CULTURE-BUILDING THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNICATION:

A CASE STUDY ON THE RABBIT ROOM NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

by

Kate Elizabeth Mead

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

School of Communication and the Arts

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ABSTRACT

Communication patterns and techniques have been changed by the continuous evolution of online technology. Research has found that online communities may unify through a myriad of communication techniques. To date, however, there is limited research over the online communication patterns of faith-based organizations, particularly faith-based nonprofits that operate separately from traditional religious bodies. The purpose of this case study was to develop a deeper understanding of how communication presents itself online and thus develops culture within a Christian nonprofit organization. This qualitative case study analyzed the Rabbit Room organization and its online artifacts from November 1, 2021 through April 30, 2022 through the framework of Bormann's symbolic convergence theory. The overarching research question of this study sought how online communication encouraged the creation and maintenance of a particular culture within a Christian nonprofit organization through fantasy themes and rhetorical vision(s). Online content was collected, coded, and analyzed in search of fantasy themes and any resulting rhetorical vision(s) that would indicate the cultural norms of the organization. The study identified three fantasy themes within the organization's communication and one larger rhetorical vision, each playing a prominent role in the creation and maintenance of the group's culture. The research findings demonstrated how consistent theming can unify otherwise diverse audiences, encouraging active participation in the maintenance of a group's established culture.

Keywords: online communication, culture, community, symbolic convergence theory, Christian, nonprofit, organization

Copyright Page

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all who, through their communication, create a group culture that displays and honors the glory and power of God.

Acknowledgments

This study was made possible (and better) through the support of my committee members, Dr. Jessica Ptomey, Dr. Wes Hartley, and Dr. Robert Mott. Their guidance and encouragement bolstered me often and I was blessed to be served by them. Additionally, there was no one more influential in the starting, continuing, and finishing of this doctoral work than my husband. For our entire marriage he persistently encouraged me to pursue doctoral work and when I (finally) listened, he persistently encouraged me through it. No one supports me more or better and I am honored to walk alongside him. To God be the glory.

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Center for Disease Control (CDC)

Contemporary Christian Music (CCM)

Digital Single-Lens Reflex (DSLR)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Communication has been established as a primary method through which community and culture is created between individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Carey, 1988). The consistent evolution of online forms of communication has created a need for continued research into the uses and results of various forms of online communication. This qualitative case study analysis aimed to uncover information about how online communication is used by faith-based nonprofit organizations for the creation and cultivation of a group's culture. It utilized a case study on a Christian nonprofit organization, the Rabbit Room, which has established an online community of participants and followers. This chapter will introduce the core communication concepts foundational to the study and then provide an overview of the specific case study.

Community and the Social Reality of Groups

Every group has a social reality. This reality defines the nature of the group. It establishes norms and customs. It helps members identify collectively. Schatzki (1988) asserts that social reality is the "interrelatedness of what determines, occurs in, and is produced by human lives" (p. 244). Carey (1988) expounds on this concept by contending that social reality is not something that inherently exists. Therefore, social reality is not something that can be merely shared through human communication but, rather, it is built through human communication. Through the communicative interactions between individuals, social reality is created and interpreted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through the communicative exchange that happens during daily life, groups create a shared identity and sense of reality that defines them collectively (Fine & Hallett, 2014). This social reality is symbolic in nature and does not exist in the concrete world but is developed symbolically through communication (Bormann, 1972).

Communication brings people together as they connect over messaging and experiences

because communication's use of symbols allows group members to consistently relate and, therefore, create shared understandings (George, 2018). Individuals who interact on a regular basis are more likely to come to similar understandings. References made within groups are often recognized exclusively by group members because of shared experiences, and these common understandings can create a shared identity among members (Fine & Hallett, 2014; Goffman, 1981). Particular language choices can also contribute to the creation and maintenance of group identity and social reality (Kidd et al., 2016). For instance, a social reality can be established through communicating past group events or potential futures and can, as a result, shape the behavior of individuals within the group (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Chuang et al., 2004; Fine & Hallett, 2014). Resulting group development affects not only behavior within the group, but also the group's interactions with the context and culture surrounding them (Crouch, 2008; Fine & Hallett, 2014). Jaskyte and Dressler (2004) assert that a deep understanding of a group's symbolic reality is influenced by individual behaviors, group-enacted behaviors, and the context within which the group is situated. Each of these factors affect communication and communication, in turn, affects the group's social reality.

This symbolic social reality can be found in groups, public addresses, and organizations because the communication present in each can create a reality into which others may join (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crouch, 2008; Wuthnow, 1994). In essence, symbolic reality draws additional people into community through communication that extends within the group and to others outside the group. Group membership has been shown to affect communication content and patterns (Gallois et al., 2018). Communication can unify members within a group while contrasting in-group communication with out-group communication. Stereotypes can often influence members of the group to communicate a certain way with those outside of the group.

For instance, Giles et al. (2012) found that group membership among White, non-Latino police officers affected how they interacted with Latino/a individuals and Ishii et al. (2021) noted that academic librarians can identify as organizational group members but also as occupational group members. These memberships affect how they interact with others outside the established group. Groups can exist in any scenario or context, and ultimately affect communication both inside and outside of those groups.

Community

Groups may come to exist in a myriad of situations. In a simplistic view, it may seem that all it takes to establish the community of a group is some sort of commonality among individuals. Occupations, hobbies, ethnicities, geographic locations, lifestyle preferences, health diagnoses, education levels, intellectual aptitudes, biological features, family dynamics, political affiliations, religious doctrines, athletic abilities—all of these and more can provide a foundation for the establishment of a group. Organizations that focus on developing online communities have leveraged this idea, building entire social media platforms around the idea of networking with others who share experiences, relationships, and preferences with each other. For example, Facebook's Groups feature encourages these connections, and even more expressly, suggests that users join multiple groups with which they identify through commonality and this functionality is useful to bridging individuals across spaces (Arica, 2020; Calin, 2019).

Community is much more complex than commonalities, however, and does require the creation of a symbolic reality. A group of blonde individuals does not necessarily establish community just because each individual happens to have blonde hair. Saxophone players will not always unite together, nor will all individuals who happen to live in the state of Wisconsin. Many groups frequently aim for more intentional and effective community because of one primary

truth: a collection of individuals that share some commonality does not inevitably result in successful community. Rothenbuhler (2000) contends that community does not always imply cohesion or positive interactions. Rather, community is often used as a tool for the working out of differences because members who join together are not identical and may not even be inherently alike.

Community from Differences

A variety of fields have sought to uncover how to build and maintain community in order to accomplish specific purposes. Businesses seek to build up greater community within organizational membership. Sociology studies the community present in geographical people groups. Public health studies how to successfully guide communities toward new practices and treatments. Studying community, therefore, may be seeking answers to public health crises (H. K. Brown et al., 2017; Haas & Reves, 2019), cyclical aspects of crime in a particular city (D. Hartmann & Depro, 2006; Telep & Hibdon, 2018), or how to effectively encourage customers to create a brand community with a particular company so that business growth ensues (Coelho et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2018).

The study of religious groups is another academic area which considers the creation and influence of community. In America, the study of Christianity has been one that consistently considers the religion's role in a variety of contexts, including the role that Christianity plays in the development and effectiveness of Christian community. Studies have shown that the pursuit of community finds individuals seeking ties to others through the route of communication (Jones, 1981; A. Li et al., 2019). Communication is positioned as a cultivator and developer of community.

Burke (1950) employs his concept of identification to explain the rhetorical act of

identifying with an audience to successfully persuade and communicate. The process of identification, ironically, begins with the reality of differences. Identification is not necessary unless it is acknowledged that individuals begin differently. They begin as unique beings, but the process of identification can minimize those differences by communicating commonalities that draw individuals closer together into identification with one another (Burke, 1950). Rothenbuhler (2000) similarly asserts that communication is a tool used to bring people together despite differences. This "social accomplishment" (Rothenbuhler, 2000, p. 147) is an achievement realized through communication that bridges a spatial gap that exists between communicators (Peters, 1994). Communication is necessary because people are not innately unified. It is through communication, then, that community can be created because it enables the coming together of minds, ideas and thoughts.

