

Article

Get out of Church! The Case of #EmptyThePews: Twitter Hashtag between Resistance and Community

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Received: 21 May 2020; Accepted: 17 June 2020; Published: 23 June 2020



Abstract: This study explores the relationship between politics and religion, resistance and community, on social media through the case study of #EmptyThePews. #EmptyThePews was created in August 2017 after the events in Charlottesville, calling users who attend Trump-supporting churches to leave those churches as a form of protest. What starts out as a call of action, becomes a polysemic online signifier for sharing stories of religious abuse, and thus a format for identity and community construction. An analysis of 250 tweets with #EmptyThePews reveals five different uses of the hashtag, including highlighting racial, gender, and sexual identity-based discrimination; sharing stories of religious or sexual abuse; constructing a community and identity; and actively calling for people to empty churches. This Twitter hashtag did not facilitate an active movement of people leaving churches, but instead created a Twitter community. Giving voice and space to this community, however, can be seen as a form of resistance.

Keywords: hashtag; activism; online communities; online social movements; digital religion; Trump; evangelical churches

1. Introduction

Twitter has been seen by many as a digital platform for social movements and social resistance (Gaffney, 2010; Hassan, 2012; Dubois and Gaffney, 2014). Usually, these movements are facilitated through a specific hashtag, which calls for a type of action—for example, #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo. However, as will be shown in this article, hashtags are defined by the uses users give them; not their prescribed use from the leaders of a social movement. In other words, hashtags are living, polysemic signifiers, and as such, scholars should explore how specific hashtags are used in order to fully understand the relationship between Twitter and resistance. This article offers a case study of a hashtag and social movement that also brings into question the relationship between politics and religion.

The vocal and constant support of Donald Trump by Christian (majority Evangelical) churches in pre- and post-2016 election period have left many Americans confused [1–3]. While the majority of white evangelicals voted for Trump [4], there were those Christians (Evangelical and otherwise) and ex-Christians who strongly opposed the marriage between Trump and the Evangelical leadership [5]. Trump, who was not an explicitly religious man before and during the elections (especially when compared to some of his republican runner-ups), and the unsolicited support he received from many churches, raised questions about the relationship between politics, religion, and media in the 21st century, USA [1,6]. Opinion pieces, tweets, posts, and memes reflected on what it means for these churches to support Trump. Especially after Trump's seemingly inadequate response to the terrorist event at Charlottesville, which led many business and organizational leaders to step away, resign, or disapprove of his actions, the support or silent acceptance by Evangelical leaders increased the disappointment and anger some of the Christian practitioners already felt.

This disappointment also gave birth to a Twitter hashtag, which, as this article shows, blurs the lines between a social movement and an online community. #EmptyThePews started as a Twitter hashtag by Chris Stroop in mid-August 2017, shortly after the protest at Charlottesville. Stroop, a prominent blogger, online author, and academic, launched the hashtag with a specific goal in mind: to show Evangelical leaders that their support of Trump or racist, sexist, and xenophobic behaviors will lead them to lose their congregations. In his words, Stroop is trying to lead people into leaving their churches in protest over the church's support of Trump:

Noting that almost nothing will get most evangelicals' attention apart from declining church attendance, last night I took to Twitter to exhort any wavering members of conservative evangelical churches, or indeed any churches complicit in Trumpism and white supremacy, to take now as a moment to leave those churches in protest, as publicly and vocally as possible. [. . .] I have observed over the last couple of weeks [. . .] many people stating that evangelical Trump support was the final straw that led them to leave evangelicalism behind. I believe that Evangelical pastors need to hear their message, and so do those still in the pews who may be harboring doubt and discomfort but who are afraid of leaving. To that end, I created the hashtag #EmptyThePews, asking those who have left evangelicalism over bigotry to tweet their stories along with the hashtag [7].

The hashtag elicited moderate responses from Twitter community, with the original call (See: https://twitter.com/C_Stroop/status/897967493800656896) for action from August 16th being retweeted 1389 times, and liked 2354 times (As of 3 June 2019). The hashtag itself has been used daily since. The hashtag also gained some attention from online media, with stories covering it on various online news or religious websites [8,9].

This study examines this hashtag in order to answer the questions: How has this hashtag been used? What is the relationship between the originator's intent and the uses of the hashtag? Further, and even more broadly: Can a hashtag move people out of church? What does this teach about the relationship between online resistance and community?

To answer these questions, 250 #EmptyThePews tweets were sampled between August 2017 and December 2017 and then analyzed manually. The analysis points to six unique themes that emerge from the ways in which the tweets were employed, which are: resistance, religion, politics, gender/sexuality, race, and community. These polysemic theme point to a diversity of uses for a single hashtag. The broader theoretical implications of the main themes identified in the analysis are then discussed.

