

THE WORD OF WISDOM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MORMONISM: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE

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Brigham Young University made headlines in 2012 for a series of controversies that would be, to say the least, unusual on most college campuses: a student-led push for the university to sell caffeinated beverages at student vending locations. Although a staple throughout the United States, caffeinated sodas had long been restricted from sale at BYU due to “lack of demand,” according to university officials.¹ Five years later, however, caffeinated soda was, at last, approved for sale on BYU’s campus. This was part of a larger conversation in which many in the LDS community expressed the belief that caffeine, from its association with coffee and tea, was either forbidden by doctrine or in a nebulous state of permissibility, leading to an official clarification that “the [C]hurch does not prohibit the use of caffeine.”² This controversy ultimately arose

1. Bob Mims, “Holy Brigham Young (University)! Caffeinated Sodas Allowed on Mormon Church School’s Campus,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 21, 2017, <http://www.sltrib.com/news/2017/09/21/reversing-decades-old-policy-byu-sells-caffeinated-drinks-on-campus>.

2. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “OK, Mormons, Drink Up—Coke and Pepsi are OK,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 5, 2012, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=54797595&itype=CMSID>. The day after this pronouncement was made, the Mormon Newsroom revised the statement slightly to clarify that the Word

from Mormons' interpretations of the Word of Wisdom, originally conceived as advice for Joseph Smith's followers to live cleaner, purer, healthier lives. Obeying what later became section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants has evolved into a key identifying cultural marker for Latter-day Saints.

While refraining from coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful drugs is widely acknowledged to be a highly visible component of Mormon religious practices, there has been little previous research conducted regarding patterns of Word of Wisdom adherence within Mormon communities. Using original data collected in the fall of 2016 by the Next Mormons Survey (NMS), we present a comprehensive overview of rates of Word of Wisdom adherence among American Mormons as well as the degree to which contemporary Mormons view the Word of Wisdom as central to their religious identity.

Historical Development in Word of Wisdom Interpretation

Originally received in February of 1833, the Word of Wisdom is believed by the LDS Church to be a revelation to Joseph Smith regarding the appropriate dietary regulations for pure, healthy living.³ The text forbade the consumption of tobacco, hot drinks (which have been generally interpreted to mean coffee and tea based on Joseph Smith's clarifications "five months after he gave the revelation"), and some forms of alcohol.⁴ It also cautioned against the overconsumption of meat while advocating for the use of "wholesome herbs," fruit, and grains (D&C 89:1–14). However, scholarship on early practices indicates that Mormons' observance of

of Wisdom "does not mention the use of caffeine." See Mormon Newsroom, "Mormonism in the News: Getting It Right," Aug. 29, 2012, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormonism-news--getting-it-right-august-29>.

3. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

4. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 274.

the Word of Wisdom in the nineteenth century was far less of a focal point than it later became, despite the Word of Wisdom's later being declared a firm commandment by President Lorenzo Snow on May 5, 1898, following the precedent set by "a statement from Brigham Young that the Word of Wisdom was a commandment of God."⁵ Early Mormons eschewed drunkenness, for example, but did not entirely abstain from alcohol. Wine was served at Mormon weddings in the 1830s, at religious gatherings in which the Saints practiced speaking in tongues, and as part of the sacrament in church meetings.⁶ Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has chronicled the fact that "a jug seems to have been essential equipment" at Winter Quarters in the 1840s.⁷ When he was president of the Church, Brigham Young himself did not always adhere to the Word of Wisdom's counsel. He maintained his habit of chewing tobacco until 1848, when he decided to quit the habit, and abstained successfully until 1857, when a painful toothache drove him to seek pain relief in chewing once again. He finally kicked the habit for good in 1860. In a sermon in March of that year, though, Young did not demand total abstinence from other brethren: he advised any men with a tobacco habit merely to "be modest about it," not spitting in public or taking out "a whole plug of tobacco in meeting before the eyes of the congregation." Rather, they were to go outside and avoid sullyng the parlors of Zion. "If you

5. Ibid. It should be noted that there is evidence disputing whether Brigham Young declared the Word of Wisdom to be a commandment. See Robert J. McCue, "Did the Word of Wisdom Become a Commandment in 1851?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981): 66–77.

6. Robert C. Fuller, *Religion and Wine: A Cultural History of Wine Drinking in the United States* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 61–66.

7. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 165.

must use tobacco, put a small portion in your mouth when no person sees you,” he advised.⁸

Two generations later, Mormon leaders’ understanding of the Word of Wisdom had tightened considerably. In fact, interpretations over how and to what extent the provision should be interpreted and adhered to shifted with each new influx of Church leaders and General Authorities, with little resembling the uniformity of the modern interpretation until the early twentieth century.⁹

The turning point came with the broader national movement for Prohibition, which the LDS Church joined only after a near-decade of internal controversy during the 1910s. In 1921, adherence to the Word of Wisdom officially became a requirement for admission to the temple as part of a general transition into the new realities of Prohibition. Shortly after Prohibition was enacted, Church leaders strove to create similar official sanctions against tobacco use, linking it to “swearers, crooks of all kinds, ‘bums’ and prostitutes.”¹⁰

After Prohibition ended—which Utah’s vote ironically ensured by ratifying the Twenty-First Amendment—the LDS Church strove to maintain the same social proscriptions against alcohol and tobacco and expand them to exclude other substances. Specifically, Frederick

8. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 312. For a contrasting account regarding early Mormon observance of the Word of Wisdom, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, “The Word of Wisdom in Its First Decade,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 1 (2012): 131–200. Drawing on primary documents and other contemporary accounts, Hoskisson argues that strict observance of the Word of Wisdom was expected of members during the Kirtland period but then relaxed after the Saints relocated to Nauvoo.

9. Thomas G. Alexander, “The Word of Wisdom: From Principle to Requirement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981): 78–88.

10. See Jed Woodworth, “The Word of Wisdom (D&C 89),” *Revelations in Context, Church History*, June 11, 2013, <https://history.lds.org/article/doctrine-and-covenants-word-of-wisdom?lang=eng>, accessed April 21, 2017, and “Tobacco and Religion,” *Improvement Era* 26, no. 5 (1923): 472–73.

Pack of the University of Utah wrote in 1917 that Mormons should not drink Coca-Cola because “its physiological effect is very much the same as that of tea or coffee,” a position that earned support from Church officials in the 1920s.¹¹

Nearly a century later, the current official interpretation of the Word of Wisdom is found in the Church’s handbook of instruction:

The only official interpretation of “hot drinks” (D&C 89:9) in the Word of Wisdom is the statement made by early Church leaders that the term “hot drinks” means tea and coffee. Members should not use any substance that contains illegal drugs. Nor should members use harmful or habit-forming substances except under the care of a competent physician.¹²

The above policy reflects some of the confusion that members may have regarding the Word of Wisdom, including questions about the status of caffeinated drinks and certain drugs, such as marijuana, which some could interpret as a “wholesome herb.” And the handbook guidelines have historically said nothing about decaffeinated coffee, prompting the First Presidency to respond in the late 1960s and early 1970s to a series of letters from local leaders who had inquired about Sanka, the main brand of decaffeinated coffee at that time. “The use of a beverage from which the deleterious ingredients have been removed would not be considered breaking the Word of Wisdom,” the First Presidency instructed a Provo stake president in 1969. “This would include Sanka coffee, and a temple recommend should not be denied to those drinking Sanka coffee.”¹³ Other letters offered the same advice, sometimes identically worded.

