons to learn more

¹⁴⁰ M. Russell Ballard, “To Whom Shall We Go?,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 2016.

about Mormon history, doctrine, and policies that they may not be aware of. The non-LDS reference tab provides a link to very popular exmormon online websites and blogs that are considered to be common shelf breakers, such as the “CES Letter,” “Letter For My Wife,” “MormonThink,” in addition to ex-Mormon recovery sites such as exmormon.org and “Mormon Spectrum.” The Pro-LDS reference tab provides links to four LDS Church approved and owned sources for information. And finally, the LDS Essays tab provides links to the LDS church-published “Gospel Topic Essays.” I argue that exmormon Reddit plays a crucial role in providing the sources that lead to the broken shelves of ex-Mormons.

Reiterating Zuckerman’s point that individuals are not always mindful of the external factors—such as one’s social networks—that affect our decisions, I argue that the exmormon Reddit community is one driving force in modern Mormon deconversion. As I have shown, some Redditors did recognize Reddit as a cause for their broken shelf. The single common denominator among my research subjects is that they are all participants in the exmormon subreddit forum. They are part of an online community reading the stories of former Mormons, discussing, sharing their own stories, and learning from each other. Whether Redditors are consciously aware of it or not, they are influenced by the narratives they read on exmormon subreddit.

Reddit is a virtual community. It is a social media platform designed to reward content creators which shapes the way Redditors create posts and write comments. Good content receives upvotes and rewards and becomes more visible to those visiting the forum, while bad or uninteresting content receives downvotes and are less visible. The nature of Reddit forums is to encourage individuals to post and comment in such a way that would be agreeable to those in the subreddit community. One must recognize that when Redditors respond to the question, “What

broke your shelf,” users may unconsciously reply in a way that helps them “fit in” with the exmormon Reddit community. Echoing Mullen, this explains why the Reddit narratives were often identical. Deconversion narratives on exmormon subreddit are influenced by the way Redditors speak of their own deconversion. Being exposed to the viewpoints of ex-Mormons in online communities like Reddit, one’s shelf becomes vulnerable to the weight of the religious disaffection from others.

Exmormon subreddit is a community to help Mormons and ex-Mormons process and work through their questions, doubts, and assist those who are transitioning their religious identity. A welcoming community for many, exmormon subreddit provides those struggling with their faith a safe place to discuss and learn without the judgment that is often present in face-to-face circles. As an online community, exmormon subreddit can reach Mormons across the globe and help them to not feel isolated and alone in their journey of leaving Mormonism. The internet is a world of its own. It is young and online social media is even younger. This study sheds light on how social media affects religious beliefs and asks us to reflect on the future of religious involvement and how it might change in a world where individuals spend so much of their time online.¹⁴¹

This research is important to the academic study of religion not just as a study of deconversion, but because it shows specifically how digital social media can both register and influence religious disaffiliation. As religion journalist Tara Burton notes in her recent study of twenty-somethings and the internet, younger generations of Americans are using digital social

¹⁴¹ For a recent examination that discusses twenty-somethings, the internet, and religion, see Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. New York: Public Affairs Books, 2020.

media to revise their religious and supernatural beliefs and practices.¹⁴² The growing influence of online media and ex-religious communities is generating digital deconversion among some religious people. Questions that I have that were not answered with my research are: Why does the discovery of certain historical issues cause some Mormons to leave, but not others? Why do some Mormons physically stay in the church when their shelf is broken and they are mentally and emotionally out? After one leaves Mormonism, at what point do they no longer *need* ex-religious communities, like exmormon subreddit? Can faith affirming online communities, such as latterdaysaint subreddit, put back the pieces and heal broken shelves?

¹⁴² Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. New York: Public Affairs Books, 2020.

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