2. Hashing out What a Hashtag Is

In order to fully understand the #EmptyThePews story, certain terms and ideas need to be unpacked, such as Twitter hashtag, social movements, resistance, community online, and the relationship between these terms. The hashtag is a tagging system on the social networking website Twitter which brings together "Internet resources across web" [10] (p. 1), such as ideas, users, and concepts [10,11].

From the Arab Spring forward, scholars have argued for the importance of social media, and specifically Twitter, for raising political awareness and mobilizing people into action [12–14]. In these texts and contexts, hashtags within Twitter are imagined as having a unified meaning or connotation, which is then used to create and motivate political action. However, more recent research suggests that hashtags are complex signifiers, polysemic texts, which hold multiple, and even conflicting, meanings [15,16]. For example, Yadlin-Segal [16] in her research on the hashtag #IranJeans showed how some users utilized the hashtag to highlight the similarities between Iran and 'The West' while others used it to shed light on Iranian oppressive religious customs. She argues that "the same signifiers—jeans and hashtags—were used to signify conflicting messages about Iran, nationality, freedom, and Western societies [. . .] The hashtag advances a combination of signifiers that lead to the formulation of multilayered identities through a transcultural discussion" [16] (p. 2780). This scholarship highlights the complexity of hashtag meaning-making. One way to understand this complexity is through the theory of uses and gratifications (U&G), which, according to Erz, Marder,

and Osadchaya [17] is especially suited for “understanding behaviors relating to information systems technologies, in particular social media” (para 2). This is because U&G sees users as active participant in the consumption of media, choosing to use and interpret different media in different ways based on their individual needs. Erz et al. employ U&G to highlight six motive for using hashtags in general. Similarly, this article will show five uses for a specific hashtag, and how the difference uses and meanings attributed to the hashtag accumulate to a form of resistance.

2.1. Hashtag Activism

#EmptyThePews starts as a clear call of action, a resistance to churches that support Trump or more general, preach discriminating ideas. Online resistance, or the use of a hashtag to create or sustain social movements, is currently a strong trend in Western context, with movements such as #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter leading to changes in legal, media, and social structures [18–20]. Research on online social movements shows that often, these movements are led by multiple key players [21–23], and that unlike popular opinions about ‘slacktivism,’ online activism is tied with offline actions [24,25]. Social media activism is understood mostly through the lens of networks, in which nodes (leaders or key players) promote a cause that is then shared and echoed in various circles or networks. Research on various online social movements has utilized network analysis to discover “patterns of information flow” [23] (p. 1), analyzing these movements or hashtags as indicator of viral messages that need to be mapped. However, one might wonder if online social activism might be better understood as operating within communities and as an online community itself, especially in the case of smaller movements. This paper shows how uses of an activist hashtag indicate a behavior of online community, through sharing stories and identities. Therefore, I ask if by overlooking the human connection that a hashtag can create, we might be missing some of the story.

2.2. Hashtag and Community

To further understand this claim a definition of a Twitter-based online community is needed. A traditional definition of a community would be that of something like ‘a high frequency of communication and interaction between interconnected people with a sense of solidarity’ [26]. Because of Twitter’s design, in which connections are labeled as ‘followers’ and not ‘friends’ and which supports asymmetrical communication, scholars tend to consider Twitter communication between users as networks, publics, or movements [27]. According to Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev [28], even though Twitter is not necessarily designed to support online communities, people still use them to form social connections within the framework of a community. That is, while not all of one’s connection on Twitter might be considered one’s community, Twitter can be used to create and maintain a community. Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev [28] conducted both a network analysis, which pointed to key players in the network, and a content analysis, which highlighted what they call the more “personal” elements of the network. In their words:

In our analysis of Wellman’s community, we confirmed that his personal Twitter network is more than simply “imagined”. It exhibits characteristics of both Jones’s “virtual settlement” and McMillan and Chavis’s “sense of community”. Using social network analysis and content analysis, we demonstrated that members of Wellman’s personal community regularly meet, talk, provide support, and help each other on Twitter. The content and nature of their Twitter interactions suggest that they display a sense of belonging to parts of Wellman’s network and that they have the ability to influence others in the network through their replies and retweeting [28] (p. 1313).

That is, the personal elements of the communication: sharing and supporting, are what made this community ‘real’ according to the scholars. Twitter, then, while often used for viral sharing of ideas through hashtags, can also foster communities. While hashtags on Twitter have been widely successful in motivating social movements, as stated above, the logic of a hashtag, even one used for resistance, can also give birth to a community. As will be seen in the analysis below, that is also the case of the #EmptyThePews.