11. Frederick J. Pack, “Should Latter-Day Saints Drink Coca-Cola?” *Improvement Era* 21, no. 5 (1918): 432–35.

12. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 21.3.11, § Word of Wisdom, <https://www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/selected-church-policies/21.3?lang=eng&r=1#213>.

13. LDS First Presidency, “Letter to President A. Harold Goodman of the BYU Fifth Stake,” Feb. 12, 1969. Copy available for download at <http://religionnews>.

Within the past few years, the future of the observance of aspects of the Word of Wisdom has become less clear. Commentators have recently claimed that the growth of the LDS Church into a more global organization, as well as shifting domestic perspectives, might create a change in how the Word of Wisdom is observed and interpreted going forward. There is a growing list of inconsistencies between current interpretations of the Word of Wisdom and prevailing cultural norms in many countries, which often puts LDS missionaries in “awkward dilemmas.” These include contradictory views regarding the use of alcohol in cooking certain dishes, customary drinking of tea, and the consumption of caffeinated sodas in regions where it is the most accessible liquid that is safe to drink.¹⁴

Whether as a result of these pressures or not, the LDS Church has issued several statements in recent years clarifying the Church’s position on various implicit or assumed proscriptions in the Word of Wisdom. In addition to the 2012 clarification from Church leaders that caffeinated sodas are not proscribed by the Word of Wisdom, the Mormon Newsroom also issued two statements in 2016 regarding the use of medical marijuana.¹⁵ The general guidance has been that medical marijuana is

com/2017/09/25/hello-most-mormons-actually-do-drink-caffeinated-soda/. A nearly identical letter was sent to Curt Bench of Salt Lake City on October 17, 1966, from Claire Middlemiss, secretary to LDS President David O. McKay. Middlemiss states that President McKay had directed her to provide Bench with the same answer that the Church had provided to others who inquired about decaffeinated coffee: “that the drinking of Sanka is not in violation of the Word of Wisdom.” The letter to Bench goes further in saying that “Sanka, being 97 percent caffeine [*sic*] free, is not considered harmful, and there is no objection to anyone’s using it as a warm drink.” Copy in Curt Bench’s possession.

14. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Will the Word of Wisdom Ever Change?,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Mar. 26, 2017, <http://local.sltrib.com/online/WoW>.

15. Robert Gehrke, “Mormon Church Elaborates on Reasons for Opposing Medical Marijuana Bill,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 16, 2016, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=3532772&itype=CMSID>.

acceptable provided that it is used legally and by prescription, creating a shift in how many observers have interpreted what falls under the purview of “wholesome herbs.” The quickly shifting legal status of marijuana has thus led to a perceived instability in whether marijuana and other grey-area substances are entirely forbidden by the Word of Wisdom.

What seems clear is that modern-day interpretations of the Word of Wisdom as a whole emerged more out of the broader social and political controversies of the early 1920s than the original understandings and practices regarding Joseph Smith’s teachings and have become a focal cultural marker for members of the religion and outsiders alike.

Previous Research on Word of Wisdom Observance

In contrast to the growing body of historical analyses of the Word of Wisdom, relatively little analysis exists regarding the modern behavior of Mormons and their adherence to the Word of Wisdom. Some scholars have looked at narrow subsections of the Word of Wisdom’s prohibitions and their influences on individuals’ health and lifestyles, particularly college-aged Mormons’ general levels of abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, as well as some other dietary practices.

An analysis of college-aged Latter-day Saints conducted by Rick Jorgensen in 2006, for instance, observed the behavior of a sample of BYU and Utah Valley University students, including both prescriptive and proscriptive aspects of the Word of Wisdom.¹⁶ The study found a widespread consensus regarding what fell under “strong drink,” such as alcohol, tea, and coffee, but found a more even divide regarding whether energy drinks and nonalcoholic beer qualified as strong drinks; only a minority found soft drinks to fall under this category. The sample

16. Rick B. Jorgensen, “Not by Commandment or Constraint: The Relationship Between the Dietary Behaviors of College-aged Latter-day Saints and Their Interpretation of the Word of Wisdom” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2008), <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2699&context=etd>.

population also identified hot drinks in keeping with the definitions previously established. The study also asked college-aged Mormons about what fell under the prescriptive purview of “wholesome herbs” and found a sharp divide regarding whether to include dietary supplements, while 6 percent interpreted substances such as marijuana and opium to be wholesome herbs. The vast majority of respondents (87 percent) interpreted illegal drugs to be prohibited by the Word of Wisdom, with their interpretation of illegal drugs and the Word of Wisdom correlating strongly with their own history of usage.

Scholars have also looked at Mormons’ relationship with alcohol as subsets of larger data on drinking and religion. In a study published in 2007, Michalak et al. found that Mormons have the highest rate of abstention and ex-drinkers within a religion, with Mormons being only 13 percent likely to consume alcohol, lower than any other religious group included in the study.¹⁷ At the same time, Mormons also had a three-to-two ratio of heavy drinkers compared to moderate drinkers, second only to the Church of God and Baptists, implicating habits of binge-drinking or alcoholism among Mormons who do drink. The authors are careful to note that when the rate of heavy drinkers among all Mormons (3.2 percent) is compared against the national average (5.2 percent), Mormons still have lower levels of alcohol consumption across the board. Michalak’s team also theorized that higher levels of religiosity lead to higher rates of abstention for individuals.

Michalak’s findings about religiosity and abstention also echo the 2004 analysis by Heaton, Bahr, and Jacobson, who found that use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs was negatively correlated with being LDS.¹⁸ Among

17. Laurence Michalak, Karen Trocki, and Jason Bond, “Religion and Alcohol in the U.S. National Alcohol Survey: How Important Is Religion for Abstention and Drinking?” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 87, no. 2–3 (2007): 268–80.

