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## A Content Analysis of Rachel Held Evans' Impact through Her Virtual Community of Faith

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A content analysis of Rachel Held Evans' impact through her virtual community of faith

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### Abstract

This research discusses the impact of Rachel Held Evans' life, work, and death on her virtual community of faith. Evans' work as a writer and theologian in the progressive evangelical Christian world was analyzed in this study through the Twitter hashtag #becauseofRHE, a space that emerged on Twitter after her death to commemorate how she had impacted followers' lives. In addition to an outpouring of grief the hashtag presented three key impacts: radical inclusiveness, accepting and encouraging doubts, and helping followers keep their faith in God and the Church.

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### **Introduction**

This research paper examines the impact of Rachel Held Evans' life, ministry, and death on her community of faith. Evans is most known for her unique writing voice that fostered a community of believers who yearned to challenge conservative beliefs while seeking God in new ways. In her 37 years of life, Evans authored four books including: *Faith Unraveled*, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, *Searching for Sunday*, and *Inspired*. Evans encouraged believers to be okay with having doubts in their faith and shared her own stories of deep doubt – even to the point of sometimes appearing not to know whether she was even Christian at all. In a recent *The Daily* podcast episode, Evans was credited for almost singlehandedly bringing together a new kind of community that is defining Christianity for the coming generations (The New York Times, 2019).

A marker in Evans' life, work, and ministry was her use of blogging and Twitter to connect with her community. Present day, Evans has 165k followers on Twitter and 123k page likes on Facebook. Evans has been praised for her ability to create a community of faith online. The timing could not have been better for her – just as she began blogging social media was taking off. She said in a soundbite in *The Daily* episode: “What I love about the internet and I love about blogging is that it gives a platform to people who wouldn't otherwise have one – especially in conservative Christian culture. In the church I was raised in I couldn't even pass the offering plate, much less teach a Sunday school class or speak in front of the congregation. So, blogging gave me a voice in evangelicalism that I would never have had as a woman otherwise” (The New York Times, 2019).

Evans' use of blogging and Twitter to share thoughts and questions as well as connect with her audience quickly broke down the access barrier protecting who was participating in public theological conversations. Because of her opening her life to others and using her platform to give voice to the experience of so many, she quickly became a beloved ministerial voice in the margins of evangelical Christianity.

Evans tragically died on May 4, 2019. Almost immediately, people flocked to Twitter with prayers and tributes. The New York Times said, "You started to see this flood of prayers from all sorts of people many of whom had never met each other in person but were all part of Rachel's church on her social media feed" (The New York Times, 2019). There was an overwhelming outpouring of grief from Evans' fans and many of the people she sparred with – all expressing their love for her genuineness and authenticity (The New York Times, 2019). Though her life was cut much too short, her impact clearly lives on through the lives she touched, questions she encouraged, and faith she inspired. Her impact is nowhere clearer than in the Twitter hashtag #becauseofRHE where her community and critics expressed their grief specifically by sharing stories and naming ways in which Evans' life and work had shaped their lives in tangible ways (Huckabee, 2019). The purpose of this study is to map Rachel Held Evans' impact on her community through analyzing the tweets under this particular hashtag. More specifically, this study addresses the research question: What were the distinctive components of the long-lasting impact Rachel Held Evans' life, work, and ministry had on her virtual community of faith?

## Literature Review

### A Synopsis of Rachel Held Evans' Life

On April 14, 2019, Rachel Held Evans tweeted out to her thousands of followers, present day 165.2 thousand, “If you’re the praying type - I’m in the hospital with a flu + UTI combo and a severe allergic reaction to the antibiotics they gave me” (Evans, 2019). After enduring a medically induced coma for three weeks, due to extensive brain swelling, she passed away at the age of 37 on Saturday May 4, 2019. She left behind her husband, Dan, and their two young daughters.

Evans was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on June 8, 1981, before moving to Dayton, Tennessee, for much of her teenage years. She was raised in a Christian evangelical home before attending Bryan College to complete a degree in English (Bailey, 2019). After graduation she worked briefly at the Chattanooga Times Free Press and The Herald-News in Dayton. Despite her lack of formal seminary training, Evans soon moved on to matters of theology and the world of books and blogging. Evans began her blog, [rachelheldevans.com/blog](http://rachelheldevans.com/blog), in 2008. In 2010 she published her first of four books – all chronicling bits and pieces of her own faith evolution. Throughout her tenure she amassed a large following, in addition to those on her blog, on multiple platforms including Twitter and Facebook.