3. Method and Sample

The method used in this study is a thematic analysis of 250 selected tweets with the hashtag #EmptyThePews. This method is deemed appropriate because it would reveal the different ways the hashtag was employed by users. The sample and the analysis were informed by a few important tweets (for example, the first tweet with the hashtag); web-articles on the hashtag; and informal communication with the hashtag creator, Chris Stroop. The researcher has been following Stroop, the hashtag, and a few pages (on Facebook and Twitter) dedicated to the hashtag and movement since August 2017 in order to more deeply understand the context and various developments of the hashtag. This method can be understood as an in-depth qualitative research with contextualized data sampling based on the organic narrative development of the hashtag. I suggest thinking of this as a 'hashtag narrative' or 'hashtag story' where various systematic and academic methodologies are utilized to describe and understand the creation, meaning-making, uses, and 'life' of a hashtag.

In terms of the informal context, the author contacted Stroop via Twitter shortly after his August 2017 announcement. They met in person in November 2017 for an informal interview, and stayed in touch via online communication since then. At times, Stroop tagged the author into specific conversations on Twitter. The author follows the Twitter account for #EmptyThePews, and became friends with Stroop on Facebook.

The body of the analysis is made of a sample of $n = 250$ tweets with the hashtag, posted between August 2017 and December 2017. In December 2017, a Python library (<https://github.com/Jefferson-Henrique/GetOldTweets-python>) was used to retroactively retrieve any tweet that used the hashtag. This yielded $n = 24,247$ unique tweets that were outputted into a Comma-separated values (CSV) file. Using Microsoft Excel and an online random number generator (<https://www.random.org>), $n = 250$ tweets were selected and inputted into a new excel file. These tweets were then coded into six overlapping themes, which were constructed out of fifteen sub-themes, based on initial analysis and inductive coding. The themes originated from a manual, iterative, analysis. While reading through the entire data set of 250 tweets, each tweet was interpreted to have a central or few central theme: for example, attacking a political figure; or sharing a sexual trauma. The tweets were analyzed in an excel tweet, where new columns were created for each theme. Then, if a theme was also present in a different tweet, that tweet would have been tagged as having that idea. A single tweet could have multiple themes. Once these themes were tallied, similar themes were then conceptualized as sub-themes of a larger theme, which resulted in six over-arching themes throughout the data: resistance, politics, religion, sexuality/gender, race, and community.

This method included certain limitations. Most significantly, because of the random selection of the tweets, the conversational aspects were difficult to follow. Twitter allows for long threads with multiple participants. A random selection, as conducted in this methodology, takes tweets out of the context of these threads. To overcome this limitation, the author would, whenever possible, search for the original thread in which a certain tweet originated, and add that to their notes. The random selection of tweets was supplemented by an in-depth understanding of the contextualized nature of the tweets. Thus, the sample was built by highlighting the benefits of both randomized sample (overcoming selection biases) and contextualized and nuanced supplemental sample (positioning the case at hand within its thick and entangled organic development).

4. Making Sense of Emptying the Pews

In the first few days following Stroop's initial tweet, users took to the hashtag to call out and electronically "walk out" of church. Some of the most popular tweets using the hashtags from August 26th follow the rationale and call for action presented by Stroop. For example: "If your pastor doesn't condemn racism tomorrow...walk out. #EmptyThePews". However, emptying the pews was not the only way this hashtag was used. The following discussion outlines the polysemic uses of the hashtag.

4.1. Resistance

The most obvious use of the hashtag, indeed, its intended use, is for resistance. Tweets collected under this theme (overall, $n = 159$) were either tweets that were explicitly calling users to leave churches ($n = 91$); or generally against religion and/or tweets in which users shared reasons why they left the church ($n = 68$). The last two were related to resistance because, they include either stories of past resistance to the church by leaving it, or resistance to religion. However, as will be noted from the analysis below, those tweets are not adhering to the suggested call-for-action, but instead take the hashtag into a different direction.

An explicit form of resistance were tweets that clearly called for action, for moving out of churches that promote hate, for example: “#EmptyThePews if your church supports hate don’t go” or “It’s time to #EmptyThePews—BEEN TIME”. Or make visual arguments supporting the call for action, for example:

The caption following the image reads: “Seems to be working. This is our local megachurch. The parking lot is not full these days” (Figure 1). The need to visually argue for a decline in church attendance suggests a need for the hashtag to “work” from the online to the offline world. This is further supported by the caption “seems to be working”, indicating that the call to #EmptyThePews is, indeed, emptying churches.