18. Tim B. Heaton, Stephen J. Bahr, and Cardell K. Jacobson, *A Statistical Profile of Mormons: Health, Wealth, and Social Life*, Mellen Studies in Sociology, vol. 43 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

high school seniors nationally, for example, marijuana use was 18 percent versus 8 percent of LDS high school seniors. Among those with weekly church attendance, the differences were even greater, with religiously-active LDS teens far less likely than other teens to use alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, or illegal drugs. Related to this research are the findings of three BYU professors that LDS high school seniors have significantly lower rates of having drunk alcohol, used marijuana, or smoked cigarettes than high school seniors nationally.¹⁹

Scholars have also drawn parallels between Word of Wisdom observance and quantifiable health benefits. Ray Merrill, Gordon Lindsay, and Joseph Lyon's 1999 study compared tobacco-related cancer rates in Utah to the national averages, finding that Utah bears a significantly lower level of such cancers than the rest of the United States. The authors attribute this discrepancy to the influence of the LDS Church and the Word of Wisdom. Furthermore, research published by Monika Sandberg in 2007, at the time a graduate student at BYU, showed that LDS females are less likely to turn to "substance" use in response to "negative emotion" than non-LDS females, with "intrinsic religiosity" functioning as a better predictor for women's use of substances than other religiosity scales.²⁰

Observance of the Word of Wisdom: A Fresh Look

As shown, existing analyses of Word of Wisdom adherence among contemporary American Mormons are somewhat spotty. Our current objective is to present, for the first time, a nationally-representative overview of self-reported observance of the Word of Wisdom by self-

19. Bruce A. Chadwick, Brent L. Top, and Richard J. McClendon, *Shield of Faith: The Power of Religion in the Lives of LDS Youth and Young Adults* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, in cooperation with Deseret Book Company, 2010).

20. Monika Sandberg, "Eating and Substance Use: A Comparison of Latter-day Saint and Non-Latter-day Saint College Females" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2007), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/1394>.

identified Mormons and former Mormons in the United States.²¹ Our data comes from the 2016 Next Mormons Survey (NMS) administered by Jana Riess and Benjamin Knoll. This is an online survey collected by the survey firm Qualtrics using a panel-matching technique to identify and survey populations of interest in the United States. In our case, they sampled 1,156 self-identified Mormons and 540 former Mormons in the US. The survey was in the field from September 8 through November 1, 2016 and is representative of American Mormons and former Mormons nationally. (More information about the NMS can be found in the appendix at the end of the article.) To our knowledge, the NMS is the most extensive collection of Mormon attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors collected to date by independent or academic researchers.

To measure Word of Wisdom observance rates specifically, respondents were asked, “Have you ever consumed any of the following substances at any time in the last six months?” Our survey measured current and former LDS members’ usage of caffeinated sodas and/or energy drinks, non-herbal tea, alcoholic beverages, coffee, decaffeinated coffee, marijuana, tobacco, psychedelic substances, other illegal drugs (“heroin, cocaine, etc.”), and Postum (a coffee substitute). As we might expect, usage rates among current and former Mormons differ significantly and therefore will be analyzed separately.

21. The LDS Church defines its members and former members by their status on official membership registration rolls, regardless of their level of activity and social or emotional attachment to the faith. In contrast, public opinion researchers of social topics such as religion must rely on survey respondents to describe their own demographic characteristics and are not usually able to independently verify the accuracy of these self-reported responses. In our case, we allowed respondents to self-select into the survey based on the nature of their identification with Mormonism. This means that “current Mormons” and “former Mormons” in our survey are those who *say* they are Mormons (or once were) regardless of their current status on the LDS Church’s membership rolls.

Current Members: Overall Word of Wisdom Observance Rates

The most straightforward way we can examine patterns of Word of Wisdom adherence is by analyzing how many members are “squeaky clean” observers of the Word of Wisdom. In other words, how many Mormons reported that they have not consumed non-herbal tea, alcohol, coffee, tobacco, marijuana, psychedelics, or other illegal substances (including heroin and cocaine) in the last six months? Our survey results reveal that 45 percent of self-identified Mormons in the US said “no” to each of these substances.²² Another 22 percent said “yes” to only one of them and 15 percent said “yes” to two. The rest (about 17 percent) said “yes” to three or more. It seems that fewer than half of American Mormons faithfully observe a literal prevailing interpretation of the Word of Wisdom by avoiding each of the substances most commonly understood to be prohibited.

When examining only Mormons who describe themselves as “very active” (regardless of frequency of church attendance) 60.5 percent of survey respondents reported that they avoided each of the substances prohibited by the Word of Wisdom. This decreases to 30.4 percent of those who say that they are “somewhat active” and 15.9 percent of those who say they are “not very active” or “not at all” active. Slightly more than half (52.9 percent) who attend church every week say that they avoid each of the substances listed above compared to 26.2 percent of those who attend once or a few times a month and 13.9 percent of those who attend seldom or never. Most interestingly, only 61.8 percent of current temple recommend holders say that they have not consumed

22. We did not include the consumption of caffeinated soda/energy drinks in this part of the analysis given that it has generally been accepted as not violating the Word of Wisdom in recent years by Mormon leaders, as described previously. If caffeinated soda/energy drinks are included, this drops to 18 percent of self-identified Mormons who report having abstained from each of these substances in the last six months.

any of the substances forbidden by the Word of Wisdom in the last six months. This is especially noteworthy because Mormons are required to report to an ecclesiastical leader that they are faithful keepers of the Word of Wisdom in order to qualify for a temple recommend. This suggests that either a high number of Mormons are dishonest in the recommend interview process or that they are interpreting the Word of Wisdom with more nuance than one might expect by a large minority of active, temple recommend–holding Mormons.

There are also significant trends and patterns regarding specific substances prohibited by the Word of Wisdom. Our survey data shows that about two-thirds of current Mormons report having consumed caffeinated soda in the last six months (62.2 percent), while about a third report consuming coffee (35.2 percent). Nearly a quarter of current members report consuming alcohol (24.9 percent) or non-herbal tea (24.7 percent). Our findings on alcohol are consistent with the data recorded in the General Social Survey as analyzed by Heaton et al., who found that 27 percent of LDS respondents reported that they drink alcoholic beverages, as opposed to 71 percent nationally.²³ Nearly 17 percent of Mormon respondents in the NMS smoked or chewed tobacco, which is slightly higher than the GSS result of 13 percent. About one in ten (9.7 percent) consumed marijuana. Fewer than one in twenty Mormons report ingesting psychedelics (3.2 percent), while slightly more have used other illegal drugs such as cocaine or heroin (5.1 percent).

Interestingly, coffee alternatives such as decaffeinated (13.9 percent) or Postum (3.6 percent) have lower rates than regular coffee (35.2 percent). This is surprising because Postum has been deemed acceptable by LDS leaders.²⁴ The significantly higher rates of Mormons consuming fully

23. See Heaton, Bahr, and Jacobson, *Statistical Profile of Mormons*.

24. LDS First Presidency, "Letter to President A. Harold Goodman of the BYU Fifth Stake," Feb. 12, 1969. Copy available for download at <http://religionnews.com/2017/09/25/hello-most-mormons-actually-do-drink-caffeinated-soda/>.

caffeinated coffee over these more acceptable alternatives is suggestive of the survey's larger finding that a number of current members have recently used substances explicitly prohibited by the Word of Wisdom as interpreted by modern LDS leaders.