Evans was widely known in her work for challenging conservative Christianity and creating a safe hub for a diaspora of Christian refugees (Dias, 2019). The New York Times wrote, “Evans’ spiritual journey and unique writing voice fostered a community of believers who yearned to seek God and challenge conservative Christian groups . . . Her congregation was

online, and her Twitter feed became her church, a gathering place for thousands to question, find safety in their doubts, and learn to believe in new ways” (Dias, 2019).

In her writing, Evans, a best-selling Christian author, “was unafraid to wade into fierce theological battles over issues such as the role of women, science, LGBT issues and politics” (Bailey, 2019). Katelyn Beaty of the Washington Post wrote that “Evans gave us many gifts with her writing and speaking” (Beaty, 2019). Beaty categorized the gifts in four ways saying that Rachel paved the way for other women in a theological landscape dominated by men, she expanded the definition of “Christian”, Rachel embraced the shadow side of faith, and she was generous with her platform (Beaty, 2019).

These sentiments echo the general portrayal of who Evans was and what her work was about. Evans has been called “a hero to Christian misfits” (Green, 2019), the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism” (Bailey, 2015), a progressive Christian author (Bailey, 2019), a radically inclusive Christian (Griswold, 2019), a progressive Christian blogger (Shellnutt, 2019), and a voice of the wandering evangelical (Dias, 2019).

Her friends, Jeff Chu and Sarah Bessey, wrote, “Rachel was for an all-embracing vision of Christ’s church and the relentless inclusion of refugees and those suffering poverty, of LGBTQ people, of women and especially women of color, of the unseen and unheard and swept aside” (Bessey & Chu, 2019). Chu and Bessey, co-organizers of a conference Evans held called Evolving Faith, recalled how she created space and hope for evangelicals questioning the institutions of their faith. In addition, Bessey said, “[Evans] relentlessly championed the voices and experiences of others, especially those whose voices were ignored or marginalized in the Church” (Dias, 2019).

Evans' life powerfully "gave voice to a generation of wandering evangelicals wrestling with their faith" (Dias, 2019). Though her life was cut much too short, her impact clearly lives on through the lives she touched, questions she encouraged, and faith she inspired.

### **The Emergent Church, religious nones, and church disaffiliation**

Due to the unique cultural moment in which Evans' life and work intersected with the life of the Church, her writing hit home for many evangelicals. During the time period of her theological work, 2008-2019, there were multiple movements that had happened or were happening that set the stage for her story and theological writing to have the impact it did. The Emerging Church Movement (ECM) and the rise of the religious nones in combination with growing church disaffiliation primed a generation of people who might be likely to latch on to the life and teachings of Rachel Held Evans. Both the Emerging Church and the rise of the nones presented a growing population of people who were spiritually wandering, disillusioned, had a lot of questions, were open to new ways of being religious, or were full of doubts. It was the perfect cultural moment for a unique voice like that of Evans to rise.

The Emerging Church Movement is a particular practice of Christianity built around the sociological practice of deconstructing orthodox ways of being Christian (Moody, 2017). Those within the ECM exhibit a wide variety of religious identities and orientations. The key tenets and beliefs of the ECM are hard to define as the main idea behind the movement is that they are believers in the process of forming new expressions of congregational life. One definition puts it this way, "The Emergent Church is a trans-denominational, praxis-oriented, noncentralized movement that seeks to reconfigure, to varying degrees, the theology, worship, biblical hermeneutics, and social engagement of the Church, in light of the cultural and intellectual shift from modernity to postmodernity" (Mallinson, 2017).



The people who are at the center of this movement value parts of religiosity that do not mesh with the attributes of traditional evangelicalism. Moody said: “ECM stories of deconversion are not about conversion away from Christianity. Instead they are about disillusionment with certain ways of being Christian” (Moody, 2017). The key components of the ECM that have been highlighted as attractive to millennials are authenticity, pluralism, participation and creative involvement, and resistance to institutionalization. Moody also added that “the characteristics of the millennial generation, and especially the historically large proportion of religious nones suggest that millennials might feel a particularly strong affinity for Emerging Christian stories of *disillusionment, disaffiliation, deconstruction, and deconversion*” (Moody, 2017, emphasis added). These stories are often stories of converting away from, not converting to.