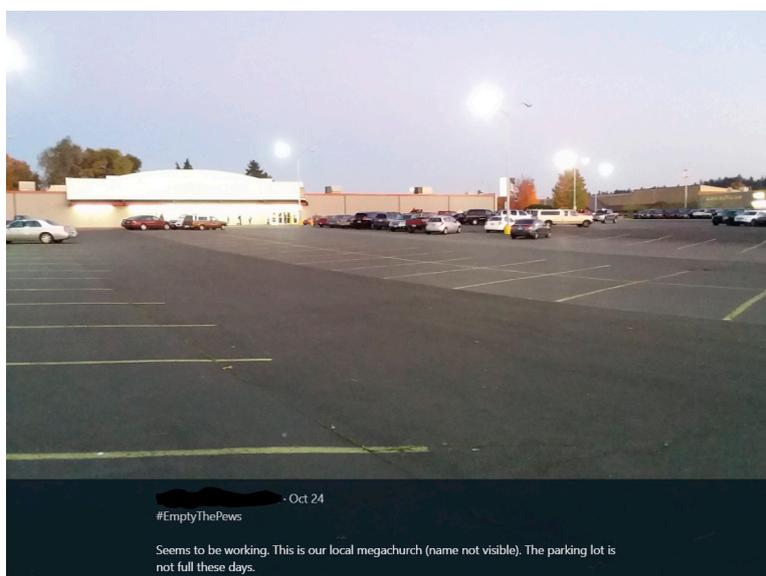


Figure 1. Seems to be Working. 24 October 2017.

Other tweets, however, were interpreted to use the hashtag to call for action, but in an implied manner. For example: “#EmptyThePews When almost every Christian I knew refused to denounce Trump, and denounced me for not wanting him in office” or even more indirectly: “when Muslims take care of Americans and evangelicals won’t #EmptyThePews#YouDontKnowEvangelicals <https://twitter.com/GordMacey/status/902318804356788224>”. This last tweet links to a different tweet that discusses Joel Osteen’s decision to keep his Houston churches closed during Harvey flooding (The tweet reads: “FYI while Joel Osteen refuses to open the doors of his “Christian Church” to victims of Hurricane Harvey, three mosques have opened theirs”). By adding the hashtag #EmptyThePews, the user is implicitly communicating that this behavior of a Christian leader is a reason to empty the pews. These implicit uses of #Emptythepews are nonetheless important to be considered as a form of resistance, because they tie the action of resistance—walking out—with the reasons for resistance: corruption, discriminations, etc. In that way, they use the hashtag as a call for action while at the same time explaining the rationale for this action.

Similarly, other users used the tweet to share their stories of why they left the church in the past. Users seem to feel that sharing their reasons for leaving the church in the past corresponded with the intention of #EmptyThePews. This use of the hashtag tends to be personal and emotive. For example, “I left Evangelicalism after being condemned to hell for being gay. #EmptyThePews” or “As a smart & devout 21 yo woman, was told the only way I’d ever have leadership role in any church was to marry a pastor #EmptyThePews”. These examples, while showcasing different reasons for leaving, all include some reference to discrimination or trauma. By telling their stories of ‘why I left’ rather than explicitly calling people to leave now, these users re-appropriate the hashtag for sharing personal traumas, while at the same time keeping the initial intention verbalized by Stroop, by showing how discrimination can lead to lower church membership.

Another types of resistance were tweets in which #EmptyThePews was used to vocally belittle and ridicule religion. For example: “. . . You’ve always been damaging + hurtful + cruel. Your shitty theology has always been shitty theology. #EmptyThePews”—in this tweet the user is explicitly insulting a theological stance (‘shitty theology’) and connecting it with abuse, and as a result, the need to empty pews. Or, for instance, comparing Evangelical churches with cults: “This crap largely comes directly from the pulpit. Believers in skygod cult easily brainwashed. #YouDontKnowEvangelicals #EmptyThePews”. In other cases, empty the pew is more of an ideological stance, an atheist perspective on the subject. For example: “Lovely. Bragging about ignorance. If there were a god, he/she would want more for his/her creation. #EmptyThePews #Atheist”. These tweets are resisting Evangelical Christianity by-and-large, not for racism or other social/political reasons, and seem to be anti-religion in general, as this tweet clearly summarizes: “#ReligionMakesYouStupid #ReligionIsDarkness #ReligionIsTheProblem #ReligionPoisonsEverything #emptythepews”.

One of the most emotional uses of the hashtag was one in which users shared stories of emotional or religious abused (total of $n = 35$ were coded for this sub-theme of emotional/religious abuse). For example: “This is like ‘what is #gaslighting’ on the Church Abuse Jeopardy game show. #EmptyThePews” or “When the pastor pulled out a diagram from the cult leader I was raised under and I had a panic attack and fled outside. #EmptyThePews”. In these tweets, words like abuse, trauma, survivor or descriptions of emotional reactions are used frequently, clearly tying forms of abuse with reasons for leaving the church. Some of the tweets under this category are tied to sexual abused, like: “Sexual predator abused children and treated priests who did the same #EmptyThePews #ChurchToo” while other have to do with general discrimination or other forms of power and abuse, like: “Conservative Evangelicals want the power to dominate others. Authoritarianism is inherently abusive, and they are authoritarian through and through”.