Patterns in Word of Wisdom Observance

One obvious explanation for the third of Mormons who report having had a cup of coffee in the last six months or for the quarter who have consumed alcohol or tea might focus on activity rates. After all, not every Mormon is active or holds a current temple recommend, the latter of which requires that individuals affirm that they “keep the Word of Wisdom” in the temple recommend interview process (although the interviewer does not at that time spell out what adherence would mean). While we reported earlier the proportion of active, church-going Mormons who report full and strict adherence to the Word of Wisdom, Table 1 shows the proportion (in percentages) of self-identified Mormons in the NMS who report consuming various individual Word of Wisdom substances by their self-reported level of activity, their temple recommend status, and how often they attend church. Very active or somewhat active Mormons comprised 87 percent of the self-identified Mormons in the survey, so this data can be considered generally representative of self-identified American Mormons as a whole. It is clear in Table 1 that all three measures showed that higher levels of religiosity correlate with higher levels of Word of Wisdom adherence.

Table 1: Word of Wisdom Adherence and Religious Activity

	Caffeinated Sodas / Energy Drinks	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Decaffeinated Coffee/Sanka	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs	Postum
“Very active”	58.1	18.8	12.9	21	12.5	7	11.4	2.9	3.5	5.4
“Some-what active”	62.2	29.1	34.6	47.1	14.5	11.6	22.4	3.8	7.1	1.4
“Not too active”	76	37	42.5	64.9	24.4	17.1	24.1	2.2	8.2	1
“Not at all active”	82	49.3	59	62	10.3	14.6	27.5	5.2	5.2	1.8
Current TR holder	57.8	18.3	10.9	18.4	10.2	5.4	10.1	2.9	3.2	4.2
Not Current TR holder	67.5	29.4	37.3	50.1	17.4	15.1	25.9	4.3	7	3

	Caffeinated Sodas / Energy Drinks	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Decaffeinated Coffee/Sanka	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs	Postum
Convert Mormon	54.7	29.5	29.1	39.9	18.3	13.1	19.8	4.9	7.2	5.7
Born in the Church	67	21.7	22.3	32.2	11.1	7.6	15	2.2	3.7	2.3
Attend church at least once per week	57.7	20.8	17.5	27.4	14.3	7.4	12.5	2.7	3.1	4.3
Attend church once or twice per month	67.5	24.5	43.6	50.3	10	10.2	28.6	5.7	8	0.8
Attend church rarely or never	80	43.5	47.2	51.4	14.9	20.3	29.5	4.1	8.4	2.3

The self-reported “activity” measure tends to show the widest range of usage rates for each substance. In general, the data show that as self-

reported activity decreases, the rate of usage increases. This trend is particularly strong regarding the explicitly-forbidden substances found in the Word of Wisdom. In a comparison of members who self-identify as “very active” and those who said they were “not at all active,” there is a 46 percent increase in the number of members who have consumed alcohol in the past six months, a 40.9 percent increase in coffee consumption rates, and a 30 percent increase in drinking non-herbal tea.

Despite the lower rates of consumption among more active members, the fact that between ten and twenty percent of “very active” members report consuming coffee, tea, tobacco, or alcohol signals that there is a disconnect between prevailing interpretation of the Word of Wisdom and day-to-day practices of American Mormons. This disconnect becomes even more prevalent among members who are “somewhat active,” wherein almost half reported drinking coffee within the last six months, over a third drinking alcohol, and almost a quarter consuming tobacco in some form. All told, at least a substantial minority of “active” Mormons have broken their Word of Wisdom observance within the last six months. While the Word of Wisdom may be central to popular concepts of Mormon social identity, it appears to be far less central to members’ day-to-day lives.

Another cultural marker of Mormon orthodoxy and orthopraxy is whether the member holds a current temple recommend. In order for members to obtain a temple recommend, they must, among other things, declare their faithful observance of the Word of Wisdom. As such, temple recommend holders should (theoretically) have nonexistent rates of usage of these prohibited substances. Our survey results show that most temple recommend holders are indeed keeping the Word of Wisdom, but not all; between ten and twenty percent of temple recommend holders report that they consumed tea, coffee, alcohol, or tobacco in the last six months. This would suggest a number of possible interpretations. It is possible, for example, that a minority of temple recommend holders are not fully truthful in recommend interviews. Alternatively, these recom-

mend holders might consider themselves to be “keeping the Word of Wisdom” so long as they avoid these substances most of the time and do not consider an occasional indiscretion a violation of the “spirit” of the Word of Wisdom. It is also possible that these active, temple recommend–holding members simply interpret the Word of Wisdom more loosely or metaphorically than official Church guidance would mandate.

Our study also noted a difference between converts and lifelong Church members. Except for caffeinated beverages, converts reported higher rates of usage than members born into the Church by a margin of roughly 7–10 percent across each category. This distinction suggests that converted members may have greater difficulty abstaining from prohibited substances than members who were born into the Mormon culture and grew up with less exposure to alcohol, coffee, tobacco, and other drugs. It may also imply that early exposure and socialization is particularly influential in later observance of doctrinal practices like the Word of Wisdom.

Current members’ frequency of religious service attendance shows a similar general trend regarding Word of Wisdom observance. With most of the explicit Word of Wisdom prohibitions (non-herbal tea, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco), there is a significant difference between members who attend services weekly or more and those who attend once or twice a month. Except for tea, the differences in consumption of these main substances between weekly attendees and those who attend once or twice a month ranges from 16 to 23 percent. These larger shifts in usage drop off when comparing members who attend once or twice a month and those who attend a few times a year or less, with margins shrinking to 3.6 percent, 11 percent, and 0.9 percent for alcohol, coffee, and tobacco. In contrast, the consumption rate of non-herbal tea spiked between these two groups, with an increase of 19.1 percent. Nonetheless, it appears that about one in five regularly-attending Mormons in the United States have recently consumed coffee, tea, or alcohol.

A notable exception to this pattern is consumption rates of Postum, which advertises itself as “an alternative choice for those with religious dietary restrictions such as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Seventh-day Adventists.”²⁵ Postum has been viewed for generations as a safe, caffeine-free alternative to coffee for observant Mormons. Overall, the numbers were small for Postum consumption, with only 3.6 percent of respondents saying they had consumed it. In both the “activity” and temple recommend status measures, Postum usage increased among members with higher activity or with a temple recommend. The increase indicates that very active members may also subscribe to a letter-of-the-law reading of the Word of Wisdom.

Table 2: Word of Wisdom Adherence and Demographics

	Caffeinated Beverages	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Decaffeinated Coffee/Sanka	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs	Postum
Millennial	57.6	26.7	28.9	39.3	18.2	17.3	22.7	6.7	7.2	3.4
Generation X	65.3	23.4	29.8	40.4	14.5	6.9	17.7	2.2	6.7	3.7

25. Brandon Judd, “5 healthy alternatives to coffee: Postum back on the shelves,” *Deseret News*, Jan. 10, 2013, <https://www.deseretnews.com/top/1236/2/Pero-5-healthy-alternatives-to-coffee-Postum-back-on-the-shelves.html>.