Christian Communities

Expressly Christian communities have a strong presence in the historical study of America. The nation was founded by groups seeking to express their religious beliefs in freedom (Kirkpatrick, 1992) and that founding principle has remained steady in the centuries that have followed. Historically, academic research has focused on the rhetoric of influential preachers and leaders (Casey, 2000; Riley, 2015; Wilson, 1952), as well as specific denominations that represent large populations of Christians (Reddy, 2019a, 2019b; Souders, 2014; W. H. Taylor, 2014; Trawick & Lile, 2007). Christianity, however, is not one unified group or movement. There are denominational differences that separate Lutherans from Catholics and Pentecostals from Anglicans. There are congregational differences that make two Baptist churches in the same city two clearly separate entities. Many of these differences can be attributed to how Scripture is interpreted and how those differences result in diversity even among individuals who

are commonly grouped together by the term "Christian" (K. A. Johnson et al., 2016). Similarly, various other characteristics of individuals have shown them to be commonly divided as a religious group, rather than unified purely because of an overarching religious belief (De Beer & Naidoo, 2016). From this division, however, sprouts other forms of commonality. Formalized groups pursue Christian education together (Maitanmi, 2019), individuals seeking recovery from pain, addiction, or hurt join groups to heal together (A. E. Brown et al., 2013; Celebrate Recovery, 2018), individuals join together in social movements (M. Lee, 2021), or an affinity for Christianity and the arts can prompt the creation and maintenance of an organization like the Rabbit Room.

It is estimated that between 65% and 70% of Americans identify as Christians (Pew Research, 2021a; PRRI Staff, 2021). Within American Christianity, individuals may participate in Christianity through a variety of groups including denominations, congregations, and/or other various religious organizations. Christian groups that exist outside of the bounds of traditional denominations or congregations may be referred to as religious organizations, parachurch organizations, religious nonprofits, Christian nonprofits, or Christian special purpose groups. In purpose, these are organizations that operate under American nonprofit laws as they aim to serve a targeted population through the inclusion of faith-based initiatives. They are defined as "501(c)(3) organizations that define or express themselves as Christian in mission or identity but are not congregations or denominational agencies" (Scheitle, 2009, p. 384). They differ significantly in missions and find commonality only in the claim that whatever they endeavor to do, they do from a Christian perspective. For the purpose of this paper, they will be referred to as Christian nonprofits.

Christian Nonprofits

Christian nonprofits are as diverse and varied as their denominational and congregational brethren. They seek to operate as an arm of the Christian church by serving in ways church congregations cannot or should not (Saunders, 2015). These groups can take many forms. The Wycliffe Bible Translators nonprofit turns its attention to translating the Bible into all languages. Compassion International seeks to partner with individuals so that children in poverty around the world can receive financial and spiritual support. Awana supports discipleship among preschool through high school students by partnering with individual groups hosted within local churches. While these few examples have a national or international scope, the majority of Christian nonprofits are established in and continue to serve their local communities (Scheitle, 2010). These groups feed the hungry, aid individuals struggling with addictions, host sports camps for community youth, evangelize on college campuses, or they may operate as private religious educational institutions. The number of ways Christian nonprofits serve communities and attempt to integrate faith into service are almost innumerable.

While Christian nonprofit organizations can be viewed as a relatively new phenomenon, Scheitle (2010) points out that groups similar to these organizations developed centuries ago and were particularly prevalent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During this time, outreach agencies were created to serve as an arm of the church by developing groups devoted to ministries like evangelism, Bible publishing, missionary projects, and contributing to social movements like temperance and abolitionism. Though many of these individual groups were not sustained throughout the ensuing centuries, Scheitle argues that their very presence demonstrates that the recent surge of religious nonprofit groups is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it displays a pattern of "rise, fall, rise again" for these Christian nonprofit groups that represents "a

continuous narrative in the changing structure of the religious market" (Scheitle, 2010, p. 21).

These Christian nonprofit organizations and their purposes represent "a shift in the organization

of American religion to structures outside of congregations and denominations" (Scheitle &

McCarthy, 2018, p. 238) and are therefore worthy of study. Wuthnow (1994) similarly notes that

organizations operate within entire fields and each one helps determine culture in tandem with

like-minded organizations. Christian nonprofits, therefore, should be studied in order to better

understand the culture that results from such organizations (McNamee, 2011).

      Christian nonprofits like the Rabbit Room provide an interpretation of how Christianity

engages with the world outside itself and encourages members to participate in that

interpretation. Research into these nonprofits can provide insights into how the individuals who

are a part of the organizations endeavor to enact their Christianity through the symbolic realities

that they create through communication. And, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted, the

symbolic realities created within a societal group have the potential to positively maintain

society. Through communication acts, Christian groups such as the Rabbit Room have a distinct

ability to create a culture, maintain a culture, and ensure that the culture being created and

maintained is one that, in their opinion, glorifies God.

Culture

      Culture has been defined in a variety of ways. Colloquially, the term culture often refers

to varieties of literature, food, music and art. More formally, it has been defined as patterns of

human behavior (Kluckhohn & Kelly, 1945). Ultimately, culture depends upon two things. The

first is a cultural artifact and the second is a public (Crouch, 2008). Cultural artifacts include

things like the written works of Jane Austen, McDonald's restaurants, and jazz music. These

items become a part of culture because they are received and responded to within a group of

individuals, or a public. They are also changeable. Artifacts can be edited and altered in attempts to make new cultural artifacts or new culture. Blues and jazz influence R&B and Hip-hop, McDonald's launched a plethora of fast-food chains which altered how America (and the world) ate, and the works of Jane Austen furthered popular literature and later inspired a bevy of cinematic interpretations. Therefore, the second important aspect of culture is that it requires a public in order to actually be a culture. It requires community.

Within a group of individuals, culture can be uncovered and analyzed because of how that culture is accepted, created, maintained, and cultivated by that community. This idea of culture aligns with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concept of socially constructed reality. Institutions, traditions and roles combine with human socialization to dialectically create reality. Reality is co-created between individuals as they participate in this process. In order to study culture, Crouch (2008) recommends turning attention to several enlightening questions:

1. What does culture assume about the world?

2. What does it assume about how the world should be?

3. What does it make possible?

4. What does it make more difficult or impossible?

5. What culture is being created in response?

These questions guide researchers to not only uncover culture, but to consider it as an influencer of society and future culture. In this way, culture is an ever-evolving entity that was created from something that already existed and will continue to develop into a new thing (Crouch, 2008). To study Christian culture in a way that acknowledges new manifestations of it, this study analyzed the Rabbit Room because of the nonprofit organization's manifestation of Christian culture in relation to its use of online communication.

Online Communication

Strategies that are being utilized in Christianity and Christian nonprofits are occurring more frequently in the online realm, showcasing a potential change in Christian culture. The development and ensuing popularity of the internet has made it a common platform for communication of many varieties in many contexts. Mass messaging takes place over the internet, but more personal communication also occurs. Messaging from organizations can be broadcast to general audiences. This limits the direct engagement between individuals and allows audience members to remain isolated while receiving identical messaging. Alternately, social media platforms enable individuals to directly interact, despite distance. In this way, it works dichotomously by isolating individuals while also extending their social reach (DiGennaro & Dutton, 2007).