As mentioned, a large proportion of people who might be interested in the ECM are the novel group of religious nones, people who are religiously unaffiliated or disaffiliated. Religious nones are the fastest growing religious group in much of the Western world (Thiessen, 2017). In a study from the Pew Research Center in October 2019, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population was standing at 26%, up from 17% in 2009, just 10 years earlier (In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace, 2019). When nones were asked why they were unaffiliated, the top three reasons were that they questioned religious teachings, disliked the positions churches take on social and political issues, and that they didn’t like the religious organization/institutions (Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion, 2018).

In 2015, Sarah Pulliam Bailey wrote a piece about Evans titled “How Rachel Held Evans became the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism”. She wrote: “The conversation over evangelical identity is decades-old, but it has been growing in intensity over the past 10 years . . .

But Evans is among a growing number of young evangelicals who are questioning the status quo promoted by these gatekeepers” (Bailey, 2015).

In this cultural moment with a growing population of religious nones and the Emerging Church Movement harboring Christians deconverting from their traditions, Evans stepped on to the scene ready to discuss her own disillusionment with the evangelical institution. Unlike previous generations, she took that conversation to the internet. Evans made use of blogging and Twitter to build a Christian community of those caught up in the work of disaffiliating and deconstructing.

### **Online Christian community**

By and large Christian communities of faith have been understood as rooted in a specific place and existing in an embodied reality. The notion that Christian community can exist and flourish in spaces that do not include face-to-face interaction is a relatively new idea in the life of the Church. In a time period with growing engagement online, especially on social media, Evans created a space virtually for people to gather as a community of faith. One source said, “Her congregation was online, and her Twitter feed became her church, a gathering place for thousands to question, find safety in their doubts, and learn to believe in new ways” (Dias, 2019).

Evans herself explained back in 2014 that “she tries to position the blog as a community where people can safely engage in conversation about things that are important to them – a platform that fosters a different kind of community” (Lofton, 2014). Heidi Campbell, a leading scholar in the field of religious online community, has identified six distinctive qualities of religious community online: personal relationships, care and support, value of community

investment, intimate and transparent communication, strong and consistent connectivity, and finally shared faith ideas (Campbell, 2007).

One important thing to know in this conversation is that the creators of these technological platforms do not necessarily create these spaces with the intention for these kinds of communities to form, nor do the leaders of the particular communities always intend for what sometimes results. In Evans' case it seems she hoped for the community, but it is also worth noting that the community takes on a life of its own and shapes the movement and the direction of the faith community. Campbell said: "Christian community is shown to be about shared interest, affiliations, and relationships. This kind of social capital is built over time and based not on the intentions of the creator of the technological forum, but the meaning which the members construct and the values that they bring to this discursive space" (Campbell, 2007). Campbell also added that members in a community like this tend to be willing to share their personal stories because they feel respected. This fosters deeper bonds of trust and friendship within the community (Campbell 2007).

In Evans' case, her community was very encouraged by her voice, her admission of doubt, and her personal story to embrace this community of fellow wanderers. Caroline Tee discussed the charisma of online leaders and said that voice is an important component in shaping these communities. Magnetic leaders, like Evans, are best able to convey their message and mission to their followers often through their charisma and well-honed oratorical skills (Tee, 2019).

One pragmatic function of online community is the way in which it differs from face-to-face interactions. Tee said, "the facility on social media to like, share, and voice agreement and disagreement allows for allegiances to be clearly displayed in a way that is not easily replicated

in offline social encounters” (Tee, 2019). Something about these functions seems to lend itself to helping likeminded individuals find each other online in a way that cannot happen as blatantly in the physical world. For Evans’ community this meant that wandering souls, questioning souls, and hurt-by-the-Church souls were more easily able to find and link up with one another in this virtual community in a way that is not possible in other more traditional church settings. Phillips added: “as the institutions that have kept modern liberal and progressive evangelicals apart begin to drop away, people in these previous silos of thought and praxis are beginning to find each other. This is owing in large part to technology but in no small part to an evolving consciousness” (Phillips, 2018).