	Caffeinated Beverages	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Decaffeinated Coffee/Sanka	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs	Postum
Baby Boomers/ Silents	64.1	23.8	14.5	24.1	8.1	4.1	9.0	0.3	0.6	3.8
Male	59.9	26.2	29.2	39	18.2	13.5	22.1	5.4	7.4	3.7
Female	64.3	23.5	21.2	31.8	10.1	6.4	12.2	1.3	2.9	3.5
White	64.4	24.8	24.1	34.1	13.4	9.2	17.3	3.3	4.7	3.5
Nonwhite	46.9	24	30.5	42.6	17.4	13.6	14	3.1	7.5	4
Income less than \$50,000	31.9	26.1	24.2	36.6	12.1	12.2	21.8	4.3	5.6	3.9
Income \$50,000- \$100,000	62	25.8	23.9	33.9	18.3	7	11.3	1.3	4.1	3.1
Income more than \$100,000	57.7	18.2	29.7	33.8	9.33	8.3	14.5	4.7	5.4	3.9
Less than college degree	62.9	27.7	26.5	36.7	135	11.5	20	3.6	5.8	3

	Caffeinated Beverages	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Decaffeinated Coffee/Sanka	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs	Postum
College degree	60.2	16	20.3	30.9	14.7	5.5	10.3	2	1.2	1.6
Post-graduate degree	62	24.9	24.9	34.9	14.7	7.7	12.32	3.7	8.3	10.3
Lives in Utah	71.6	20	12.2	22.1	6.3	5.5	9.1	0.9	2.9	3.1
Does not live in Utah	58.5	26.6	30	40.4	16.9	11.4	19.4	4.2	5.9	3.8
Democrat and leaners	59.5	31.3	36	52.6	18.2	14.8	23	5.7	6.5	6
Independent	60.77	24.4	27.8	30.7	9.2	14.1	17.8	6.1	6.7	2.6
Republican and leaners	64	21.1	18.2	26.3	12.4	60	13.2	1.3	3.9	2.4

Table 2 shows us that notable trends also exist among various demographic subgroups of Mormons when it comes to Word of Wisdom observance. In particular, a Mormon's level of education and whether or not the member lives in Utah is associated with a wider

range of Word of Wisdom adherence. Mormons with a college-level education report lower rates of usage than either their less-educated or more-educated counterparts. Current members with less than a college education and those with post-graduate education had similar, and higher, rates of usage than did members who identified as college graduates. Except for decaffeinated coffee, this pattern was evident for each of the Word of Wisdom substances. This pattern suggests that the unique experiences that members attain in their undergraduate careers may encourage better patterns of observance, or perhaps a particular series of life events, such as going from a mission into an undergraduate degree program directly into the workforce, encourages more strict patterns of observance.

Table 2 shows that geography also makes a difference. Across the board, Utah Mormons are less likely than non-Utah Mormons to have consumed any of the substances in question except caffeinated sodas, which is actually 13 percent higher among Utah Mormons than non-Utah Mormons.²⁶ Utah is clearly unique when it comes to the LDS Church, given that the Church's headquarters is located there and that it has by far the largest concentration of Mormons of any US state. It may be that the greater density of Mormons, and thus a greater concentration of religious homogeneity, provides a broader base for mutual support and accountability to maintain adherence to the Word of Wisdom. As previous research has demonstrated, social environment and relational networks can be very important factors influencing a person's religious behavior, even if the individual's own belief system is the most important factor.²⁷

26. These relationships remain even after statistically controlling for level of church attendance.

27. Carol Madsen Cornwall, "The Determinants of Religious Behavior: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Test," in *Latter-Day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members*, edited by James T. Duke (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 345–72.

Further Patterns in Word of Wisdom Adherence

Table 3 reports the percentage of Mormons who reported consuming a particular Word of Wisdom substance in the last six months that also reported consuming another particular substance in the same time period. The table should be interpreted as follows: the numbers in each cell indicate the proportion of people who said “yes” to the substance in the column who also reported saying “yes” to the substance in the row. For example, the second column of the third row shows us that 28.8 percent of those who said yes to caffeinated sodas also said yes to non-herbal tea.

Table 3: Rates of Joint Consumption of Word of Wisdom Prohibitions

% who say yes to COLUMN who also say yes to ROW.	Caffeinated Beverages	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs
Caffeinated beverage		72.4	72.6	70.3	59.8	72.8	50.0	64.4
Non-herbal tea	28.8		41.7	41.4	44.2	39.0	62.2	51.7
Alcohol	29.1	42.0		52.8	60.2	59.5	60.5	62.7
Coffee	39.8	58.9	74.7		56.3	72.3	67.6	74.1

% who say yes to COLUMN who also say yes to ROW.	Caffeinated Beverages	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs
Marijuana	9.3	17.5	23.5	15.5		31.8	60.5	53.4
Tobacco	19.7	26.6	40.3	34.6	54.9		64.9	67.8
Psychedelics	2.6	8.0	8.0	6.1	20.4	12.3		30.5
Other illegal substances	5.3	10.5	12.8	10.6	27.7	20.5	47.4	

We can see from Table 3 some additional distinct patterns in Word of Wisdom adherence. In general, non-adherents tend to split into two primary groups: those who consume legal substances and those who consume illegal substances. In other words, Mormons who report consuming one legal Word of Wisdom substance were more likely to also consume other legal substances and those who said they had consumed one *illegal* Word of Wisdom substance were more likely to also partake of other illegal substances.

Specifically, of the members who said they consumed coffee in the last six months, a little over half (52.8 percent) reported drinking alcohol, about two-fifths (41.4 percent) said they drank non-herbal tea, and about a third (34.6 percent) said that they smoked or chewed tobacco. Of those who drank alcohol, three-quarters (74.7 percent) reported drinking coffee, about 40 percent consumed either tea or tobacco, and roughly a quarter (23.5 percent) used marijuana. Of the various legal substances,

it seems that those who drank coffee and tea were least likely to report consuming the other substances, followed by alcohol and then tobacco.

In contrast, members who consumed marijuana, psychedelics, or other illegal drugs showed a higher rate of using other prohibited substances. Among marijuana users, about 20 percent also used psychedelics and 28 percent used other illegal drugs. The small number of Mormons who used psychedelics had higher rates of consuming marijuana and other illegal drugs—about 61 percent and 47 percent, respectively. Those who used other illegal drugs followed the psychedelics users' trend, with about 53 percent using marijuana and 31 percent consuming psychedelics. These patterns provide context to the possible thought processes of Mormons who consume these substances, who either defer to legal substances or prefer illegal substances but are less likely to consume products from both groupings.