With the internet also comes new complexities. The internet has been shown to open the door to hyperpersonal relationships (Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Rains et al., 2019), increased levels of miscommunication (Mazer & Ledbetter, 2012; Perry & Werner-Wilson, 2011), and negativity that can affect self-worth (D. Li et al., 2020; Naydanova & Beal, 2016; Zhai, 2019). Internet communication is rife with strengths and weaknesses that affect communication messaging. Perhaps most notably, it has traits that may be considered both a weakness and a strength, depending on who is doing the assessing. For instance, while online communication extends time and place and therefore connects individuals, it also separates them by removing the need for more traditional interpersonal communication. It can impart relational distance where distance could not exist prior to the development of the internet. Communication between managers and workers previously was required to be done in-person or, at the very least, over the phone. Forms of communication have now been developed to allow and even expect individuals

to remain relationally separate. In the interest of convenience and time, relationships co-exist from afar. While this certainly reduces the time required for communication, it can also introduce greater miscommunication or lack of personal connection which might have adverse effects on group cohesion (Byron, 2008; Holtgraves, 2021).

These cultural realities have implications for religious communication. It has been noted that there is a lack of academic consideration for how religious messaging is presented and accepted, particularly online (Campbell, 2005; Mitchell, 2007; van Geuns, 2019). With the increase of Christian messaging that occurs online, there is a need for increased understanding of how that messaging is presented in its multiple forms and what its effects are. Some of these effects might be positive and some might be negative, while some may be positive or negative only because of the context or manner in which they are expressed. For instance, Facebook recently announced that it would begin transitioning itself into a new identity, Meta (Associated Press, 2021; Reality Labs, 2021). This innovation has some looking forward to coming changes and others skeptically considering its implications for humanity (Rushkoff, 2021; Vena, 2021; Weinberg, 2021). Christian circles are also considering how technology can change communication between individuals and, thus, culture.

One concern is that the proliferation of virtual reality may blur the lines between virtual reality and the real world (Larson, 2021). Christian messages based in the real world may be more difficult to focus on when communication in an alternate reality is so prevalent. Similarly, some warn of potential dangers to individual identity and interpersonal communication skills, including the distraction of individuals from Christian community (Bantum, 2021; Bennett, 2021). This concern is not new and not solely a result of Facebook's recent pivot in the direction of Meta and virtual reality. For years, the communication occurring on the internet has been

considered a threat to Christian individuals for its ability to so consistently insert itself into daily life, even seemingly uninvited (A. Kumar, 2011). Some have recognized that Christian groups have been ill-prepared to keep in step with advancing technology and, therefore, have been less than effective at properly responding to and using the technology (Berk, 2021; Harber & Miller, 2021). Whether it be the coming metaverse or a yet unknown advancement, it is evident that the internet, through online communication, affects perceptions and even reality—and those affect Christianity and culture. This state of affairs points to a significant need for more research regarding technology and how it affects Christian individuals and groups. While studies cannot yet be done on technologies that have not yet taken effect, researchers can study Christianity within existing technology to better prepare Christians to effectively interact with technology for the glory of God.

The internet has already changed Christian communication significantly. Its ability to provide relatively equal access of information has allowed individuals and churches to broadcast messages to far-reaching corners and has, thus, changed how Christianity is manifested and cultivated (Anderson, 2014; Foley, 2002; Rinehart, 2017; Stokel-Walker, 2017). In an internet era that has seen individuals and groups compete for audiences through purported identification, sensationalism, and grandeur, some Christian nonprofits have sought to present messages in a more measured way, without incentivizing "a fallen culture" (Dalrymple, 2021). Other Christian groups have grounded themselves in the world of the internet and gained traction for their group and their faith through that technology (Stokel-Walker, 2017). Still others have moved forward with limited understanding of how online communication can innovate their offerings and have, therefore, found limited success (Ebarb, 2019). Further study on the types of online communication that are used by Christian groups can help broaden the world's understanding of

how religion affects communication, communication affects religion, and how both intersect to develop, maintain, and challenge communities. Therefore, this study on the online communication utilized by the Rabbit Room provides insights into the integration of Christianity and online communication.

Online Communication in Christian Nonprofits

There are no innately right words or wrong words, right methods or wrong methods, and there seems to be no proven equation for how to successfully communicate a message. What there should be, however, are more studies and teachings that help the world better understand what types of communication produce what effects in which contexts. Within the context of Christianity, communication is best understood when studied from the varied contexts in which Christianity exists. One of these contexts is the realm of Christian nonprofits, which communicate in ways unique to their purposes and audiences. The internet has created a new way to communicate and increased understanding of these changes and realities requires increased study, particularly where online communication intersects with the work of Christian nonprofits.

The aspect of these organizations that was of primary interest to the researcher was how community and culture develop within these Christian groups through communication. It has been commonly cited that organizations develop their own sense of community and culture (Gregory et al., 2009; O'Reilly, et al., 2014; Roulin & Krings, 2020; Spicer, 2020; Wuthnow, 1994), but informal observations led the researcher to contemplate how communication within a Christian nonprofit shapes the nature of interactions and, thus, the communal effectiveness of the organizations.

The Rabbit Room

The selected case for this study was a Christian nonprofit organization called the Rabbit Room. The Rabbit Room is a nonprofit organization that is based near Nashville, Tennessee. It was developed as an online community that encourages Christian musicians, writers, and artists through community and artistic support. The organization's mission is summarized as the cultivation and curation of "stories, music, and art to nourish Christ-centered communities for the life of the world" (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). The organization describes itself as an experiment in creative community that focuses on music, story, and art. These art forms are intended to bring people together and bring them closer to Jesus Christ. The Rabbit Room combines an intentional striving toward community, a distinctly Christian mission, and online communication as essential components of its organizational identity. These things position the organization as a fruitful study in how Christianity can be communicated and used to cultivate community through online communication.

Statement of the Problem

Communication is an endeavor that speaks into differences and separation in an attempt to bring commonality and unity (De Beer & Naidoo, 2016; Rothenbuhler, 2000). This phenomenon has been studied from multiple perspectives, including how religious communication unifies individuals and how online communication unifies individuals. Much of the existing research, however, fails to do two things: (a) it fails to consider religious communication that occurs outside of the individual or traditional congregation and (b) it fails to consider religious communication that occurs online. Study of expressly Christian communication has often been limited to non-digital forms or communication as it stems from traditional congregations and denominations or individual speakers and leaders.

The general problem to be addressed was the lack of understanding about how Christian culture is expressed online. Online communication bridges spatial gaps, uniting individuals who would otherwise not be able to communicate or identify with one another and is therefore a valuable research area in the study of communal culture (Briones et al., 2011; Carey, 1988; Çinar, 2016; Hsu, 2019). Existing literature shows expressions of Christianity that occur in non-traditional forms online to be an understudied source of communication, particularly as they relate to religious and spiritual culture and identity among members (Chaves, 2002; McNamee, 2011; Scheitle, 2010; Siuda, 2021; Torry, 2005).

Significance of the Study

This study proposed that members of Christian organizations that communicate primarily online create and maintain group culture in ways unique to the world of the internet. This online communication was believed to further the effectiveness of an organization's missional work by strongly unifying individuals within established groups. The study of this communication provides insight into the nature of community and communal identity. It also provides insight into the tools of online communication available to and used by a Christian organization in the creation of culture. The study's focus on online communication provides insights that may be used to increase the effectiveness of Christian groups and communicators.

Christian nonprofits, in particular, provide a useful arena for the study of Christian communication. Because Christian nonprofits can specialize in particular religious activities but remain generalized in the Christian audiences they target, studying them provides insights into broad Christian culture, communication patterns, and communication tactics. These provide a useful focus of study for those looking for tested methods of strategic communication within the realm of Christianity.

Purpose of the Study

This study contributes to understandings of Christian group communication and culture through a case study of one Christian nonprofit organization: the Rabbit Room. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the nature of communication and community online, particularly within Christian groups that actively participate and seek consistent community to bolster fellowship among members and the greater Church body. The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how Christian communication presents itself online and thus develops culture. Communication that originated from the Rabbit Room was analyzed through a case study to provide insight into the nature of how Christian nonprofits communicate online in an aim to create and cultivate community among members and participants.