### **The power of narrative – especially in terms of social media activism**

Evans’ online community was also known for encouraging its members to engage in activism on social, political, and theological issues. In a 2016 article titled “I’m a pro-life Christian. Here’s why I’m voting for Hillary Clinton,” she encouraged her followers and any readers of Vox to vote for Hillary Clinton, a pro-choice candidate.

Evans knew the power of personal stories and narratives to move people to action. She recounted a story in her book, *Inspired*, from a conference she and good friend Nadia Bolz-Weber hosted:

“We posed the question, why Christian? As each speaker approached the microphone to share their stories it became clear that there simply remains no greater apologetic for the Christian faith than a life caught up in the story of Jesus... When it came time for me to share, I spoke honestly about my doubts about the Bible and Christianity. I confessed my uncertainties about raising children in this broken and beloved community we call

church. I explained how gatherings like these help restore my faith because they pull me out of my head and into the lives of others, into the big, colorful, messy, and magical story of Jesus. I had forgotten the power of giving testimony, of publicly recounting our unique “gospels according to”. May we never neglect the gift of that. May we never lose our love for telling the tale” (Evans, 2019).

This was Evans way – narrating her experience in the world to lead her into action, and encouraging her followers to do the same. One scholar said: “storytelling is an ongoing process of *composition* rather than a more-or-less coherent reporting of experience. Narration is constructive, a way of fashioning the semblance of meaning and order for experience. Storytelling can thus be likened to composing written text in that it involves the organization of what might be imagined as experiential “chaos” into coherent and decipherable forms” (Gubrium, 1998). Evans was a master of narrating, and thus of constructing meaning, often theological meaning, from her story and others. From that place of idea construction and worldview construction she encouraged people to take action.

Evans was able to do this encouragement on social media platforms – where its common to raise awareness and disseminate information about issues (Moors, 2019). In a study on place, storytelling, and social media narrative Moors said, “Social media activism is not only a conscious use of online, connective, and technological affordances to make social issues known, but that it also draws on those affordances to affectively influence discourses and effect social change in a way that transcends spread ability and scale of stories... These alternative storytelling practices specifically leverage the connective features of social media such as sharing and embedding to offer different perspectives” (Moors, 2019).

Social media activism and storytelling helped Evans advocate for her most important messages of inclusion, doubt, love for Jesus, and love for others.

### **Method**

In the days following Evans' death, multiple hashtags such as #prayforRHE, #rememberingRHE, #rachelheldevans, and #becauseofRHE emerged on Twitter to commemorate her life and work. Among the many hashtags, #becauseofRHE stood out as a space to specifically name how Evans' life and work had shaped or changed followers' lives in tangible ways. The hashtag quickly took off. In the week following her death, the hashtag amassed 3,644 unique tweets,<sup>1</sup> and it reached over 15,000 tweets, including retweets, by the end of 2019. The purpose of this hashtag was by and large to express the ways in which Evans had an impact on an individual's life. The research is focused on finding, naming, and mapping the specific categories that made up Evans' overall impact.

Tweets within one week of her death sent out by accounts with 100 or more followers were chosen for analysis. This set of data ranging from May 4 to May 10 contained 2,771 unique tweets. Among the 2,771 unique tweets, almost 50% paid general tribute to Evans' life without providing specific details of her impact. These tweets mostly offered condolences to her family or provided a link to a recent obituary or blog post. Because the purpose of the study is to map Evans' specific impact on her community, these tweets of general tribute were excluded from the analysis. In the end, 1,452 tweets were kept for analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Credit for the collection of data used in this research is due to Kent Gerber, Digital Library Manager at Bethel University. His work to collect and archive all the tweets in #becauseofRHE beginning immediately on the day of her death, May 4, 2019, significantly contributed to the research of this project.

This final data set was analyzed and coded into nine different narrative categories based on the specific impact the tweet expressed. These include: unfavorable tweets, grief, platform, action, inclusivity, kept faith, freeing, doubts and community (see Table I). Through conducting this quantitative analysis of the narrative themes present in the hashtag #becauseofRHE, a clearer picture emerged of how Rachel Held Evans specifically created an online community of Christian misfits.

