The Missionary Voice
Perceptions of an Emerging Register

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Latter-day Saint Missionaries

- Terminology
  - Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
  - ("Mormon" is now discouraged.)

- Missionary service
  - 18 month to two years, full-time, unpaid
  - strict dress and behavior rules
  - emotional, financial, spiritual preparation involved
  - a foundational, coming-of-age experience for many who serve

Identity and Language

- Per 3rd Wave sociolinguistics, identity expression happens through language.
  - Orientation towards a place (Reed 2020, Carmichael 2017)
  - Ethnic identity (Grieser 2022, Rodríguez 2022, Cheng, Jeon, & Kim 2023)
  - Sexual orientation (Podesva 2007)
  - Upward mobility (Labov 1963, Eckert 1989)
  - Political orientation (Schrimpf 2013, Hall-Lew, Coppock, & Starr 2010)
  - "Country" ideology (Hall-Lew & Stevens 2012, Podesva et al 2015)

- Widespread usage > Association > Indexical
  - Missionary slang certainly spreads (Nygaard 2022)
  - What about phonetic variants?

Is there a "Missionary Voice"?

Can Latter-day Saints hear it?

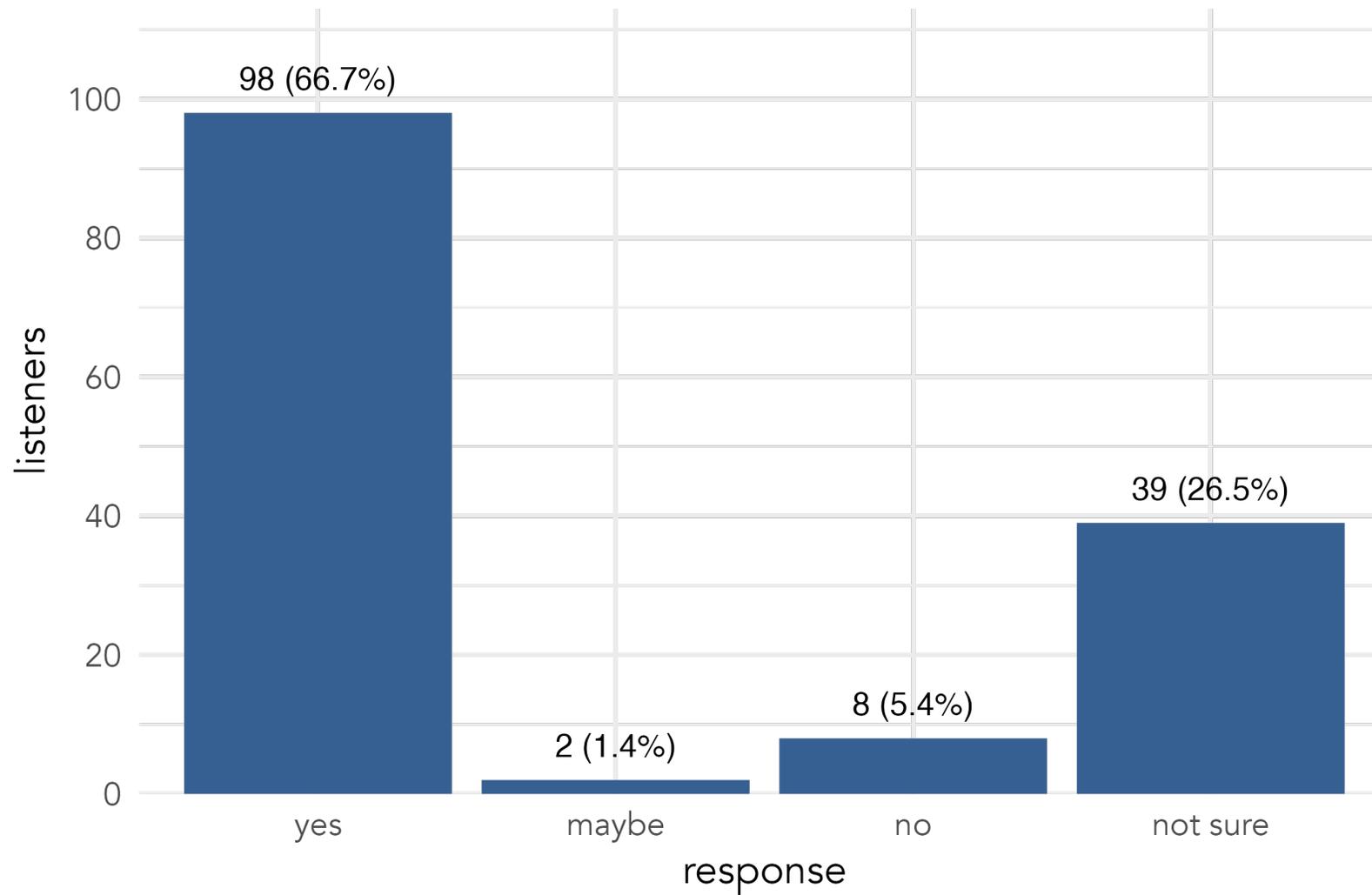What are the acoustic correlates of Missionary Voice?