We can also infer patterns of preferred substances among Word of Wisdom non-adherents. In general, coffee consumption, although found in higher rates among drinkers and smokers, is less indicative of using alcohol and tobacco, while the inverse is true for alcohol and tobacco. The same is true for the “illegal substances” grouping. Marijuana usage alone is comparatively less likely to predict members' usage of other substances, while the presence of psychedelics and other illegal drugs tends to correlate with marijuana usage. In other words, if members violate the Word of Wisdom but stay within the “legal” category, our data indicates that coffee and tea are generally more common than alcohol or tobacco. If members cross into illegal usage, though, marijuana becomes the more “acceptable” option.

That non-adherence tends to sort into these two key categories—legal vs. illegal consumption—suggests an additional important point. When Mormons chose to violate the Word of Wisdom, it does not seem to become an “all or nothing” affair. The majority of those who consumed coffee, tea, or alcohol did *not* also report consuming marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or psychedelics. It would not be fair, then, to assume

that coffee, tea, or alcohol function as gateway drugs to crack and heroin for Mormons, just as they do not function in that way for the majority of the American population.

Attitudes Toward the Word of Wisdom Observance

So far, we have detailed patterns of Word of Wisdom observance rates among American Mormons, but what do Mormons *think* about the Word of Wisdom and how it relates to their religious identity? The NMS presented respondents with a variety of statements representing important “cultural markers” of Mormons in American culture and asked them to indicate “how important is each of the following for being a good Mormon?” When it comes to “not drinking coffee and tea,” 37.5 percent of American Mormons said that it is “essential” to being a good Mormon. Another 31.6 percent said that it is “important but not essential,” 18.1 percent said it is “not too important” and the remaining 12.8 percent said it is “not at all important.” In other words, less than half of American Mormons view the prohibition against coffee and tea as an indispensable component of Mormon identity and nearly a third said that it is of low importance.

In contrast, attitudes toward alcohol and Mormon identity are much stronger. When it comes to “not drinking alcoholic beverages,” 57.2 percent said that this is “essential” to being a good Mormon, with another quarter (25.3 percent) saying that it is “important but not essential,” and the remaining 17.5 percent opining that it is either “not too important” or “not at all important.” Just as consumption rates differ among Mormons between coffee and alcohol, so do attitudes about the centrality of both to Mormon identity. It seems that while many Mormons might shrug their shoulders at a member of their ward indulging in an occasional Starbucks latte, drinking a weekend margarita would be met with much stronger disapproval.

Further interesting patterns are evident in opinions about the centrality of Word of Wisdom observance to Mormon identity. Whether or

not a Mormon views Word of Wisdom observance as “essential” or not does not much depend on their personal income, gender, level of education, or convert status. However, a number of other things *do* matter.

Table 4: Patterns of Word of Wisdom Adherence and Mormon Identity

	% who say not drinking coffee/tea is “essential” to being a good Mormon	% who say not drinking alcohol is “essential” to being a good Mormon
Millennial	31.2	46.0
Generation X	31.7	52.2
Boomer/Silent	51.8	76.3
Live inside Utah	49.2	70.0
Live outside Utah	32.9	52.1
Attend church at least once per week	42.9	63.4

	% who say not drinking coffee/tea is "essential" to being a good Mormon	% who say not drinking alcohol is "essential" to being a good Mormon
Attend church less than once per week	22.4	39.7
Democrat and leaners	25.5	40.2
Independent	32.3	59.3
Republican and leaners	45.2	66.2
White	39.3	60.1
Non-white	25.0	37.1
Consumed coffee in last six months	16.9	40.4
Did not consume coffee in last six months	48.7	66.3

	% who say not drinking coffee/tea is "essential" to being a good Mormon	% who say not drinking alcohol is "essential" to being a good Mormon
Consumed alcohol in the last six months	18.8	27.2
Did not consume alcohol in the last six months	43.7	67.1

Table 4 shows us that younger Mormons are much less likely to define Mormon identity by Word of Wisdom observance than are older Mormons. Less than half of Millennials view avoiding alcohol as essential to Mormon identity, and less than a third think the same about coffee/tea, compared to three-quarters and half of the Boomer/Silent generation, respectively. Mormons who live inside Utah are about 20 percent more likely to view Word of Wisdom observance as essential compared to non-Utah Mormons. As we might expect, levels of church attendance also make a difference, with more active Mormons viewing the Word of Wisdom as more essential. As with observance rates, we again see a partisan difference. Mormon Democrats are about 20 percent less likely than Mormon Republicans to view Word of Wisdom observance as essential to Mormon identity. We also see a similar pattern for non-white Mormons compared to white Mormons. In sum, those most likely to link Word of Wisdom

observance to Mormon identity are older, religiously active, politically conservative, white, Utah Mormons.

It is noteworthy that among Mormons who adhere to the Word of Wisdom's prohibition on coffee, less than half (49 percent) consider this abstention to be essential to Mormon identity. Similarly, only two-thirds (67.1 percent) of alcohol abstainers view teetotaling as essential to Mormon identity. Even among Mormons who faithfully adhere to the Word of Wisdom, there seems to be a good deal of leeway in the degree to which they consider coffee, tea, and alcohol consumption as integral to Mormon identity.

It may also be helpful to compare the centrality of Word of Wisdom observance to Mormon identity with other Mormon "cultural markers." This is how many Mormons say that each cultural marker is "essential" to being a good Mormon:

- 85.0 percent – believing Jesus Christ is the Savior
- 64.1 percent – a belief in a literal appearance of God to Joseph Smith
- 63.0 percent – obeying counsel of LDS prophets and General Authorities
- 60.6 percent – working to help the poor and the needy
- 60.4 percent – attending church regularly
- 57.2 percent – not drinking alcohol
- 57.1 percent – believing that the LDS Church is the only true church
- 48.9 percent – having regular Family Home Evening
- 37.5 percent – not drinking coffee/tea
- 28.2 percent – not watching R-rated movies

Apparently, in the minds of contemporary Mormons, there is a strong consensus that a "good Mormon" believes in the divine role of Jesus Christ. A little less than two-thirds of Mormons think that church attendance, helping the poor and needy, and belief in the divine role of Joseph Smith and current leaders are essential to Mormon identity. Abstaining from alcohol is a little less central, roughly equivalent to believing in the

unique status of the LDS Church as the only true church. Only about a third of Mormons today see abstention from coffee, tea, and R-rated movies as central to Mormon identity.

Of course, it is one thing to consider Word of Wisdom adherence in the abstract. What if it were one of your own children who decided not to follow the guidelines of the Word of Wisdom? We asked Mormon respondents to indicate how “saddened” or “disappointed” they would be if their children (or hypothetical future children) engaged in a series of activities that would put them at odds with prevalent Mormon cultural expectations. These include not serving a mission, cohabitating before marriage, leaving the Church, coming out as gay/LGBT, as well as not observing the Word of Wisdom.