**Table I: Narrative Themes**

Unfavorable	tweet is an unfavorable/critical opinion about RHE's life and/or work
Grief	tweet expresses heartbreak/lament/grief/loss
Platform	tweet tells story of RHE sharing their work, sharing her platform, championing others
Action	tweet shares a story that because of RHE they have entered ministry, started writing, gone to seminary, written a book, taking up blogging again, etc
Inclusivity	references the inclusivity of RHE and her message, her fight to give a voice to LBGTO people, women in ministry, and other misfits/outsidere
Kept Faith	user expresses that they are <i>still</i> a Christian/have faith/believe in God or have returned to church because of RHE
Freeing	tweet expresses that RHE's work was <b>freeing</b> personally or ideologically
Doubts	tweet references RHE challenging prior ideas about faith, helping them rethink and challenge/deconstruct, tweet references <b>doubt</b> , RHE encouraging questioning and doubts
Community	references the RHE "community", especially the unique Twitter community

### Data Analysis

Table II indicates the number of tweets and the percentage of the total each narrative category represents and is organized in descending order from highest to lowest percentage.

**Table II: Results and Percentage Breakdowns**

Narrative Theme	Number of Tweets	Percentage
Grief	302	20.80%

Inclusivity	297	20.45%
Doubts	245	16.87%
Kept Faith	179	12.33%
Community	154	10.61%
Action	119	8.20%
Platform	73	5.03%
Freeing	73	5.03%
Unfavorable	10	0.69%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,452</b>	<b>100%</b>

This data from the categorical breakdown of each tweet provides a detailed description of the main categories in which Evans' followers and community found her work to be most meaningful.

### **Narrative of grief**

With 302 of the total tweets, the largest categorial narrative theme identified in the research was centered around the experience of grief. As Evans died young and had such a devout following, this narrative being the largest does not come as a surprise.

An example of a typical tweet within this narrative theme is: “#BecauseofRHE I was exposed to a God who could hold me together even when my theology fell apart. I have to believe that God holds all of us together in our grief and confusion now. I hope, at least. And Rachel helped me hope. What a legacy. What an extraordinary woman” (Rogers, 2019). In expressing grief many individuals pointed back to instances where they felt like they had learned



that grief was okay from Evans. Unlike what a typical tweet expressing the sadness over losing a celebrity, many individuals in this hashtag expresses that they felt okay feeling grief because of the very individual they found themselves grieving.

Another user articulated this same idea saying: “Today as I placed communion in my dear flock’s hands, I remembered the words Rachel wrote that reminded me of the importance of the words ‘for you’. I fed them with tears of loss and joy in my eyes because somehow she is still teaching me #BecauseOfRHE” (Tina, 2019). In and through her death, Evans’ followers felt she was and is teaching and leading them through her words and witness that live on. In this category that accounted for over 20% of the total tweets, many members found comfort in Evans’ honest and raw words even after her passing.

The grief category also included more basic expressions of grief not necessarily tied to the teachings of Evans. One user expressed, “Dear @rachelheldevans, we are all heartbroken you’re gone, but thankful you left such immortal and beautiful words. #BecauseOfRHE” (Gallagher, 2019). Another added: “My heart is so heavy as I mourn a woman I never met. Her words inspired me, challenged me, and gave me hope. I will be sharing quotes all week. #becauseofRHE” (Kollasch, 2019).

By and large, this narrative conveyed a sense of heaviness and weightiness that was present in the mourning and grieving process. The following narratives were related to the formative impacts of Evans’ teaching as opposed to the grief of the present moment.

### **Narrative of inclusivity**

Evans was known for blowing the doors of inclusivity wide open. This message of inclusion was widely celebrated by her followers as evidenced by inclusivity as the second

largest narrative identified by 20.45% of the tweets. Her fans and followers shared personal testimonies of how other Christians had excluded them and yet Evans embraced them with her teaching of hospitality and welcome.

Stephanie McCown detailed this welcome in saying, “#BecauseOfRHE I learned that sound theology is never more concerned with who can be excluded in the name of Jesus, than it is with how more people can feel welcome at the table” (McCown, 2019). This kind of inclusion happened for a couple different groups of people – women and the LGBTQ community.