Study 1: Eliciting Impressions

Eliciting Impressions

- Are other people aware of Missionary Voice?

- Methods
  - Online survey, primarily recording oral responses (=more detail)
  - Asked people if they think missionaries "sound different."
    - Only those with current or past affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
  - Distributed via Reddit to Utah(-adjacent) subreddits

- Demographics
  - 366 people took the survey
  - 146 responded to the Missionary Voice question

Does missionary voice exist?
Based on 147 responses

Perceptions

- Generally positive from most people
  - good: *calm, classy, mellow, nice, peaceful, pleasant, positive, relaxed, soft, soothing, wholesome, "everything is like a ray of sunshine"*
  - compassionate: *agreeable, approachable, empathetic, friendly, gentle, intentional, loving, non-judgmental, respectful, understanding*
  - lively: *confident, energetic, enthusiastic, excited*
  - religious: *faithful, earnest, humble, passionate, pious*
  - authority: *elevated, power, professional, reverent*
- Some neutral responses: *formal, proper, calculated, serious, more scripted*
- Some negative
  - fake: *artificial, disingenuous, fake, rehearsed, robotic, stiff, unnatural*
  - "holier than thou": *condescending, pretentious*
  - coercive: *forceful, lecturing, manipulative, mild admonishment, persuasion*
  - indoctrinated: *brainwashed, conformity, cultish, emasculated, silly, stupid, unhelpful*

Perceptions of where it came from

- From constantly giving the same prepared lessons
  - Perhaps more common when lessons were more memorized

- No different than salesperson, teacher, customer service, public speaking, presentation, style-shifting

- Emergence of a register
  - Imitating global church leaders
  - Passed on in micro-generations by trainers, leaders, and more experienced missionaries
  - It's what idealized Latter-day Saints and a representatives of the church sound like
  - "It's what spiritual discussions are supposed to sound like."

Study 2:
Do people recognize Missionary Voice?

Finding Missionary Voice

Missionary Voice audio

- Church-produced videos featuring people serving as missionaries at the time of filming.
- Subjectively selected the ones that exemplified Missionary Voice.

Control audio

- videos featuring BYU students or videos from another Christian university in the Western US.
- Selected speakers who matched the missionaries in age, ethnicity, and variety of English.

- Selected five-second portions containing semantically neutral content

- 20 recordings balanced by source (missionary vs. not) and gender (male vs. female)

Survey Design

- A very simple survey
  - Label the voices as from a "missionary" or a "student."
  - All 20 recordings were included, in a random order.
  - Not told how many missionaries there were.
  - Also asked for what they heard to help them decide.