In these various tweets, stories of religious abuse in the form of, for example: gas-lighting, authoritarianism, or cutting off support systems, are shared. Through sharing these traumas, users here again (re)appropriate the hashtag: while it is still used for resisting discriminating churches, this use highlights the complicities and deeper problems within the church, problems that have little explicit relationship to the current political situation. As pointed out by one tweet in this theme: “I left b4 45-just SO toxic”—meaning, this user left the church before the election of the 45th president, Donald Trump, because of the toxic and harmful environment, in other words, the various types of abuse users felt in the church. Through sharing their personal traumas, users utilized this hashtag to call for resistance based on the need to protect people from these types of abuse.

4.2. Politics

This next major theme comprises of those tweets and uses that relate to USA politics and the relationship between politics and religious institutions ($n = 142$). These tweets were coded as political because they included names of political figures, such as Trump or Roy Moore, or referred to political events. For example: “#EmptyThePews the racism & discrimination is a disgusting betrayal of the Bible. People like Pence who is a fake Christian and defies God”. Or more broadly for example: “. . . The single greatest threat to democracy and human rights in America is the Christian Right . . .”—here the

user is alluding to more than just the election of Trump, they are referring to the general conflict they feel exists between democracy and the Christian Right. Furthermore, because of the time-frame in which these tweets were collected, many of the tweets reacted to the appointment of Roy Moore and the allegations against him, for example: "... Are you going to continue to support child molesters? I'm sure #RoyMooreChildMolester is very happy with your support ... " While these tweets are not explicitly discussing Trump, they still highlight what they see as problematic political relations between churches and politics. In these various ways, users connect the hashtag with politics, or use it to discuss new political happenings from the perspective of criticizing Evangelical support of discriminatory politics. Given that Stroop's original hashtag intentionally connected religion and politics, it is of the utmost importance to understand how users reacted to and expanded this context.

Users also used the hashtag to more generally criticize various religious institutions for their support of Trump, for example: "Will evangelicalism recover from their support of the new Caesar? I think they lose any credibility going forward. #EmptyThePews"; and other institutional behaviors that are deemed discriminatory or self-serving. One prime example was users' reactions to Joel Osteen's churches in Texas not sheltering people during the Harvey storm and floods. For example: "#EmptyThePews If there was ever a time for your church to be full...it is now @JoelOsteen" or "@JoelOsteen Is your mega church only open on Sundays? How about when God's children need safe shelter? #EmptyThePews #WhatWouldJesusTweet" or, reacting to Osteen's tweet stating that he and his wife are praying for the victims of Harvey, one user writes back: "Because praying doesn't cost you anything or get your floors and furniture dirty, right? #EmptyThePews". In these and similar tweets, users not only criticize Osteen, but also tie their criticism to #EmptyThePews, using the hashtag as a signifier for a larger perspective or movement. That is, in these tweets, the hashtag is not calling people to empty Osteen's churches, but rather uses the hashtag as a symbol for resistance against what users express as corrupt institutional Christian behavior.

Other tweets in this category are not aimed at a specific person, but describe various institutional behaviors that the users find problematic. For example: "Had a priest at a funeral hijack the eulogy to tell us there's no place in heaven for the educated. Family full of teachers. #EmptyThePews" or "The CDC is an American crown jewel, one of the institutions that truly make the US a first-world country. So naturally the Christofascists and Bannonites in charge are going to fuck it up because faith-based politics. #shame #emptythepews".

Other users cry out against the homophobic Nashville Statement that was signed by multiple churches and Evangelical leaders. In these types of uses, which will be further explored in the gender/sexuality theme, users connect their criticism of current church discrimination of women and LGBT+ people with #EmptyThePews, which, like in the Osteen examples, hint at a different type of use: using the hashtag to highlight and resist systematic issues in the various institutions of the church, even without calling for the action of leaving the church or connecting it to the Trump administration as initiated in Stroop's original statement.

4.3. Religion

Aside from making space for those who left, and amplifying stories of abuse and discrimination within churches, the hashtag also serves as a tool for religious discourse and negotiation. A total of $n = 152$ tweets were coded under this theme, including the sub-themes: theology, religious institutions, and 'anti-religious' (some overlapping with over themes). Tweets were coded as 'religion' if they included religious terms like Bible, God, etc. (or anti-religious terms like atheism); if they discussed theology in some way; or made reference to religious meanings. While some #EmptythePews users are vocally ex- and anti-religious, as discussed above, others are trying to negotiate their own understanding of a bigotry-free Christianity. In fact, the @EmptyThePews account on Twitter has in its info the following statement: "If you're faith is important to you but you cant [sic] support your church or if you arent [sic] a Christian and want to vent- Join us. All are welcome" (emphasis added). This description is inviting people of faith to discuss and develop religious ideas too.