One frequently reoccurring group was women who felt affirmed and included in ministry and theology. One tweet shared: “Remember that time Rachel taught me that women aren't just storytellers, aren't just writers of the heart . . . but that women - like me, mind you - are more than qualified theologians? Yeah, me too. #BecauseOfRHE” (Meredith, 2019).

The other notable group who felt specifically included by Evans was the LGBTQ community. She chose to fight for LGBTQ inclusion in the church, even though in some respects it was not a battle she had to fight. This tweet identifies that Evans could have chosen not to speak out about or advocate for inclusion on behalf of the LGBTQ community – but she did anyway. “The fight for full LGBTQ inclusion in the Church was Rachel's fight only because she chose it to be. She didn't have to. She wasn't born into the fight like the rest of us. #BecauseofRHE” (Bates, 2019). Bates went on to add in his thread: “She suffered a lot during her career because she chose to enter into sufferings that weren't her own. Our sufferings. And by that entering, our sufferings were made less, were transformed. If that's not the gospel, I don't know what is” (Bates, 2019).

### **Narrative of doubts**

The third largest category detailing Evans' specific tangible impact on her virtual community of faith has to do with doubt. The narrative theme emerged with 245 of the total tweets at 16.87% of the total data. In some ways this category served as a catch all for anything in the realm of doubt, challenging old ideas, challenging the institution, or encouraging messy unsure faith. As is clear by this category's ranking, this was the experiences of many individuals in Evans' community of faith as well as to Evans herself.

Not only did Evans push and challenge expectations of typical evangelical faith she actually seemed to encourage doubting. One way she did so was by sharing her own story of doubt. Many users expressed that just simply knowing they were not alone in their doubting or deconstruction process was comforting. One user shared: “#becauseofRHE I learned that it is ok to doubt. It is ok to search. It is ok to ask the questions that need to be asked. My faith took a sharp and devastatingly vital turn for the better because of her” (Gines, 2019). Another tweet added: “#becauseofRHE I realized that questioning the church will not damn you to hell. That it's okay to be disenchanted by the church is. It's okay to talk about things no one else wants to. It's okay to be messy” (Taylor, 2019)

One important thing to note in this category was that Evans was able to give a sense of permission to her followers to doubt and challenge. This tweet shared that idea in saying, “As my theology shifted and changed, as I realized I simply could not believe in the God many Christians around me believed in (the God of white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, and capitalism), Rachel gave me permission to question, challenge, and change. #BecauseOfRHE” (McDougal, 2019).

### **Narrative of keeping faith**

Following the specific ways in which Evans created spaces of inclusion and an openness to doubt, the next narrative theme was kept faith with 179 tweets at 12.33% of the total data. This category held expressions and compelling testimonies of individuals who claimed that because of Evans influence or writing they had kept their faith alive. This occurred in a few different ways including individual faith, reconciling with evangelicalism, and reconciling with the idea of the Church as a whole.

One user shared an individual testimony of keeping faith: “I honestly don’t know if I’d still be a Christian right now if you didn’t show me there was another way. You were the gateway to the broader progressive Christian community that changed my life. And my timeline today is proof that you changed thousands more #BecauseOfRHE” (Gambrell, 2019).

Evans was open about her various critiques of the evangelical community and yet also sought to reconcile with that community. This user expressed her own similar journey in saying, “Rachel gave me hope of reconciliation with the evangelical community I grew up in. #BecauseOfRHE” (Sanderlin, 2019). As was often the case, Evans’ own story and testimony of different experiences of faith gave way for other individuals to have hope or walk the path at least without feeling so alone.

Lastly in this category one tweet shared a renewed hope in the institution of the Church as a whole. Aaron Jackson tweeted, “#BecauseofRHE I was able to find hope in the Church again after it nearly destroyed me and cost me everything” (Jackson, 2019). This was a frequent testimony recounted in the hashtag. Evans provided a place for people who had been deeply hurt

and wounded by the Church institution and helped give them glimmers of hope about their relationship with the Church again.

### **Narrative of community**

As the fifth largest category with 154 tweets, one major impact Evans left on her followers was the gift of the virtual community she created. While most of Evans' quantifiable impact showed up through ideas she promoted and upheld in her writing, this aspect of community is a different kind of impact she had. Because Evans did her work online and interacted with her followers there, that space became a virtual community that many likened to a literal church community. The Twitter community was the congregation, and Evans the pastor.