Definition of Terms

There are several terms that should be defined to ensure there is a proper understanding of the researcher's meaning.

1. *Christian nonprofit* is defined as an organization that holds 501(c)(3) status in the United States and also has a mission that is expressly Christian in nature (Scheitle, 2010).

2. *Community* is defined as a created social reality, or a symbolically created reality which enables group members to share consciousness and operate in congruity (Bormann,1972).

3. *Culture* is defined as what humans make of the world through what already exists (Crouch, 2008).

4. *Online communication* is defined as communication that occurs through the channel of the internet. This online communication may be synchronous or asynchronous in nature, but all of it will exist and be observable only when an individual has been connected to the internet through an electronic device. Online communication requires the service of

the internet to allow for the ability to interact with content and social relationships

(Campbell, 2006; Gradinaru, 2019; Sun, 2019a; 2019b).

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made regarding this study's research. It was assumed

that online communication differs in nature and scope from other forms of communication. It

was assumed that Christian community utilizes and relies upon communication and that

communication, therefore, both creates and maintains community. It was also assumed that while

each Christian organization is unique in its mission, function, and communication, there are

commonalities that allow the study of the communication of one organization to have elements

of generalizability to other Christian organizations.

Since communication available at the owned websites and social media accounts that

were studied was created and presented by Rabbit Room administrators, it was assumed that the

communication shared in these locations was representative of the group as a whole and thus

testified to the group's communication modes and preferences. In addition, it was assumed that

text and visuals work together as a meta-message of communication that influences group

members. In this way, visuals present online may take the place of nonverbal communication

that is often otherwise absent from online communication.

There were also assumptions that laid the foundation for the theoretical framework of this

research: symbolic convergence theory. These assumptions were noted in Cragan & Shields'

(1992) case study on corporate strategic planning:

1. Meaning, emotion, and motive for action are in the manifest content of a message.

2. Reality is created symbolically.

3. Fantasy theme chaining creates symbolic convergence that is dramatistic in form.

4. Fantasy theme analysis is the basic method to capture symbolic reality.

5. Fantasy themes occur in and chain-out from all discourse.

6. At least three master analogues—righteous, social, and pragmatic—compete as alternative explanations of symbolic reality. (p. 200)

Limitations

Because this study focused on the communication presented to a particular group with unique interests, identities, and purposes, the findings may not be generalizable to all Christian nonprofit organizations. The nature of online communication is also such that it is consistently updated and may change quickly. Therefore, the case study approach was required to focus on communication acts within a limited time range. Communication from a period of six months was considered representative, as it provided limits on the amount of data that was to be analyzed and coded. This six-month collection period was from November 1, 2021 to April 30, 2022. As online technologies and communication techniques can change quickly, situating this data collection within a bounded timeframe may eventually limit the applicability of some findings regarding the technology used.

Qualitative research also presents the opportunity for researcher bias. While the researcher's experience with The Rabbit Room was limited, she had still been aware of the organization for several years and had participated in a small amount of the organization's online communication prior to the data collection window. Also, while the bias may not be inherently positive nor negative, the researcher has been familiar with and active in Christianity for the majority of her life. This provided the researcher a lens through which to view and interpret the messaging from the Rabbit Room. This may have introduced a potential bias but was also beneficial as she was better able to understand the language and interpretations inherent in the

group's religious communication.

Delimitations

The proposed study analyzed the online communication shared through the Rabbit Room organization from November 1, 2021 through April 30, 2022, as present on the organizational website and social media pages. It was proposed that this period of time would be most useful and generalizable because it was the most recent available. The study also only included communication that originated in the online sphere rather than communication that extended into the physical world (face-to-face communication). Since the Rabbit Room is a community of artists and appreciators of those arts, there was also communication that occurred around but not within the Rabbit Room—these communicative situations were not considered, except when needed for clarification purposes. Personal artist websites, for instance, were not the purview of this study even if messaging there happened to relate to the Rabbit Room. However, any events that were organized by the Rabbit Room were considered, since those messages were planned and executed by the organization. The study also remained a passive-observation study and therefore did not directly interact with any employees, members, or followers of the Rabbit Room.

Conclusion

In the world of communication there is no clear path that leads to perfect communication. Instead, an entire continuum of decisions helps communicators share messages more fluidly, eloquently, and effectively. There may certainly be a better or worse way to communicate, but there is no one true way. These messages create and maintain a symbolic reality and encourage identification among members. The messages also cultivate community and culture among the group. Communication that is utilized by groups and organizations contributes to or detracts

from group purposes. When group members strive to share messages and communicate clearly, they do so to the best of their natural and learned ability. These methods do not fall into categories of "right" communication or "wrong" communication but studying them allows researchers to better identify and understand effective and ineffective methods of communication.

For all fields of study, communication affects messaging. Knowledge is static if there is no ability to communicate. If knowledge cannot be transferred, it lives and dies without advancement. In the realm of Christianity, there is no spread nor growth of Christian culture without effective communication. Because of its prevalence and influence, American Christianity in all its forms should be studied by researchers. As of yet, however, much of this religion remains understudied because of the academic neglect of the study of Christian groups that operate separately yet in tandem with traditional denominations and congregations. These groups are Christian nonprofits that have leadership independent of the organized Christian Church and they vary widely in their organizational missions.

A deeper understanding of how the internet and online communication influence Christian culture is needed in academic scholarship. The Rabbit Room is an organization that provides worthwhile study because the "meanings, motives, and emotions of people can be discovered in their rhetoric" (Ford, 1989, p. 2) and this group of people and their communication create a social reality. This reality takes on a particular form when it is online, and therefore, this study conducted research in that area.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research study focused on studying Christian community online, particularly by considering how members of a Christian nonprofit organization (the Rabbit Room) communicate online and, through that online communication, establish community and culture. The existing literature on this specific topic is limited; however, it correlates to the literature of three related topics: (a) religious use of the internet; (b) studies on community and online community; (c) the nature of communication as a builder of community and culture. Within chapter two, these three research areas will be reviewed, and their intersection will be revealed as an existing gap in literature. Lastly, the sociocultural tradition of communication studies and symbolic convergence theory will be discussed as an effective framework through which to study this communication phenomena.

Internet Studies and Religion

Internet studies is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of academic topics that seek to observe and understand the effects of the internet on daily life. Much of internet studies revolves around communication patterns and how computer mediated communication is influencing lifestyles and community (Bell & Kornbluh, 2019; W. Lee & Lin, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Yamamoto et al., 2020). One growing area of research is the intersection of religion and internet studies. Attention has been drawn to the case for the integration of the two fields, citing the importance of religion as an area of study because of its prevalence in the lives of many (Campbell, 2005; Campbell & Vitullo, 2016; Farrell, 2011; Stewart, 2011).

While traditional forms of religion may not be as common or popular as they once were and church attendance has declined (Brauer, 2018; Dilmaghani, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019; Torry, 2005), individuals frequently have authentic spiritual beliefs and activities—many

of these showing up in the realm of the internet (Campbell & Evolvi, 2019; Clasquin-Johnson, 2016; Harwig et al., 2018; Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017; Neumaier, 2016; van Geuns, 2019). Some studies have suggested that increased internet usage is a sign of decreased religiosity (Dolan, 2018; Specktor, 2018), but many religious organizations engage online as a way to connect with and cultivate community. Campbell (2012) notes that the networked community that appears online can contribute to knowledge of "storied identities…convergent practice, and a multisite reality" (p. 65) as individuals enact their faith in both online and offline contexts. Research has found that offline religious organizations have transitioned to utilizing online communication which restructures "norms, values, and practices of religious community" (Cheong & Poon, 2008, p. 89). Furthermore, these online acts have been shown to build religious communities in novel ways made possible by the incorporation of online technology (Cheong et al., 2009; Chow & Kurlberg, 2020; Gault, 2018; Holmes, 2021; Hutchings, 2007; van Geuns, 2019). Other studies have documented denominational communication patterns which transitioned from solely offline communication into the world of the internet to more effectively reach audiences with religious messaging (Frost & Youngblood, 2014; Reddy, 2019a; 2019b). Effective utilization of internet technology has been recognized as a great potential for cultivating groups that corporately participate in religion (Krotoski, 2011; Raushenbush, 2022).