- 95 participants
  - Targeted Latter-day Saints; all but two were
  - 35 male, 59 female, and 1 non-binary
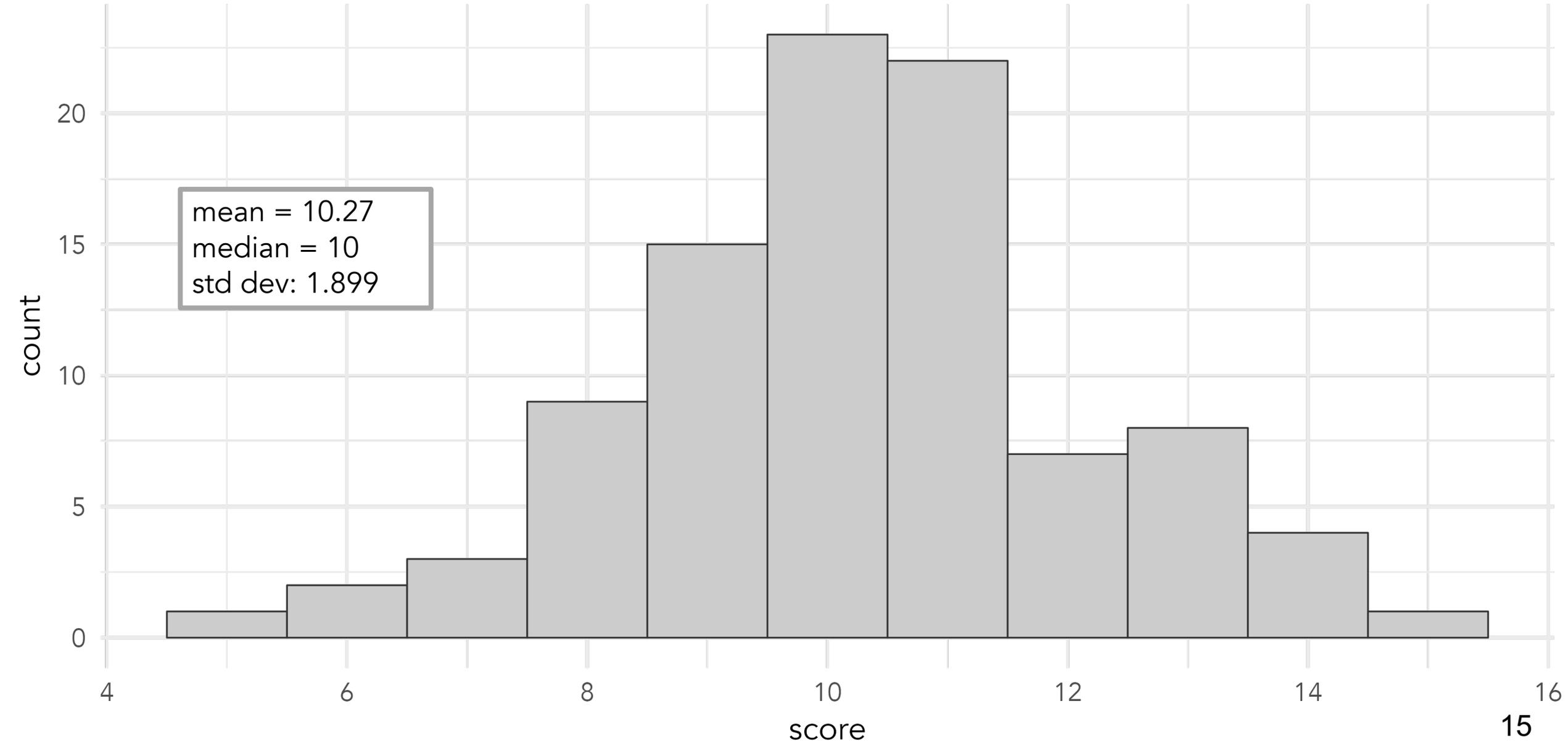 - median age: 24