That is, this theme highlights users who identify as Christians, claim to care for the reputation and theology of Christianity, and/or negotiate the meaning of being Christian. While some use this hashtag to distance themselves (and others) from Christianity at large, other use it as insiders, members of the Christian community demanding change. For example, one user citing an online article writes: “To the #Church: you sold #Jesus out for #political power. I’m out. [. . .] #Christian #EmptyThePews”. Or “#EmptyThePews [. . .] THIS is not the Jesus they taught me about. Evangelicals have sold their souls”. In these examples, users are making a theological and political polemical claims against the church. They also identify as members of the community by adding the #Christian, for example. Juxtaposing #Christian and #EmptyThePews indicates that the two are not mutually exclusive—that in fact, it is Christian members who are those seeking and calling for a change.

Some of the tweets explicitly dismiss the religiosity/theology of current Evangelical institutions, by saying things like: “You must understand that they have more in common with @realDonaldTrump & #GOP than they do Jesus—Jesus is just their mascot #EmptyThePews”. This was also evident when the Nashville statement was discussed, for example: “Exhaustive List of Everything Jesus Ever Said about Homosexuality [link] #NashvilleStatement #lgbtq #lovewins #EmptyThePews”. In these tweets, theology is negotiated to be more inclusive, and certain official stances, like the one taken in the Nashville Statement, are rejected as not representing the spirit of love these users associate with Jesus or Christianity.

A few users try to suggest that having issues with discriminatory practices within the churches does not necessitate abandoning the religion altogether, for example: “Yes, #EmptyThePews of churches that don’t follow the gospel; HOWEVER, #DontAbandonTheChurch! Find a place that knows how to love & serve!” In this example, users are encouraged to find liberal or more supportive churches, rather than emptying the pews altogether. Even more aggressively, a few users try to discourage others from leaving, for example: “Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have made a habit, but let us encourage one another’. Heb.10:25 Don’t #EmptyThePews” or “The people using the #EmptyThePews hashtag know nothing about true relationship with Christ. I pity them, honestly. They’re missing out”. In these more explicit tweets, users object the notion of emptying the pews, and say that those who do so are “missing out”. That is, users here are not necessarily disagreeing with the criticism voiced through the hashtag; but they do disagree with the call for action—the idea of leaving churches.

4.4. Gender/Sexuality

Tweets coded under this theme included references to men/women, sex, gender and sexual identity, and gender roles ($n = 86$). From the first days of the hashtag, it was immediately used to share stories related to either sexual abuse, or gender/sexual identity discrimination. As the use of the hashtag developed, two events were tied to it: (1) the Nashville Statement, published late August 2017, which was explicitly against LGBT rights, and authored by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in Nashville, Tennessee; and (2) the #MeToo movement and specifically #ChurchToo, which emerged a few months after #EmptyThePews started. Thus, it was clear from the beginning that #EmptyThePews, while not explicitly related to issues of gender and sexuality, was quickly used to discuss them.

Some users shared that their main reason for leaving the church was discrimination against women, for example: “#EmptyThePews the pews bc I attended Vision Forum’s father/daughter event and was told my sole purpose is to bring honor to my dad” or “Because she sposta be home makin’ babies, cookin’ supper, pleasin’ her man, and stayin’ quiet in church! #EmptyThePews”. In these and similar tweets, users use the hashtag to express their frustration at being belittled as a woman and discriminated against. This use of the hashtag also tends to combine issues of gender inequality and sexual abuse, as those are often intertwined experiences within religious traditions. For example, one user shared that she broke with the church: “When I was told that ‘men don’t rape godly women’. #EmptythePews”. Other examples include: “Women have never been safe in the church. Women have never been protected, valued, elevated, or listened to there. We confess to being assaulted and are

made to repent for impurity. #churchtoo #metoo #emptythepews”. Or “Countless sermons abt how wife owes husband sex anytime—is sin to deny. Never one respecting wife as human being #metoo #EmptyThePews”. In these examples, users express how church theology enables sexual abuse through victim blaming. These experiences then led these users to leave the church and use the hashtag to share their stories online.

Other users do not explicitly tie church doctrine to sexual abuse, but do condemn the church for cases of sexual abuse or what users see as support of abusers, for example: “Philippines to extradite ex-priest accused of abusing two North Dakota boys #EmptyThePews #ChurchToo”. Or, retweeting a story about an ex-Evangelical sexual abuse survivor’s reaction to Trump’s election, a user writes: “Stories like this are why we need to #EmptyThePews”. In these examples, users either explicitly argue that people should leave churches because of churches’ attitudes towards sexual abuse, or use the hashtag to condemn what they see as support of the abusers.