Existing research includes the method of integration of religion online and offline, and an additional focus has been the consideration of the communication content that originates from religious organizations. Website content has been analyzed and found to offer a combination of online communication that stands alone (Baab, 2008) as well as "in-line communication," or online communication that ties significantly to offline content to increase the effectiveness of both (Díez Bosch et al., 2017, p. 319). Content has also been analyzed in an attempt to discover

types of authority discursive communication supports within religious online forums, which can result in "individualistic, commodified forms of religiosity" (Kolodziejska & Arat, 2016, p. 4). Lewis's (2014) study on online communities of Paganism noted that forms of practice had become more individualized and therefore denoted a movement toward personalized religion and away from more traditional communal forms.

Advancements in technology have been observed to increase participation in aspects of religion, as the technology meets needs of the individual or community across space and time distances (McLeister, 2019). Vala and Huang's (2019) study analyzed a Chinese religious movement that encouraged individuals to hand-copy the Bible as an act of spiritual worship due to the cultural setting of the movement location. Research has shown that online communication enables religion to interact with and encourage audiences in tailored expressions of spirituality that reach audiences across time and space yet still within the context of that time and space. This hand-copying movement, for instance, enabled participants to establish a religious alter-identity that was able to coincide with what it means to be a citizen of the People's Republic of China.

It is important to note here, with the introduction of the concepts of time and space, that an essential part of analyzing online communication is to understand that technology affects that communication. This is a core tenet of the theory of media ecology. Marshall McLuhan first introduced the concept of media ecology, which was later named by Neil Postman (Strate, 2004). The theory proposes that any introduction of a new technology or medium irrevocably alters reality. This is the central idea behind media ecology: not only does technology alter the way messages are sent, but it changes everything, including a cultural expression of reality. Mindsets, actions, beliefs, value systems—all will change along with technological advancements.

Media Ecology

In the past, the transmission of messages and content was done only through interpersonal and public communication. Dialogue was encouraged because it was through this interaction and exchange of arguments of logic that an understanding of truth could be attained. In-person public communication could be done in a similar manner. Ancient rhetoricians pursued truth and then sought to present that truth to others in a persuasive manner (Craig, 1999). The power and influence of communication changed significantly, however, once the printing press allowed for the mass production of knowledge and opinion (Ellul, 1964; McLuhan, 1999; Ong, 2002; Postman, 1993). This pivotal moment in the history of communication enabled messaging to be shared with more people more easily and over greater distances, but it also started limiting the dialogic process because individuals could engage with another person's logical thought from a distance without conversing with the ideas directly.

Another complexity that technology introduced was the lack of control for audience adaptation. The rhetoric of interpersonal communication and public communication encouraged a deep understanding of audience to tailor messaging for them. However, the printing press made the sharing of text simpler and thus extended the potential audience of each book or pamphlet. Printing certainly makes messages more accessible and, as Ong (2002) points out, results in a transition from orality to a literate society for the exchange of ideas. However, while literacy can enable society to better record, share, and recall knowledge, it also limits the exchange of ideas in the moment and limits an author's ability to communicate for a specific audience. This may limit the effectiveness of messaging because a book may be tailored for general audiences, but there is no real way to control who the audience is so the message may end up lacking in rhetorical ability. Something printed can end up in any hands, and therefore, the successful

exchange of ideas may be limited because it was not originally written for the audience in whose hands it ends up (Ong, 1975).

This is a significant shift in the world of communication. Audience members in ancient times, when listening to a speaker present an argument, could dialogue with that speaker and pursue truth together with him. The message would likely be tailored toward the specific audience, and the exchange of ideas could address their own experiences and judgments. This exchange would take place in the same space and time—in tandem. Therefore, the pursuit of truth could be something of a corporate effort. The technological development of the printing press, however, changed that dynamic. One positive that resulted was that it allowed ideas and ideals to be disseminated so much more quickly and easily. Historical events like the American Revolution relied significantly on the ability to print pamphlets and spread opinions of English injustice and oppression throughout the colonies, since mass messaging draws greater numbers of individuals toward each other through the acceptance of printed messaging. Conversely, this also limits the dialogue that can occur between those considering the presented ideas. If readers have questions or need clarification, text cannot provide them. As Ong (2002) states, "if you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get an explanation; if you ask a text, you get back nothing except the same, often stupid, words which called for your question in the first place" (p. 78). Certainly, those with ample means (both financial and time) could converge to certain locations so that ideas could be shared and debated synchronously. But many receiving printed messaging would not be able to participate in those exchanges. A revolution, then, may rally support from those who may not have significantly participated in an exchange of the minds.

This line of thinking is an example of the theory of media ecology. When new technology

enters the world, its effects are not limited to the content transmitted nor the speed through which it is provided. Media ecology asserts that it is the technology itself that is influencing society because it changes the dynamics of culture. McLuhan (1964/2005) notably argued that the medium is the message, and this claim is a central tenet of media ecology. It summarizes that the primary influence of the media is not the content it delivers, but the presence of its method of delivery.

Electronic Developments and Media Ecology

After the development of print, electronics continued the evolution of culture (McLuhan, 1999; Palakeel, 2011). Since electronic media presents large quantities of information all at once, the presentation is far different than the linear, literate method of transmission found in the written word (McLuhan, 1999, p. 42). Therefore, its reception relies on multiple senses rather than only the eyes which do the reading of written text. For instance, electronic communication relies heavily on the microphone, which bridges greater distances while keeping an audience in "immediate relation with the speaker" (McLuhan, 1999, p. 114). In Postman's (1993) words, developments like this have created a technopoly, or a society wholly dependent upon technology. Much of communication has aimed for the automation of things that were once labor-intensive and increased the ability to record and remember them (Fang, 1997). The printing press allowed for the recording of knowledge that could be available to the masses. The microphone extended knowledge sharing by allowing person-to-person exchange despite spatial distance (McLuhan, 1999). These technologies change reality. Neil Postman (1993) contends that advances in technology have moved society from being rooted in the "symbolic world of art, polities, myth, ritual, and religion" (p. 23) and toward a striving for increased efficiency and productivity. This elevates the system of efficiency, automates processes and thinking, and aims

to avoid subjectivity. Each new technology creates "new areas of perception and new areas of blindness" (McLuhan, 1999, p. 70). It is into this cultural reality that contemporary technological advances have entered.

Whereby the telegraph and microphone revolutionized communication in decades past, the internet has continued in the same vein. More than that, however, the internet has been extended to the world through continual advances in technology and constantly developing channels of communication. The internet has changed the dynamics of relational communication, as individuals can now remain separate while still communicating synchronously. Remaining connected with others no longer requires individuals to utilize the same space and time. They may interact without being in-person, and therefore communication has changed. This has, in turn, changed the interpersonal dynamics of relationships (McLuhan, 1999). The internet, then, has a profound impact on society and the communities within it. Information and opinions are now easily viewable after their original publishing and messages are not restricted to one location. Because of this, online communication has opened the doors for communities that can meet across time and space (Gradinaru, 2019). Online forums, social media, blog entries, and even various newsletters, apps, and online shops are communication platforms through which community can develop and engage. Online communication research should be more than a study of content—it must dive into how things are being said. To better understand online communication, particularly Christian online communication, research must investigate what effect messages have on Christian community.