  - 77 were former missionaries

Distribution of correct guesses (out of 20)
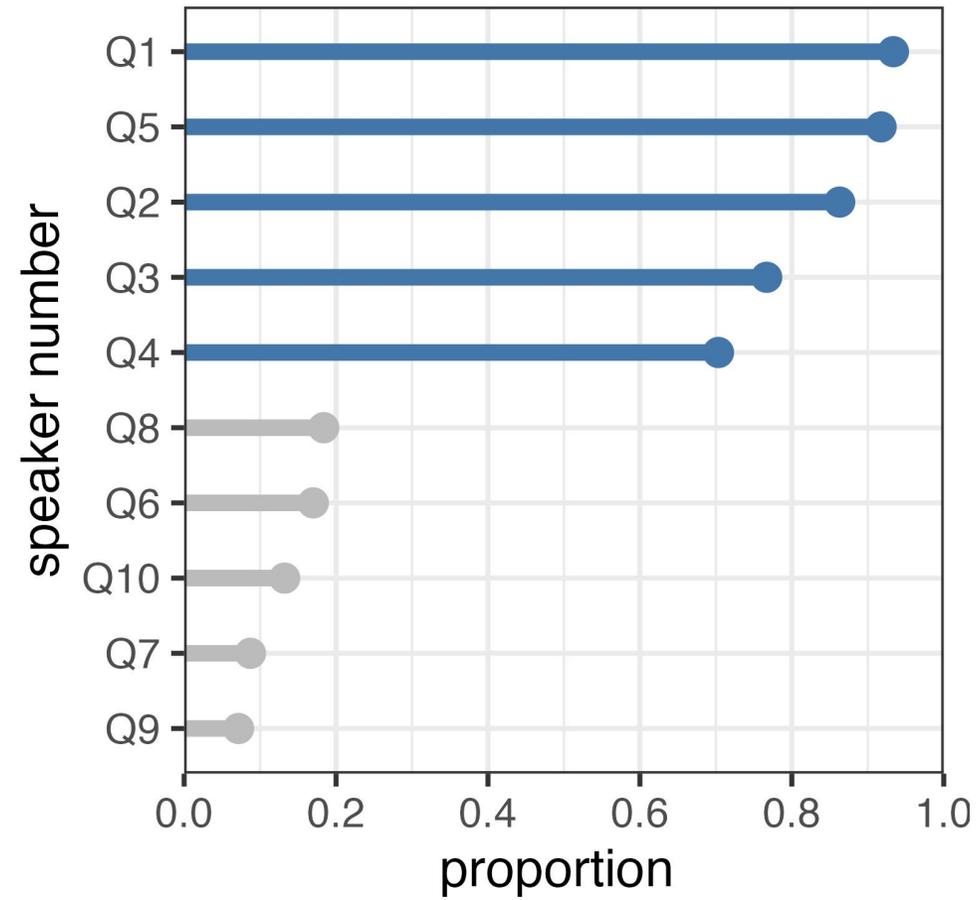People generally did no better than chance.

