Religious Rhetoric in Excessive Language Environments: Influences of marketing strategies, group communication, and authority claims

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As tribalism increases with the rise of identity politics and the decrease in physical barriers due to the internet and social media's ability to join like-minded individuals in communication with one another, this tribalism causes individuals to be more susceptible to the dangers of group communication (Fukuyama, 2018). Among these dangers are the pre-disposition to groupthink and developed extremes in ideologies and decision-making (Gastil, 2010).

Additionally, as tribalism increases, the competitive social market of where one spends their social capital through affiliation and involvement increases. Like evolutionary game theory (Smith 1982; Parker, 1984), tribal groups are forced to strategize in the social market or risk perishing. This results in marketing strategies optimized for success rather than for truth (Harper, 1991; Johnstone, 1997) including linguistic strategies of deceit such as bluffing, exaggeration, or omission in gaining and retaining membership (Gass & Setter, 2014).

Religious organizations are classic sites of tribalism and group communication practices at work, and remain so in current environments. Despite the sharp decline in religious affiliation over the last twenty years in the United States (PEW, 2019), or perhaps because of it, religious organizations such as churches are incentivized to reach and retain membership as strongly as any other tribal group. It is tempting, and not new, for religious leaders to publicly orient their rhetorical discourse as politicians often do, through the marketing techniques of excesses in language valued over truth. Unlike politicians however, religious organizations are in the market of "possessing truth" and this, along with its connection to celestialized benefits for followers of the truth, creates potential message dissonance and careful strategies to effectively be competitive in the social marketplace while not at the same time undermining their service and value. The preservation of face in public discourse for these religious organizations as bringers of truth is paramount in identity alignment with institutional objectives and their reason for existence. Leaders, therefore, as the speakers of the religious organization, must negotiate front-facing strategies that allow them to save both their face and their audiences' while remaining competitive in a world of increasing options. In the last ten years alone, we've seen changes in the religious discourse surrounding their own dogmas and the 'us v. them' rhetoric. Significantly, this diachronic shift has resulted in also more direct acknowledgement of the dangers of linguistic extremes in discourse. After all, the 'golden rule' of how we treat one another is often foundational to religious identity.

The present paper analyzes the rhetorical devices in the religious discourse of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints General Conference messages to identify how excessive language is defined and characterized, proposed strategies for combating excessive language, the sources of authority relied on in the rhetorical message, and the linguistic strategies for creating authoritative messages in speeches broadcast to wide audiences. The Church holds a minor membership in the U.S. and globally, making up only about 2% of the United States population. Thus unlike Christianity generally or some of the larger organizations, this group is strongly motivated to stay competitive socially, as further evidenced by their consistent and widespread missionary efforts. General Conference messages, unlike individual congregational messages, are distributed globally and are intended for general membership as well as as a tool for inviting prospective members. Thus, their messages are constructed with general considerations. It also means translations of these speeches are available so as to further identify the linguistic predicates used to describe linguistic extremism. Next, the context of the General Conference imbues authority into the speeches, creating more imperative than in other contexts or in other weeks of the year for members. This is the most authoritative platform regularly recognized and used by the Church. Finally, with a rotating leadership and unconventional

leadership selection style compared with most other religious organizations, a study of the Church of Jesus Christ is more likely to reveal biases, personal experiences in the professional world, and a variety of perspectives on the issues of linguistic extremism compared to any other single religious organization.

Preliminary analysis reveals that both male and female leaders who professionally previously worked as attorneys are often the first to address linguistic extremism compared to those from other professions (e.g. professors, or business managers). This alone is notable as lawyers are often those accused of creating tribal conflict and engaging in sophistry without regard for the truth. Often labelled as 'conflict' or 'contention' by these speakers, linguistic extremes are characterized adjectivally by the predicates 'belittle', 'demean', or 'rude'. The strategies for combating linguistic excess include being the one willing to change position, refocus on Christ (a 'WWJD?' rhetorical strategy), and being agreeable over social media or limiting social media use. Alongside these messages there is a continued modification of the 'us v. them' rhetoric to be more socially accepting of the risk of insult for self and others (i.e. being perceived as 'rude' or 'intolerant') while emphasizing the necessity for 'staying strong' in the 'truthful gospel message' that the organization endorses.