Online Community

Online messages and their ability (or inability) to encourage the development of community have been analyzed from various viewpoints. One of these is the analysis of how

cultivated community can benefit the initiating or hosting organization. Often, research done in

this field employs social capital theory to investigate how a cultivated community can give back

to the sponsoring organization, thus enriching community (Etter & Fieseler, 2010; Vergeer &

Pelzer, 2009). This is common in the study of corporations that seek to establish and grow a

community around their organization or product(s). Findings suggest that organizations "may be

able to utilize a sense of obligation and reciprocity within that community in a way that allows

the firm…to access much needed resources from the community" (Fisher, 2019, p. 287). The

concept of social capital has been used to research the reasons behind consistent contribution of

knowledge and engagement in online communities. In order to discover why individuals choose

to contribute in online communities, studies have focused attention on actions of engagement for

which there were no quantifiable rewards. When money does not incentivize participation, nor

does any clear rise in reputation status, the resulting engagement must be due to some other

factor(s). Studies have shown that the very acts of self-presentation within a community, the

resulting peer recognition, and the benefit of social learning may all lead users to participate

more significantly in community (Butler et al., 2014; Faraj et al., 2016; Jin et al., 2015; Park &

You, 2019).

Shared Memberships

Engagement within online community has also been studied within the realm of shared

memberships. While it may seem counterintuitive to believe that member participation in groups

outside of the studied community would detract from the sense of oneness within that

community, research has found that organizations that include diverse members that contribute

elsewhere may result in a more generative membership. Through the bridges and connections

made outside of the studied organization, individuals bring a set of resources to the community

on which the community can thrive (Kim et al., 2018). In this way, time spent outside of an online community can be generative and produce social capital that can be used between communities and within individual communities. This social capital may foster online knowledge collaboration.

The communication within online communities has also been studied from the organizational perspective, demonstrating that posts which broadcast messages about organizational endeavors, achievements, and milestones can increase engagement even more than monetary incentives (Bapna et al., 2019). Such studies provide insights into how an online audience can be utilized effectively by organizations for the organizations' benefit. Positive social roles that include trust and commitment have been shown to influence levels of engagement through the cultivation of positive reputations, established tenure within the group, and reciprocity enacted through intentional listening (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019; Hanson et al., 2019). Vohra & Bhardwaj (2019) found that participation and engagement were separate constructs, with participation preceding communal engagement. Identification has also been found to be a predictor of increased participation (J. Kumar, 2021). Ultimately, identifying with an organization in a positive way increases the likelihood of engagement in the organization's online community. This integration has also been shown to predict higher levels of engagement both online and offline (Oknyanova et al., 2013), as has quality information and style (B. J. Hartmann et al., 2015; Noguti, 2016; Ul Islam & Rahman, 2017).

Studies in online community also frequently deal with themes of identification. Focusing on ethnic online communities, Çinar (2016) analyzed how immigrants use online communities to interact with each other and maintain their identity despite geographic distance. Findings showed diverse reasoning for engagement including the concept of fun, bond to country identity, a desire

for community, and practical assistance. Chiu et al. (2019) also explored identity as they researched social identity, embeddedness, and engagement. Embeddedness in community was found to encourage and result in community identification, with both encouraging levels of individual engagement within an online community. Hsu (2019) researched brand evangelism by surveying 488 individuals who had purchased a specific brand's cosmetic products and had been members of an official brand social media page for a year or more. The study analyzed how self-identification and social identification can be united in order to build strong relationships between the brand and the consumer through message spreading. It was found that "when a brand user believes he or she can be defined based on self-identification and social identification, brand identification becomes a part of that user's self-concept" (Hsu, 2019, p. 855). Combining self-identity with social identity, then appears to be a theme in the creation and cultivation of online communities.

Christian Online Community

While online community has been a significant area of study, there are fewer instances of research that focus attention on Christian online community. Those studies that do exist have researched it from primarily two directions. First, instances of religious communication have been analyzed for common traits. In one example, authenticity was determined to be an essential ingredient in effective communication (Whitehead, 2015). Whitehead argued that authenticity in social media is essential in the creation and cultivation of online communities. In addition, two evangelical Christian parenting blogs were used as case studies to "demonstrate how claims of authenticity and fraud can be constitutive of religious practice and community formation in social media" (p. 122) by analyzing the emotional fraud wrought by deceptive or undisclosed information.

Communication media have also been analyzed for how they transmit religious messages and thus aid community. Díez Bosch et al. (2017) offered an analysis of nineteen Catholic websites from nine countries representative of more than fifty percent of Catholics around the world and how they built communities by encouraging a feeling of belonging among online community members. Data was analyzed over a period of three years by questionnaire, researching common tools in the forming online communities beyond those of social networks. Dunaetz (2019) determined that virtual community may reduce certain difficulties of time and place but not eliminate them entirely. Within a deaf Protestant community in urban China, technology was noted for how it enabled the act of communicating to bond individuals together, thus creating a unique identity that could be owned by all community members (McLeister, 2019). Similarly, Reddy (2019a, 2019b) analyzed the use of various communication mediums to cultivate community within the Seventh-Day Adventist, Methodist, and Nazarene denominations.

It is worth mentioning Vala and Huang's (2019) study again here in this section. Their research demonstrated how religion could intersect with the internet; however, it also presented research on the development of an online Christian community. Vala and Huang's passive-observation study aimed to discover how a religious group used online technology to encourage solidarity in an offline religious practice. The community built itself around the act of Bible-copying as study and celebration, as they honored the availability of a Chinese translation of the Bible. The study found that online messages were carefully cultivated in response to the current political state of China. They also found that the cultivated online space promoted an "alter-public" rather than a more oppositional "counterpublic" (p. 561), positioning the religion as less at odds with the nation-state than might otherwise be assumed. The article found that group

norms within this context were consistently affirmed and molded by communication. This

mediated communication has been found to develop online religious communities that exist

separately from traditional religious groups, but also as separate from the spirituality of

individuals (Grieve, 2013). The Christian nonprofit organization situates itself similarly by

existing in the space between traditional congregational expressions of Christianity and

individualized spiritual expression.

Christian Nonprofit Communication

Further study in the realm of religious communication, particularly within internet

studies, is beneficial for the understanding of religious community. Research should endeavor to

uncover the communication techniques that are being utilized and then consider how effective

and functional those techniques are. Of specific interest—and noticeably missing from most

current scholarship—is academic consideration of Christian nonprofit organizations. While the

local church aims to serve and teach those in its community, there are many avenues of

specialization that it cannot and should not devote its attention to. Jon Saunders (2015) points out

that churches should not spend their time and resources on the details needed for ministries that

specialize beyond this evangelical and servanthood focus. This, then, is where Christian

nonprofits find their home: as assistants to the local church in fulfilling the mission of the

Christian church. These nonprofits are part of a growing movement within American religious

structures which, according to Scheitle and McCarthy (2018), is producing changes in how

individuals participate in and practice religion and "how religion engages with the public sphere

and the perceived sources of religious authority in society" (p. 239). Despite this significant role,

there has been a lack of consideration of the topic within academic research. Most studies that

consider religion online focus on traditional congregations and denominations or more personal

spiritual interactions that are not initially part of a more formal community. Along this continuum that positions organized denominations on one side and individualized spirituality on the other, the Christian nonprofit situates itself in the middle, offering individuals freedom of religious expression while remaining part of an established group.

Several articles have provided a useful base study for the study of Christian nonprofit communication, though they typically do not intersect with online communication. First, Nita (2018) found that an annual Christian festival served as a place of meeting and exchange for Christians who sought a place where the arts met with Christian ethics and political opinions. These individuals attended to identify with likeminded others who could not as easily be found in traditional religious congregations. Nita found that the festival created an alternative to traditional church which was "just as relevant as any communal religious experience, if not much more relevant" (p. 65) through its creation of sacred and communal spaces. This article highlights how an alternate exhibition of religious opinion and identity can provide individuals a place of belonging with which they strongly identify—one separate from traditional denominations or congregations. This type of event, separate from traditional forms of church, can be cultivated into a place of more ideal community—not primarily for the transmission of messages but for the sharing of communal identity.