One-sample t-test (based on a mean of 10)
$t = 1.405$, df $= 95$, $p = 0.163$

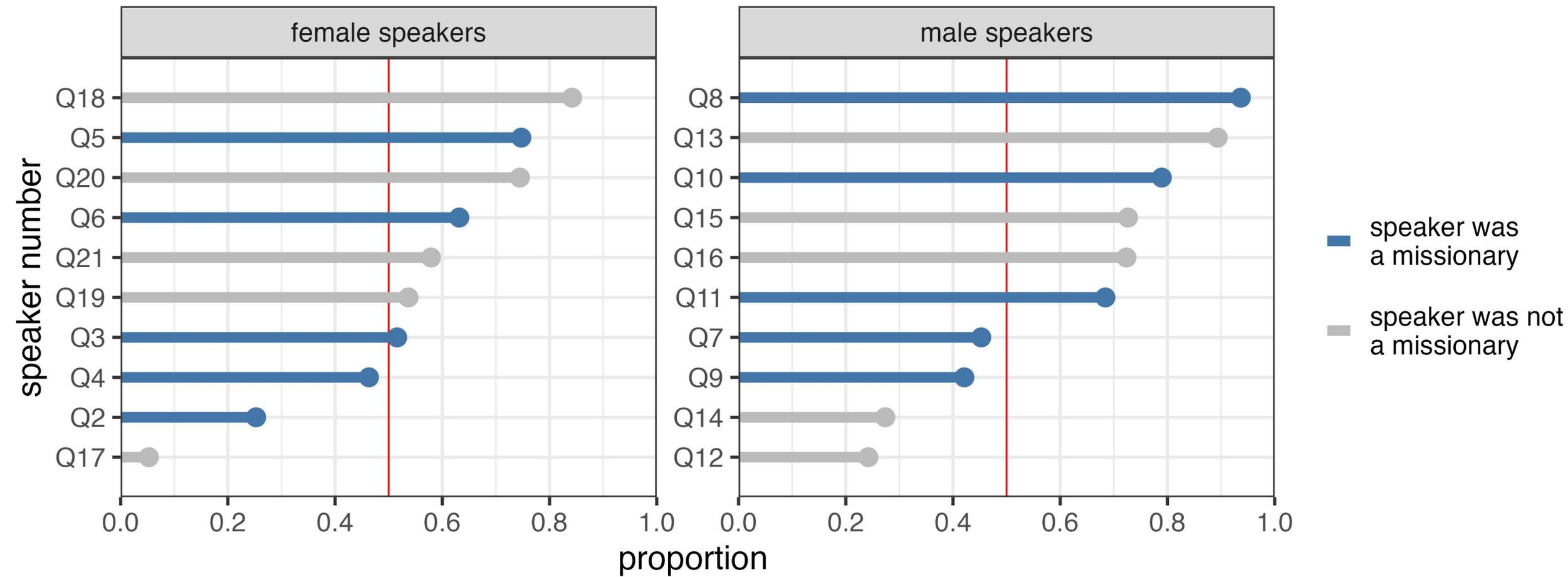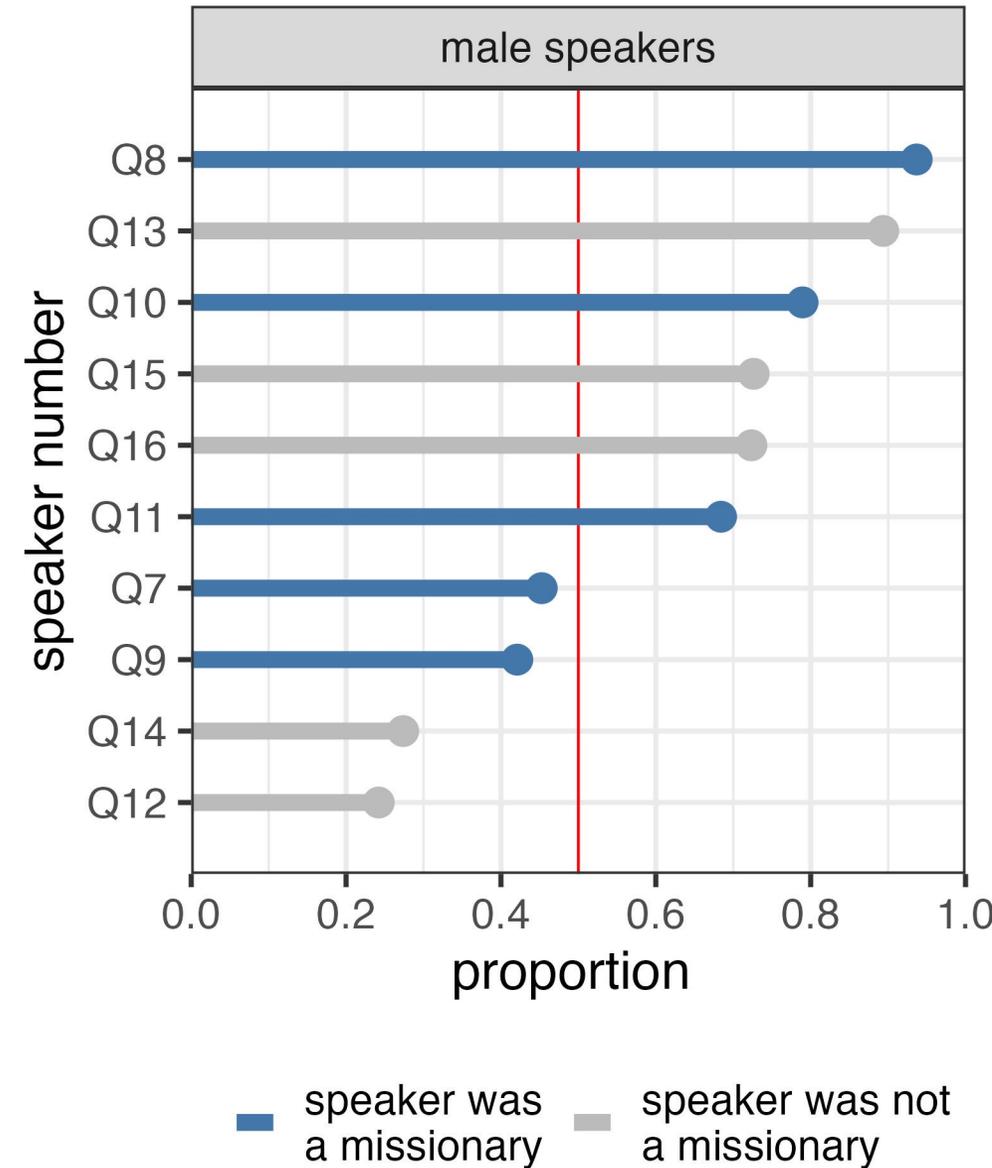mean = 10.27
median = 10
std dev: 1.899