Another avenue that leads users to leave the church is the anti LGBT+ sentiments expressed by various churched in the USA. For example: “The “church” has been so bad for so long, I haven’t been in a pew in 40 yrs, since my lesbian daughter was vilified by the vast majority!” Here, the user is not sharing a current story, but rather that they left the church because of discrimination. Various tweets related to discrimination against LGBT+ individuals are also shared with the hashtag, for example: “#EmptyThePews because the LGBT community is more accepting of others than Christians are”. In total n = 35 tweets were coded for dealing with “sexual preferences”, about 14% of the total sample. In both examples of gender and sexual discrimination (and in their intersection) users utilize the hashtag to share reasons for leaving, thus supporting the original use of the hashtag, but also use it to condemn and express their own pain and frustration, using the hashtag as a tool of empowerment to tell their stories, not unlike the #MeToo movement.

4.5. Race

The theme of racism in the church, which was the original catalyst for the hashtag, has only n = 18 tweets that are explicitly about race. Those were tweets that used words like race, racism or racial. N = 72 tweets were implicitly related to racism because they mentioned things like, for example, Trump’s support of specific racist groups. Some of the tweets clearly tie the political situation with Trump to racism in the church. For example, responding to a long thread, one user provides a link to a story about pastor Scott, a Trump supporter, who suggests that the Black population is mistaken for not having relationship with Trump. The tweet reads: “any pastor that supports the rhetoric of hate and divisiveness is a fake Christian and a terrible human being. #EmptyThePews [. . .]” Here, the user is relating a political statement about supporting Trump to religious ideology (‘a fake Christian’), race (‘hate and divisiveness’), and the #EmptyThePews hashtag. It is possible that the user is using #EmptyThePews to indicate this story as a reason to leave the church, or that they are referring to #EmptyThePews as a signifier for a movement or community. Other users are clearer in the way they use the hashtag, for example: “#EmptyThePews if your church supports hate don’t go” or “Annnnd yet another reason, of countless, to #EmptyThePews. #FightWhiteSupremacy #KlanPresident #Amerikkka #Klanistan <https://thinkprogress.org/religious-conservatives-bannon-white-nationalists-209f65eaa7e5/>” (the second tweet positioning Trump’s support of racist organizations as a reason to leave the church).

Other tweets focus on the relation between religion and racism, omitting the political element. For example: “Religious faith is chosen, skin color is not. Hatfulness should always be called out, especially when coming from a pulpit. #EmptyThePews” or “#EmptyThePews the racism & discrimination is a disgusting betrayal of the Bible [. . .]”. Other tweets connect the religion, racism, and politics by pointing to the complicated history of racism, Christianity and the political system in the USA, for example: “Poll the average #CharlotteKKK marcher and you’ll find majority of Christians. Speak to people in #YouDon’tKnowEvangelicals or #EmptyThePews” or “#TrumpIsAWhiteSupremacist—#EmptyThePews 85% of #Evangelicals didn’t vote against

#WhiteSupremacy. Wikipedia KKK-1915". As can be seen from these examples, users clearly connect racism as a reason to leave churches or as part of the general discriminatory attitudes of the church.

4.6. Community

Tweets coded for community, total of $n = 97$, were tweets in which users used the hashtag for community building: by retweets stories, supporting one another, offering community resources, expressing their identity as ex-evangelical, or explicitly calling for a space for those who left the church because of discrimination and abuse. In other words, tweets that were analyzed to create 'a sense of solidarity' [26] were coded as 'community.' For example: "Have you experienced religious abuse? Share your story anonymously here ... <https://buff.ly/2w6S3yB> #EmptyThePews #Exevangelical" linking to a website of an organization that wishes to "listen to and learn from those who have been marginalized by the Christian community" (<https://mission941.wordpress.com>). In this tweet the user connects to others by sharing similar stories, thus using the hashtag #EmptyThePews as a signifier for shared experiences, for solidarity. Similarly, other tweets under this category explicitly try to form a feeling of belonging, for example "You are not alone! You matter. #EmptyThePews". Some are more light-hearted in forming these friendly relations between the users of the hashtag, for example: "If you need a good laugh, go follow #StupidQuestionsForJesus right now. #EmptyThePews #AskSteveAustin". Other ways of creating this sense of community is by supporting each other and encouraging people to share, for example "The #emptythepews stories and .@C_Stroop are incredible". Or "I'm so encouraged by your work & the moral core at the center of it. Thank you to you & to all participating in the #EmptyThePews movement". In these ways, users connect to others through the hashtag and create a feeling of bonding over shared experiences.