Another example of influential Christian nonprofit community can be found in Balik's (2017) historical analysis of a pseudo-nonprofit group from early in the 19th century. While not formally established, the group began as a friendship between two American women in the 1800s. Emotional power and spiritual power were considered by Balik through their intersections within a community of believers. Spiritual friendships were found to build a community that envelopes all of life and aides its members through times of jubilation and trial, primarily outside

of the traditional church. Balik found that the social network that developed between two leading

women and their network of friends helped its members in both friendship and the development

of strengthened faith, especially through the writing of letters. The nature of an extra-institutional

church was also addressed, which paralleled the contemporary Christian nonprofit. Though the

available technology through which the group could interact was vastly different than current

modes of technology, other matters remain similar. Increasing mobility in the studied time added

to the likelihood of losing group members and the need to negotiate over distances. Balik

mentioned that "the relentless mobility of life during the early republic was unnerving to many

who experienced it, and many mourned the loss of community" (Balik, 2017, p. 642). However,

the women leaders and members of their spiritual network prayed together and "poured their

spiritual yearnings into letters, thereby extending their fellowship across distance. Friends made

do despite the miles that lay between them" (p. 642). The article offers insight into how

communication helps create community.

Additionally, Underation (2012) analyzed Christian evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson

and her communication techniques. His analysis claimed that symbolic convergence theory is a

useful tool for analyzing how social movements gain and maintain momentum. Underation

uncovered themes that emerged from McPherson's teachings, each of which led audiences to

embrace common themes and build community around them. While Aimee Semple McPherson's

communication eventually led to the Christian denomination of the Foursquare Church, the

initial communication occurred outside of traditional congregations and therefore parallels

contemporary nonprofit organizations that are unaffiliated with existing denominations.

Underation's research reappears later in this chapter because it also demonstrates the usefulness

of symbolic convergence theory in analyzing public address in a top-down movement that

attempts to cultivate a communal following.

Ritual Communication

As communication creates and cultivates community, it is often doing so through its ritualistic nature. Communication is generally viewed in one of two ways. The most common is the linear model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). This model can also be referred to as the transmission model (Carey, 1988). This view considers communication as the transmission of information. Messaging and information travel from one place to another through communication and it, in essence, works as a vessel for that transfer of information. The transmission view of communication is linked strongly to the idea of transportation and the implication therein is that communication takes information from one place to another. Throughout the years, the concept of transmission has been the primary means of defining communication. Early models of communication considered it as a process of action, with information traveling from one sender to a determined receiver. Definitions have included considerations of "how, why, and with what effects" people communicate and "the creation, transmission, and evaluation of messages" (Korn et al., 2000, p. 41). When communication is defined as transmission, the movement of the message is considered primarily unbiased because communication is seen to transfer the message rather than create or define it. But this view neglects nuances present in that transmission. Monberg (2005) asserts that it "privileges the values of efficiency and instrumentality" but neglects considerations over "the qualities of community that emerge from communication" (p. 184).

An alternate view of communication is one referred to by James Carey (1988) as a ritual view of communication. This view considers communication as a building-block of society. Viewing communication as a "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and

commonality" (Carey, 1988, p. 18), Carey's ritual view elevates the purpose of communication beyond the scientific notion of information exchange. It perpetuates the belief that culture can be created and ordered through communication. Monberg (2005) describes this as drawing attention to the "consequences of communication for culture and its complex normative and aesthetic fabric" (p. 184). Communication has consequences and those consequences result in the creation and maintenance of cultural norms as the symbolic action of communication cocreates culture within the context of community (Schultze, 2000; Wuthnow, 1994).

Carey's ritual view, then, considers communication more than a vessel, but an actual creator. This belief comes from an earlier notion of communication that is rooted in religious meaning. Religiously, the monastic chant, the repetitive prayer, and the ritualistic ceremony all reference a symbolic order that confirms an underlying culture and social process (Carey, 1988). Communication as ritual is seen most clearly in interactions such as oaths, rites, and ceremonies such as weddings. The communication present quite literally is producing something new such as a marriage covenant—and that new creation cannot be dissolved without another, different type of communicative effort (Rothenbuhler, 2006). The ritual patterns that are present in the everyday communication structures also construct realities. The ritualistic nature of greetings and phatic communication pattern themselves ritualistically, as do the repeated communication patterns between family members (Rothenbuhler, 2006). The patterns through which individuals interact with technological communication can also be ritualistic. Consistent engagement on social media or a website creates a cyber-reality that would not exist without the ritualized nature of communication interactions. Communication, therefore, is seen to create something and that something is the culture of the communicator and communication receiver(s).

The root of this concept is grounded in the consistency of such communication. Rather

than considering communication as isolated instances of information exchange, communication is defined as the routine exchange of ideas, ideals, and realities that, in turn, creates, affirms or corrects a social reality. Take, for instance, a classroom setting and culture. That culture is defined by the communication that occurs repeatedly. The continual exchange of ideas and interactions between individuals results in a sort of group identity. The class becomes defined by the norms that have been implemented through consistencies in communication. Therefore, the exchange of thoughts and ideas within an educational course does more than teach static information to listening students. It also, and possibly more essentially, defines the reality of life within that class. It defines the communication norms and the relational roles between participating individuals. Communication defines the setting and determines the future interactions and responses that will occur and may or may not be welcomed.

This communication as ritual perspective is an important pushback to the individualism and pragmatic nature of western society. Whereas a transmission view of newspaper reading will view the act as a dissemination and collection of facts and knowledge, the ritual view acknowledges that what is given and received through the newspaper is actually a portrayal of one particular viewpoint. Carey (1988) defines it not as "pure information" but as "a portrayal of the contending forces in the world" (p. 20). He explains that while information may be acquired, that is not the focus of communication as ritual. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the presentation of reality that "gives life an overall form, order, and tone" (p. 21). Rothenbuhler (2006) notes that these considerations draw attention to "the social consequences of communication" (p. 3).

Critics worry that studying communication as ritual that produces culture leads to assumptions due to ethnocentric error. Science, it is assumed, provides "culture-free truth"

(Carey, 1988, p. 20) but this view does not do justice to the benefit of considering communication ritual and, therefore, as a creator of culture. Carey notes:

> This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form—dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech—creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process (p. 19).

It is that confirmation that communication produces in its delivery. Communicative efforts seek agreeing audiences—and if those audiences do not yet agree, communicators seek to achieve agreement. Through the ritual of communicating, an agreement of minds, norms, and values is the ultimate aim. Therefore, organizations that seek to stir organizational members toward stronger engagement and deeper community typically do so through communication.

Gaps in the Literature

In these areas of existing research, two types of gaps can be observed. The first relates to the study of Christian nonprofit communication that occurs online. While research exists that considers religion in the online realm, much existing research does not consider Christian nonprofits, particularly those that focus on encouraging community. Secondly, although online community has been studied extensively, minimal attention has been given to the study of Christian online community and, more specifically, Christian nonprofit online community. Since Christian nonprofits allow individuals to interact in a more personal way, though still organizing them in a more structured setting, insights can be gathered into how individuals express and identify with religion and Christianity. This research direction can be particularly

useful as individualism rises and people identify less with traditional religion and find their own spaces for demonstrating and identifying with a variety of Christian expressions.

In addition, Eric Rothenbuhler (2000) has identified literature gaps within the study of ritual communication which relate strongly to this study. In his research, Rothenbuhler labeled existing research positions on the issues of communication and community. These positions, when considered together, demonstrate assumptions that surround the study of communication that should be addressed by additional research. Each position considers community to be the result of communication (as is touted through the ritual view) and relates ritual communication to mediated communication. Rothenbuhler (2000) terms the first view as pessimistic. In this view, community is considered to be based on commonality and unification, but mediated communication is seen as a threat to this community. The threat originates through the assumption that mediated communication eliminates the possibility of interpersonal connection. Since that interpersonal connection is considered to be essential to the building of community, the introduction of technologically mediated communication operates as a threat because it reduces the commonality found in individual identities and, instead, considers differences, mobility, and exchange to be the primary reasons for interaction (Rothenbuhler, 2000).