count

score

15

Idealized data

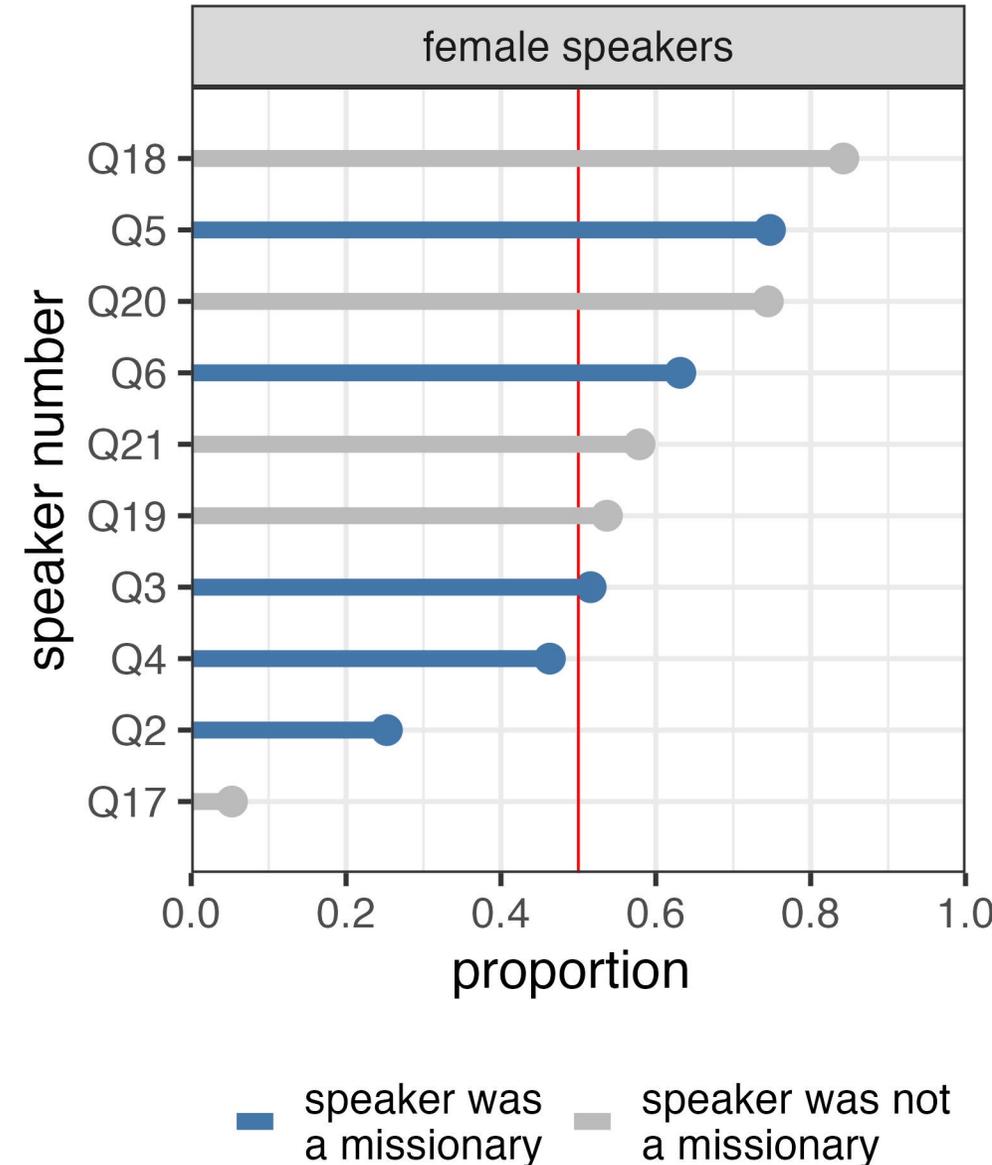Proportion of times listeners thought they heard individuals as missionaries

What did they hear in men?

- Q8: pauses
  - "…grandma [672ms] who [95ms] passed away [120ms] recently…"

- Q13: uptalk, spread lip articulation, filled pause
  - "…um, at ↗one point, somebody sent me a ↗text"

- Q14: perhaps very slight disfluencies?
  - "cuz [t-] in my mind… get that bad, [w-] if you"

- Q12: content? defiance? monophthongization?
  - "… [aᵉ]'d say ↗↘↗no"

What did the hear in women?

- Q18: semantics? optimism?

- Q5: professional? smiling?
  - "My first time I [ɛ]ver went on a night d[a̤ɪ]ve…"
  - …you [ɹ]each your arm out…
  - "pitch bl[æ̤]ck"

- Q2: informal? pitch variation? fast rate?
  - "so, I kinda just for↗got about it"

- Q17: disfluencies? fast rate?

Missionary Voice

- pauses, spread lip articulation, slower speech
- indexing younger/Western: uptalk, retracted [æ], creak
- professional and formal

These generally match the descript-tions people gave at the end of the survey.

Not Missionary Voice

- false starts and disfluencies
- any variety but Western American English?
- informality

Discussion

Overview

- Study 1: People are aware of it and know what it indexes.

- Study 2: People kinda know it when they hear it.
  – Maybe not all missionaries use Missionary Voice
  – Maybe not the most representative audio.
  – Maybe not unique to missionaries.

- People reacted not to missionaries but to Missionary *Voice*
  – Mostly suprasegmental features
  – Features that index the same things that people expect.

An Emerging Register?

- The development of Missionary Voice
  1. Existing formal register used in important situations.
  2. Missionaries use this a lot.
  3. It becomes associated with missionaries.
  4. When used by missionaries, it indexes their missionary-like attributes.
  5. It becomes expected of missionaries.
  6. Missionary-like attributes are only expressed if in Missionary Voice.
  7. Missionaries adopt Missionary Voice as part of their service.
     - Not limited to phonetic cues.