One tweet in the data noted this saying: "I began to realize @rachelheldevans was fulfilling a calling to you all, to pastor the First Church of Twitter--& I don't say that sarcastically. Her ministry was real, it changed lives, she led you even when it required a boldness she didn't always feel. #becauseofRHE" (Arthur, 2019).

Another tweet offered similar sentiments: "Like most Sundays, my church service this morning took place on here. What I witnessed doesn't take place in most churches but is exactly what "church" is supposed to be. A community that honors grief, gives thanks & allows the question "God, Why?" #BecauseOfRHE" (Anderson, 2019).

The data showed that the community online felt like a church with regular teaching, community gathering around similar ideas about faith, and a winsome leader pastoring the congregation. In addition, though, a common remark was not that Evans was at the center of the operation – instead, she was just the one who first facilitated the coming together of the community. Many mentioned that the community she created she gave away as a gift to her

followers. She gave them the gift of each other, as opposed to just trying to create a following for herself in this online church.

In an interview snippet in *The Daily* episode titled *By Challenging Evangelicals, She Changed Them*, a follower of Evans commented: “You might think that when someone so central to the community dies that the whole project might disintegrate . . . but Rachel’s own evolution gave all of us the fearlessness to evolve too. Because she created this community, we knew that we didn’t have to walk alone” (The New York Times, 2019). Evans’ gift to her community was not just her teaching – but was the presence of the community around them wrestling through the same things. Though she herself was a central player in shaping the community, the community lives on in her absence.

Well known progressive influencer, Jaimee Lee Finch expressed this in a tweet that garnered 3.9k likes. She said, “Reading through all of the #BecauseofRHE tweets today I’m struck with the awareness that the greatest thing Rachel may have given all of us was each other” (Finch, 2019). Many other followers went on to say that though there is much grief in losing Evans’ prophetic voice, there is hope that her ideas and influence will live on through the robust community that she nurtured and sent out into the world proclaiming a similar message.

### **Narrative of action**

One way her influence lives on is in the action she spurred others to take. The data set included 8.20% of tweets communicating ways in which Evans’ life and work encouraged her followers to pursue callings of their own. These callings ranged from starting a blog, to attending seminary, to publishing a book.

One user shared, “#BecauseOfRHE I went to seminary. I became a writer. I embraced my calling. I allowed myself to love more deeply” (Davis, 2019). Charissa McAfee said, “I’ve been thinking about the extent of Rachel’s impact. Not only the number of people she reached, but also the importance of those interactions - #becauseofRHE books were written, seminary was attended, faith was restored, marginalized voices were heard” (McAfee, 2019).

### **Narrative of platform**

Within the data set 5.03% of the total shared stories of Evans sharing her platform. Many authors, bloggers, pastors, and theologians shared stories of Evans publicly praising their work, sharing their work with her large network, and inviting them to speak at events and conferences she hosted. Though this category represents a rather small percentage of her impact as detailed in this hashtag, the individual stories shared present a life-changing impact Evans’ practice of platform-sharing had on many lives.

In a tweet that garnered 806 likes, Micha Boyett shared: “I was writing a blog, longing for anyone to read it, and then @rachelheldevans shared it. I’m convinced people started to read my work because of her voice. My agent? My book deal? She cheered me to those spaces. There are so many of us. #becauseofRHE” (Boyett, 2019). Her tweet began its own side conversation on her Twitter page where multiple women echoed similar sentiments.

A few other users simply replied, “Same”. One woman tagged two authors and mentioned she started following them both after Evans introduced their work on her platform. Nicole Baker Fulgham went into more detail and said: “Same. When I published my first book, she was one of the first to interview me on her blog. I’m forever grateful” (Fulgham, 2019). Another user offered: “She did the same for me. Less than a year ago. I had reached a point of

believing my words were clanging gongs. She opened my ears to their melody and showed me there was an audience willing and eager to listen. I will be eternally grateful. #BecauseOfRHE” (Schlett, 2019). One last response said: “Same same. She found me just as I was finding my voice. How many lives did she so radically change??” (Laskowski, 2019).