Nearly half (44.7 percent) of American Mormons said that they would be “very saddened/disappointed” if their children did not faithfully observe the Word of Wisdom. Another third (36 percent) said they would be slightly saddened/disappointed, and only 19.3 percent said that it would not sadden or disappoint them. (This is nearly identical if limited only to those who have actually had children.) These figures change to 53.8 percent, 34.1 percent, and 12.2 percent, respectively, for those who attend church services at least once a week. For each of these, the strongest predictors are level of church activity and political partisanship. The more frequently someone attends church and the more politically conservative someone is, the more disappointed they would be if their children were not to keep the Word of Wisdom (and vice versa).

It is again helpful to compare how the Word of Wisdom ranks along other violations of Mormon cultural expectations in terms of causing parental disappointment. This is the percentage of Mormons who said that they would be “very” saddened or disappointed if their children:

- 56.5 percent – openly criticized the LDS Church
- 48.4 percent – came out as gay/LGBTQ
- 48.4 percent – became inactive/left the Church
- 46.5 percent – cohabitated with partner outside of marriage
- 44.7 percent – did not faithfully observe the Word of Wisdom
- 43.4 percent – did not raise their own children as Mormon
- 42.0 percent – did not marry in the temple
- 28.9 percent – married someone from a different religion
- 28.1 percent – did not attend seminary/institute
- 24.3 percent – did not serve a full-time mission
- 19.9 percent – did not go to a church school like BYU

It seems that for Mormon parents, having a child who does not keep the Word of Wisdom is roughly as heartbreaking as cohabitating before marriage, going inactive or leaving the Church, identifying as gay/LGBT, or not marrying in the temple. The Word of Wisdom is even more important to Mormon parents, it seems, than going on a mission or attending seminary/institute. At the same time, less than half of Mormons say that they would be very disappointed if their children chose not to keep the Word of Wisdom. This increases to only slightly over half (53.8 percent) among Mormons who attend church faithfully every week.

To summarize: roughly half of Mormons think that following the Word of Wisdom is essential to being a good Mormon (although this varies depending on the specific substance) and roughly the same proportion would be very disappointed if their children did not keep the Word of Wisdom. About another third think the Word of Wisdom is important, but not essential, to Mormon identity and would be only slightly disappointed if their children chose not to keep it. The other 20 percent (or so) do not put much weight on the Word of Wisdom either in the abstract or for their own children. This last group includes around 10–15 percent of all those who attend church services faithfully every week.

Word of Wisdom Adherence among Former Mormons

Table 5: Comparison of Word of Wisdom Adherence among Current and Former Mormons

	Caffeinated Beverages	Non-Herbal Tea	Alcoholic Beverages	Coffee	Decaffeinated Coffee/Sanka	Marijuana	Tobacco	Psychedelics	Other Illegal Drugs	Postum
Current Mormons	62.2	24.7	24.9	35.2	13.9	9.7	16.9	3.2	5.1	3.6
Former Mormons	77.7	40.3	61.7	75.7	16.1	18	35.1	4.3	6.4	0.9

As a final analysis, we can compare Word of Wisdom adherence rates between current Mormons and former Mormons. Table 5 confirms the conventional wisdom that former members of the Church tend to be more likely to consume substances that are implicitly or explicitly prohibited by the Word of Wisdom. While the consumption of decaffeinated coffee is relatively close between the two groups, former members drink alcohol, drink coffee, and consume tobacco at rates more than twice those of current members. In all, only 8 percent of former Mormons continue to live the full Word of Wisdom by reporting that they have not consumed tea, coffee, alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, psychedelics, or other illegal substances in the last six months.

Interestingly, former Mormons drink alcohol at about the same rates as the general US population. Where 62 percent of former Mormons reported drinking alcohol in the last six months, about 56 percent of the US population said that they have had a drink the last month and 70 percent in the last year.²⁸ In contrast, former Mormons report consuming tobacco at a higher rate than the national average. According to the same national study, about 20 percent of Americans have smoked or chewed tobacco recently compared to about a third of former Mormons. Gallup reports that 64 percent of Americans drink a cup of coffee a day, compared to 74 percent of former Mormons who drank coffee in the last six months.²⁹ While this is not an apples-to-apples comparison—and the wider range in time in which former Mormons drank coffee compared to the nationwide sample likely inflates the relative magnitude of the former Mormons’ consumption rate—there is some evidence that former Mormons drink coffee and alcohol at rates comparable to the broader American population.

Conclusion

In *The Book of Mormon* Broadway musical, a memorable sequence depicts a “Spooky Mormon Hell Dream” where Elder Price experiences a nightmare full of evil: Genghis Khan, Jeffrey Dahmer, Adolf Hitler, and . . . dancing cups of coffee. While of course satirical, it conveys something about how Mormonism is perceived in contemporary

28. Jonaki Bose, Sarra L. Hedden, Rachel N. Lipari, Eunice Park-Lee, et al., “Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-FFR1-2015/NSDUH-FFR1-2015/NSDUH-FFR1-2015.htm#alcohol01>.

29. Lydia Saad, “Americans’ Coffee Consumption Is Steady, Few Want to Cut Back,” *Gallup News*, July 29, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/184388/americans-coffee-consumption-steady-few-cut-back.aspx>.

American culture, as well as how Mormons perceive themselves and their practices. Contrary to popular perceptions, though, it seems that coffee consumption is not universally shunned in Mormonism. Moreover, there is a wide variety of practices, opinions, and beliefs when it comes to Mormon observance of the Word of Wisdom, even among active, faithful members.

Some Mormons directly question the internal logic of which substances are prohibited and which are not: “I have reached a point where I feel that the way the Word of Wisdom is interpreted is very arbitrary. I have no idea when they started to interpret the ‘hot drinks’ thing as coffee and tea, but it seems so arbitrary to me. In many respects, drinking coffee is healthier than drinking caffeinated soda. I try to eat healthy and live a generally healthy life, which is important for a spiritual and practical perspective. But I don’t feel that a sort of one-size-fits-all code makes sense.”³⁰ Elsewhere, communities of active Mormons are meeting up surreptitiously at coffee shops. As one group member put it: “I actually tried coffee recently, because my BYU . . . professor, and I trust him, says there’s nothing in it that’s bad for you. There’s a really nice coffee shop down the street, and a lot of BYU students go there. We don’t rat each other out. I know a group that goes [once a week].”³¹

Then there are many Mormons who reflect traditional interpretations of the Word of Wisdom: “The way I think about the Word of Wisdom is that it’s really about us obeying a law that we feel God has given to us through a prophet, because it’s a show of our love for God and our obedience. There are certain things we’re asked to do in the Word of Wisdom that maybe don’t seem that important. Is drinking coffee going to keep you out of heaven? No. It’s going to keep you out of the temple,

30. Penny, 25, telephone interview with one of the authors, July 14, 2017.

31. K.C., 19, telephone interview with one of the authors, Feb. 27, 2017.

but not heaven.³² Those spiritual reasons are paramount.”³³ Others are like Elaine, who, after years of struggling with bipolar disorder, credits her successful managing of her mental illness, in part, to faithful observance of the Word of Wisdom: “I think it has probably saved my life from addiction. I have such an addictive personality, and with my mental illness history, there are so many times that I have looked at someone drinking a glass of wine and thought, ‘Holy moly, if I didn’t have the Word of Wisdom that would be me, and it would be a huge problem. I would not be able to stop.’”³⁴

The survey results we present here shed much additional light on how the Word of Wisdom is understood and practiced in contemporary American Mormonism. These results are, to our knowledge, the most comprehensive and representative analysis of Word of Wisdom observance of contemporary Mormons and former Mormons in the United States conducted by independent researchers to date. A quantitative analysis of the 2016 Next Mormons Survey reveals that Word of Wisdom adherence is somewhat less than ideal from the perspective of orthodox Mormonism. Only about half of current Mormons report that they have assiduously avoided every clearly prohibited Word of Wisdom substance in the last six months. This increases only to around 60 percent when it comes to active members or even temple recommend holders.