- Missionary Voice is just one of several registers within the broader Latter-day Saint religiolect and there's more to be explored.

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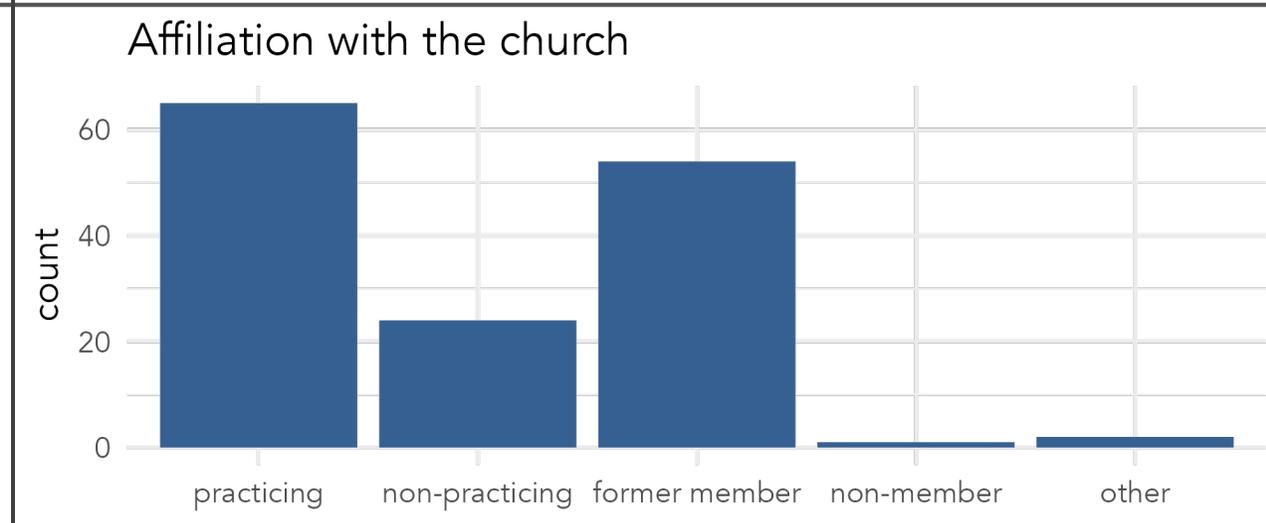