In a similar thread Jessica Goudea expressed her devastation at losing someone who had taken the time to champion and promote her work. She said: “I met @rachelheldevans when I had started a nonprofit working with Burmese refugees. She immediately advocated for them and kept it up for years. My first time writing on the internet was #BecauseOfRHE” (Goudeau, 2019). In the thread Godeau continued on saying: “My book now, which grew out of those early experiences writing thoughtfully about refugee issues, and my writing group, are both #BecauseofRHE. She was the most encouraging person alive. She would randomly tag someone and hail them as a women of valor; sometimes it was me and what a gift that was. Her encouraging emails, her constant openness to people around her, her deep authenticity—all unique. I’m devastated” (Goudeau, 2019).

Through these specific examples and many others, the data presented a picture of a figure who relentlessly championed others by freely sharing her platform.

### **Narrative of freedom**

Presenting the same number of tweets as the previous category, this thematic category housed 5.03% of the total data. This category identified users who expressed that because of Evans’ life and work they felt freed – freed from a community, an ideology, a relationship, a long-held belief, and often from guilt.



One user said: “So many women on my feed sharing how @rachelheldevans was the catalyst for a freedom they didn’t know was possible because of the wounds of patriarchy within the church. Our stories are all so similar and #becauseofRHE we are sharing them boldly and living into our callings” (Sweatman, 2019). Another said: “@rachelheldevans helped me to embrace that there was a better way in this walk of faith here on earth-one that felt more Christlike to me-and helped me to truly know how to apply the Word to my life. Forever grateful. May others find this freedom through her loss. #BecauseOfRHE” (Hoback, 2019).

On The Daily podcast episode quoted above, a follower said, “I hope that we will embody her legacy of freedom because she set so many of us free” (The New York Times, 2019).

### **Narrative of unfavorability**

Out of 1,452 tweets its worthwhile to specifically point out that, in the unfavorable category, only 10 tweets expressed a negative or unfavorable position towards Evans. While she certainly had her critics, in her death the outpouring of support was positive even in the face of disagreement. A tweet by Stephen Anderson said: “#BecauseOfRHE, I’ve come to realize the church must embrace doubters & questioners. We must invite in, not push away. We can stand strong on convictions AND engage lovingly with those who disagree. Love these thoughts by @edstetzer. Praying for @rachelheldevans family & friends” (Anderson, 2019). Though Anderson disagreed with Evans theologically he and many others like him still tweeted in her honor.

Others, though, did make use of the hashtag to express their concern for her theological beliefs. A few of the 10 tweets expressed concern that Evans actually led people far away from

God. Jordan Riley tweeted, “Her legacy of encouraging people to be gay, be feminist, be a woman pastor, worship a female version of God, vote for a woman's right to choose abortion, and to cut essential doctrines out of the Christian faith has LED many people straight to Hell. #BecauseOfRHE” (Riley, 2019). Other unfavorable sentiments in this minor category of tweets labeled Evans as liberal, progressive, a heretic, having weak faith, not understanding the Bible, and having a low view of God.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to map out Rachel Held Evans’ impact on her community. Through analyzing the content of the nine narrative themes identified in tweets under the hashtag #becauseofRHE, this study found that, in addition to a mass expression of grief, Evans’ followers remembered her legacy as being radically inclusive, accepting and encouraging doubts, and helping followers keep their faith in God and the Church.

It was challenging to express the full scope of her life and work by showcasing only a few tweets. Each tweet of the 2,771 analyzed contained personal and life-altering stories of impact. The full range of impact caused by Evans’ life could never be expressed fully in these pages. This work, though, can serve as a testimony to the many lives she touched, impacted, and changed.

In conclusion, it is evident that Evans’ work created an online community that harbored fugitive Christians. Through the thousands of stories and examples shared in small snippets of personal narratives on Twitter, one can understand the kind of welcome space Evans created for all people – especially in this current cultural moment with a growing population of religiously unaffiliated and disaffiliating people. People from all walks of life sought solace in her online

world. They went to her for comforting words, kindness, and above all, love – when other Christians were crushing their spirits through various forms of evangelism, political leanings, legalism, or fundamentalism. As many said, Evans’ world was one of wide-open welcome to all – all the misfits, outcasts, sinners, doubters, and questioners. At a time when the church needed a voice of love and not debate, Evans graciously wielded her platform and influence on Twitter to create a community that welcomed all.

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