Identity also plays a big role in this use of the tweet. Users indicate that the hashtag helps them represent and understand their identity as ex-evangelical or people with religious trauma. For example: "If you read through the #EmptyThePews hashtag, I think you'll understand after reading of people's trauma with #evangelism". Most often, tweets that explicitly discuss identity also use hashtags like #exevangelical or #YouDontKnowEvangelicals which seem to indicate the users' own identity as an ex-Evangelical. For example: "#YouDontKnowEvangelicals if you don't have at least one Christian relative who brought home a shofar from a trip to Israel. #EmptyThePews" or "If this surprises you #YouDontKnowEvangelicals #EmptyThePews". In some cases, users encourage other to empty the pews, even at the risk of losing a community, because they believe it will help the gain their individual freedom, for example: "[...] Don't let fear or guilt hold you back. Might feel like you are losing a community but you will be gaining freedom and so much more #EmptyThePews". Both in the cases of those highlighting their individual identity and those trying to bring people together, tweets in this category highlight how the hashtag is used to create a shared community and identity. Rather than using the hashtag to actually evacuate churches, these uses exemplify a more complex attitude toward resistance, one that is focused on creating networks of support, solidarity, and identity.

5. Conclusions: Between Resistance and Community

This paper sought out to examine the life and uses of the hashtag #EmptyThePews in order to explore how hashtags related to resistance are used in a polysemic fashion. #EmptyThePews was created in August 2017 with the goal to "exhort any wavering members of conservative evangelical churches, or indeed any churches complicit in Trumpism and white supremacy, to take now as a moment to leave those churches in protest, as publicly and vocally as possible" [7]. This hashtag and the movement it tries to create raises questions about social media movements and moving people. Indeed, the analysis of the tweets pointed to six different themes and five uses of the hashtag. The themes were: resistance, politics, religion, sexuality, race, and community. When separated and compared, it seems that the specific issues users wanted to bring up using this hashtag were, in order of frequency: sexual abuse (total of 39 tweets), sexual identity and LGBT rights (35 tweets), emotional or religious abuse (35 tweets), racism (18 tweets) and gender discrimination (12 tweets).

Building on these themes and supported by U&G theory, the analysis also points out to five different but not mutually exclusive uses of the hashtag: (1) highlighting racial, gender, and sexual identity-based discrimination and sharing stories of religious or sexual abuse, (2) negotiating Christianity, (3) speaking against current political and religious institutional discrimination, (4) creating a community and identity, and (5) actively calling for people to empty churches.

It seems then, that the hashtag functions as a movement and as a signifier for a community. In that way, it connects concepts of activism and online community, positioning the community itself as a form of activism. While some uses call for action or are more explicitly politically driven, and thus better understood as part of a movement, other uses have to do more with personal needs, such as sharing and supporting, classified by Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev [28] as indicators of a real community. Through sharing, liking, retweeting, and commenting, users try to craft an online space for this identity and community. While this might not be the direct call of action of marching or protesting, creating this community and giving voice to this identity can be thought of as a form of activism, of resistance: creating a community is giving visibility to those who left.

#EmptyThePews started as a verb—asking people to actually empty churches. It was an imperative, a command. But as the analysis shows, it moves from being an imperative to a symbol that represent various experiences and stances, and that happens, I suggest, because of users' various social and emotional needs (e.g., uses and gratification theory). This is shown throughout the analysis: people seem to want to share their stories of religious abuse and discrimination, and this hashtag, while not official created for that purpose, was re-appropriated for it. As shown by scholars such as Rosenbaum [15] and Yadlin-Segal [16], hashtags are polysemic and can hold multiple meanings and, I would add, usages [17]. The hashtag sign is empty and re-interpretable and thus can be appropriated for needs that were not foreseen by the actual hashtag creators.

This Twitter hashtag did not facilitate an active movement of people leaving churches, did not work as a mobilization for social action, but instead facilitates a Twitter community. Because social media is based in quantitative values (numeric counts of likes, shares, retweets, etc.), there is an inherent inclination for the signs to be interpreted in a context that affords the greatest amount of meaning to the large numbers. In the case of #EmptyThePews, however, it was not one shared meaning that created traction, but that the multiple meanings all contributed to a sense of solidarity, the idea of a community. Further, communities are based on shared meanings and experiences. Thus, through the polysemic use of the hashtag, a community was born. This use of the hashtag did not manifest in the mass leaving of multiple churches, at least not in a way that can be quantitatively proven. But it does allow for a community and identity to emerge and flourish, creating a discourse and relationships that can strengthen individuals who felt hurt by churches across the USA. By creating and strengthening ex-Evangelicals this hashtag does work towards resistance—for one needs a name before they can march.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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