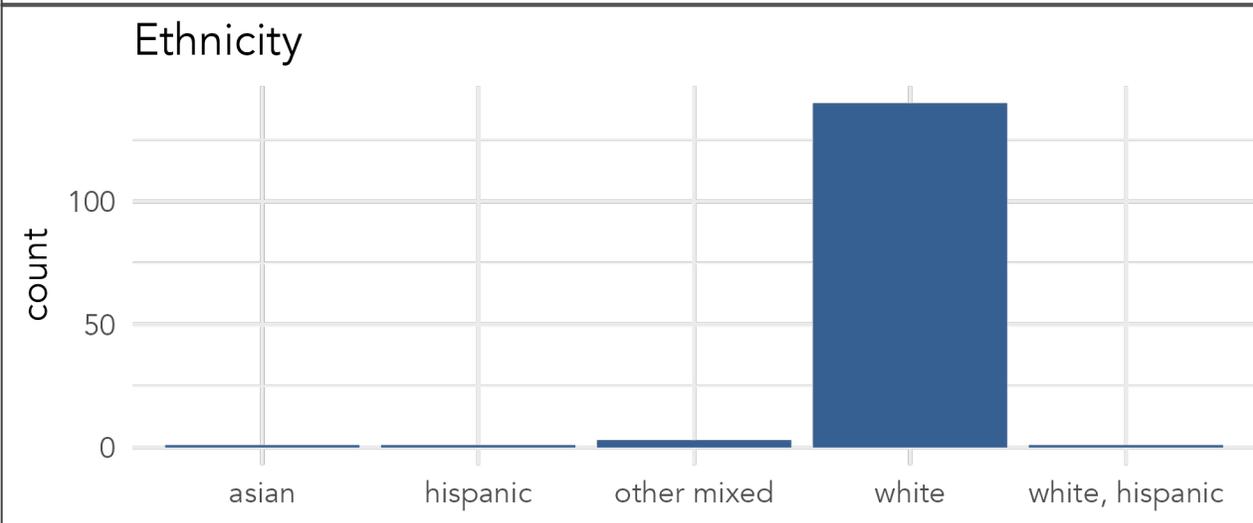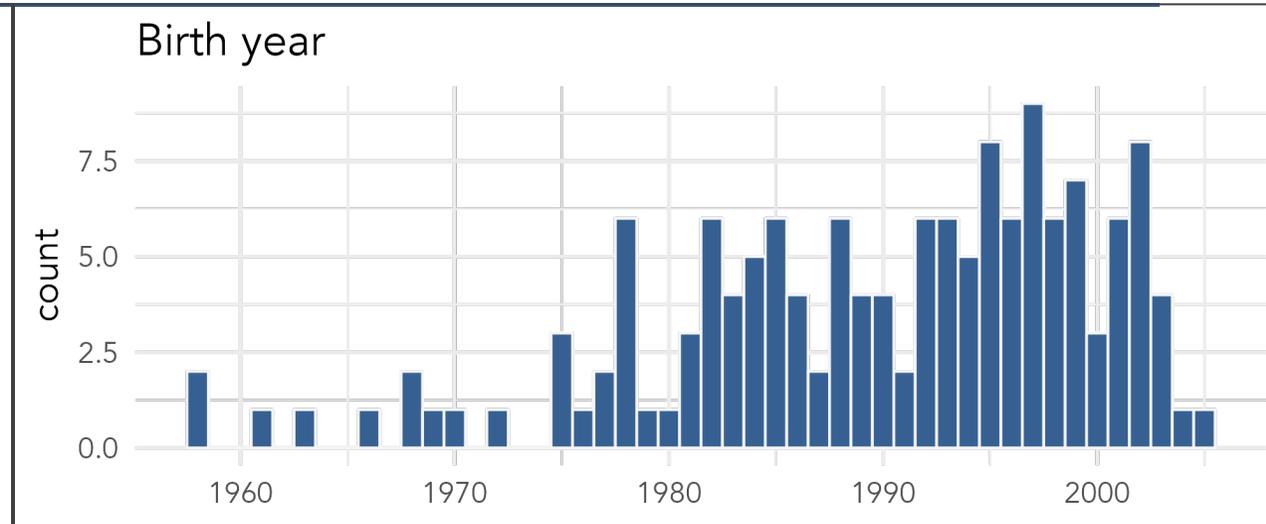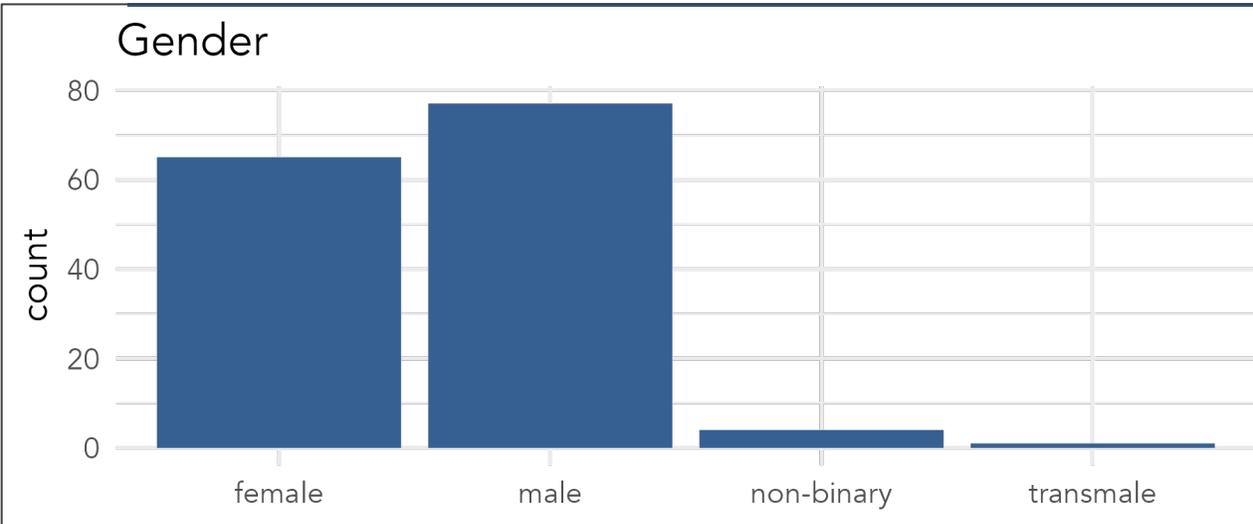
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Bonus Slides

participant demographics (study 1)

participant demographics (study 2)