32. It is interesting to compare the interviewee’s response with the orthodox LDS belief that temple ordinances are required for entrance to the highest level of the celestial kingdom. Either the interviewee is drawing a very fine distinction, opining that coffee consumption might allow for someone to enter a degree of heaven (“degree of glory”) or perhaps the interviewee does not ultimately believe that temple ordinances are literally necessary for entrance to heaven. Either way, this reveals something noteworthy about the role of the temple in contemporary orthodox Mormon belief.

33. Chrissy, 33, telephone interview with one of the authors, Sept. 18, 2017

34. Elaine, 35, telephone interview with one of the authors, Sept. 29, 2017.

Our survey findings show that coffee is the most popular “prohibited” substance among American Mormons, with about a third of Mormons reporting drinking coffee in the last six months. Alcohol and tea, for their part, are consumed by about a quarter of self-identified Mormons. We also found that, as one might expect, levels of activity, church attendance, and temple recommend status are the strongest predictors of Word of Wisdom adherence, although levels of education, age, and geography also play a role. The analysis also showed that even Mormons who choose not to adhere to the Word of Wisdom exercise discretion when it comes to which substances are legal and which are not. A strong majority of Word of Wisdom violators still refrain from marijuana and other illegal drugs.

Perhaps most importantly, the NMS revealed that Word of Wisdom adherence plays a smaller role than might be expected in defining Mormon identity among Mormons themselves. Despite the fact that Word of Wisdom compliance is required for a temple recommend, which orthodox Mormons believe permits them to receive the highest levels of salvific ordinances, there is no strong consensus among Mormons themselves that Word of Wisdom compliance is essential to “being a good Mormon” (although a majority would say that it is, at least, “important”). This is the case even for active members.

This has significant implications for how the Word of Wisdom will shape Mormon identity in coming years and decades. Even among active members, younger Mormons are less likely to adhere faithfully to the Word of Wisdom and are less persuaded that it is an essential component of Mormon identity. What will happen when they begin to occupy significant positions of power and influence in Mormon decision-making circles at local, regional, and global levels? If nothing else, the history of how the Word of Wisdom has been read, interpreted, and practiced, combined with patterns in how it is practiced today, strongly suggest that its meaning and importance will likely shift over time—just as it has shifted since its beginnings in 1833.

Appendix: The Next Mormons Survey

The Next Mormons Survey (NMS) was in the field from September 8 to November 1, 2016, though the majority of responses were collected during September. In all, 1,156 self-identified Mormons were included in the final sample, as well as 540 former Mormons, for a total of 1,696 completed surveys. The current Mormon sample has a standard survey margin of error of ± 3 percent and the former Mormon sample has a margin of error of ± 4 percent. The survey design and question wording received approval from Centre College's Institutional Review Board (IRB) on September 1, 2016.

Responses to the NMS were collected via the online survey firm Qualtrics, which uses a "panel matching" technique to acquire sufficient responses. Surveyors can specify a variety of demographic or response quotas to increase the representativeness of the survey respondents to the population of interest. Research has shown that online samples from reputable firms such as Qualtrics produce samples that are comparable in representativeness to randomized telephone surveys.³⁵ Online panel-matching surveys are becoming increasingly common in high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarly research, including research on Mormon public opinion.³⁶

35. See Courtney Kennedy, Andrew Mercer, Scott Keeter, Nick Hatley, Kyley McGeeney, and Alejandra Gimenez, "Evaluating Online Nonprobability Surveys," *Pew Research Center*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2016/05/02/evaluating-online-nonprobability-surveys>, and Miliakalea S. J. Heen, Joel D. Lieberman, and Terance D. Mieth, "A Comparison of Different Online Sampling Approaches for Generating National Samples," UNLV Center for Crime and Justice Policy, Sept. 2014, https://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/page_files/27/ComparisonDifferentOnlineSampling.pdf.

36. For example, David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson gathered a representative sample of Mormon respondents using an online panel-matching approach from YouGov in *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

After data collection was completed we found that the NMS achieved representativeness on nearly all major demographic and socioeconomic categories when compared to the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study (which used a random telephone-dialing collection method). The only notable exceptions were that the NMS oversampled women compared to men, those with a college education compared to those with a high school education, and younger individuals compared to older. In terms of income, race/ethnicity, and geographical residence, however, the two surveys were virtually identical and certainly within the margin of sampling error. For the former Mormon sample, the NMS did an even better job of approximating demographic and socioeconomic distributions in the wider population (as indicated by the 2014 Religious Landscape Study). The only two categories where the NMS differed appreciably was that it substantially oversampled women compared to men and those with a college degree compared to those with a high school education.

It is important to note that these sampling differences are extremely common in public opinion survey research. When this happens, researchers can create “post-stratification sample weights” that help minimize potential biases in the survey results due to disproportionate sampling of one group over another. In other words, we can statistically correct for these sample biases to a large extent by artificially inflating the weight of the responses from groups that were undersampled in the survey while artificially contracting the weight of the responses from the groups that were oversampled, in direct proportion to the degree to which they were over- or undersampled in the survey. Assuming that there are correlations with the particular survey question and a demographic or socioeconomic factor like age, education, gender, etc., this procedure increases our confidence that our survey findings are representative of the wider population of interest. We emphasize that this is a regular best practice among public opinion survey researchers and has consistently been shown to increase the accuracy and representativeness of survey results. It is a methodology routinely employed by virtually every reputable

survey firm including Pew Research Center, Gallup, Economist/YouGov, and the Washington Post.

With these data weights applied, our survey results match those of the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study in terms of standard demographic and socioeconomic categories, differing by an average of less than ± 2 percent, well within the commonly-accepted margin of error of ± 3 percent in most public opinion polling. We note as well that the majority of our weighted survey results for key religious and political attitudes/behaviors also approximate those found for current and former Mormons in the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study, or are within the standard margins of sampling error. We thus argue that the results we report herein are representative of the wider Mormon and former Mormon populations in the United States within the standard margins of error (3 percent and 4 percent, respectively) for public opinion survey research.