The optimistic view, foundationally similar, considers communication and community to be interwoven in that communication is both a creator and sustainer of community. In addition, community is seen as evidence of the presence of communication. In this view, both concepts are strongly grounded in the idea of commonality. To share commonality is to create, participate in, and maintain community. This sharing is done through communication in any form. Therefore, mediated communication is seen optimistically as a natural extension of face-to-face communication—but one that extends that communication across time and space. This extension

is seen as a positive because it assumes that it is possible that every new form of mediated communication brings with it the possibility of cultivated community beyond location.

Rothenbuhler points out that the pessimistic and optimistic views are based on similar ideas: "that community is based on commonality, that communication is important to community, and that community and communication are good" (Rothenbuhler, 2000, p. 143). The difference, however, is in how they see mass communication. The pessimistic view worries that the reliance on communication in the form of mass mediated channels may result in instances of false community, which can be remedied only through the presence of face-to-face interpersonal communication. The optimistic view, however, sees mass communication as an extension and adaptation of interpersonal forms of communication that can work together to create and extend community where it would otherwise have been unlikely or even impossible. Rothenbuhler asserts that these two positions house significant limitations because of their unchecked assumptions. These assumptions are (a) communication that builds community is based on commonality; (b) community is assumed to be a valued ideal; and (c) community is assumed to be an existing thing that is separate from individuals. The combination of these three assumptions results in studies that focus on individuals' identification with communities that are assumed to already exist in a positive manner. This precludes research from focusing on how the communication of individuals may *create* community (that is not already in existence), through the communicating of differences (rather than presumed commonality), so that the community is seen as an achievement rather than existing entity. Rothenbuhler notes that "we know almost nothing about the processes required to build communities, solve problems, or to deal with unhappiness and badness" and may "implicitly [define] difference as a threat to community" (Rothenbuhler, 2000, p. 148). Further research on community is needed, and symbolic

convergence theory provides a useful tool for its study.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

When community is discussed as a created sense of reality developed through the communication of members rather than something that already exists and can only be joined, then symbolic convergence theory offers a useful lens through which to view the online communication of Christian nonprofit organizations. Not only does symbolic convergence theory allow for the analysis of communicated messages between individuals, but it also functions by explaining which messages help unify group members.

Theory History: Small Group Communication

Symbolic convergence theory was developed in the 1970s through research focused on small group communication led by Ernest Bormann. Bormann and others at the University of Minnesota conducted a number of case studies wherein all meetings and forms of communication were recorded and used as the content for ensuing case studies. A result of this was the development of symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1994). This theory has at its center the assertion that communication (in both content and act) enables humans to "create, raise, and sustain consciousness" (Bormann, 1982, p. 50). This consciousness-building is done symbolically and results in a bringing together of individuals into a shared community. The study of symbolic reality does not assume initial commonality but works to identify how a shared reality is created.

At its outset, the theory focused on small groups, though the researchers' intention was to discover wider applications to the communicative nature of public and mass communication (Bormann, 1972). The theory was rooted in its initial research that employed both quantitative content analysis and more qualitative individual group case studies. The results of the studies

uncovered greater insights gathered from the case studies' qualitative data, and therefore attention turned toward developing a methodology that would allow researchers to gather qualitative data in ways similar to rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism had previously been used in the communication realm as a method for analyzing public address, but initial application to the small group context was not fruitful until Robert Bales identified the concept of group fantasizing through his own group research (Bales, 1969; Bormann, 1972). By focusing on the concept of group fantasizing, Bales was able to theoretically account for how dramatic messages delivered through communication could create a group's social reality and allow for rhetorical analysis of messaging that could provide insights into a group's culture and cohesion (Bormann, 1972).

The work of symbolic convergence theory centers around the concept of fantasy. Rather than referring to something imaginary, the term fantasy here centers on the Greek root of phantasikós which means "to be able to present or show to the mind, to make visible" (Bormann, 1982, p. 52). Fantasy is a dramatizing message that demonstrates an important aspect of a group's culture. The theory claims that the act of shared fantasy develops the communicative culture of a group, which Bormann describes as "the sum total of ways of living, organizing, and communing built up in a group of human beings and transmitted to newcomers by means of verbal and nonverbal communication" (1982, p. 50). This culture can also be viewed as a "meeting of the minds" (p. 51). The symbolic nature of the theory references its focus on interpreting the symbols through which groups (and their symbolic worlds and meanings) come together or converge. Robert Bales and Ernest Bormann found that this convergence originates primarily through the sharing of group fantasies (Bormann, 1982).

The theory separates the concept of group fantasies into several distinct-but-related ideas.

Coding of group communication identifies a variety of dramatizing messages, which can be identified by group interactions such as increased conversation tempo, dialogue interruptions, emotional responses like blushing and laughing, and a more free and open exchange of ideas (Bormann, 1972, 1983a, 1983b). Dramatizing messages typically reveal themselves through excitement over the content of group dialogue, which can be identified through both verbal and nonverbal communication. These messages can prompt negative or positive attention, resulting in participation in the telling of the stories (Bormann, 1983a). Dramatizing messages also frequently tell (or retell) stories that occur outside of the present. They may retell a story from the past or present a picture of what may happen in the future. When multiple individuals contribute to these dramatizing messages, the result is fantasy chaining. These messages corroborate each other by their links. Each one builds on another, resulting in a symbolic chain of ideas which are all linked together with similar messaging.

Not all dramatizing messages may result in this collective fantasy chaining, but those that do frequently reflect the problems or successes that a group is experiencing in the present. This symbolic connection is what makes fantasy chaining unique from more direct culture-creating group dialogue. If a group determines its purpose through communicating directly to the present situation, that would not be considered fantasy chaining. The difference is in the content of the retellings. Stories told about the past or the future are *symbolic* in how they unite group members. Whereby a group may determine to work hard at a current situation because they agree it is a worthwhile endeavor, fantasy chaining operates by bringing members to a similar conclusion through the use of symbolic ties to the past or predicted future. The first exchange of communication finds group members meeting in a current reality. Fantasy chaining, however, enables groups to unify over a symbolic connection. The chaining provides the group with views

and attitudes that connect to present circumstances. Participants jointly share emotions and attitudes, and they align with the experiences demonstrated within the shared fantasy (Bormann, 1983b). This chaining can be seen as creating and maintaining a culture through the use of fantasy retellings. Bales (1969) considers the stories present in fantasy chaining "a new realm of reality" where "the culture of a group is fantasy established from the past, which is acted upon in the present" (p. 152). Group individuals buy in to the messaging and retell it until a rhetorical vision is created as the basis for group culture (Bormann, 1972).

Theory History: Rhetorical Application

While Robert Bales' work identified and applied fantasy chaining to the small group context, Ernest Bormann theorized that the same concept could be applied to situations of public address and rhetorical delivery through initial fantasy chaining in small groups that eventually extended across groups into the larger publics and, potentially, even into the media (Bormann, 1972). These messages sustain more than a small group, they can sustain a culture of larger communities by calling on members to identify with a symbolic and social reality. Bormann (1972) refers to the resulting corporate dramas that are accepted by larger publics as rhetorical visions.

Rhetorical visions are stories that include a cast of characters of heroes, villains, and the actions and attitudes that are encouraged by these players. These visions are tried, tested and legitimized (or not) by audiences as fantasy chaining repeatedly occurs. Eventually, the visions that are legitimized become part of a group's symbolic cultural identity and can be referenced in any future communication context to identify with the original fantasy chain. As these impulses are more consistently shared, they develop into frequently used expressions with a group of people that has formed a more unified whole (Bormann, 1983a).

These expressions are often in the form of an inside-joke or a trigger that can, through its sharing, unify a group around a specific idea. This is accomplished through the truncated referencing of that idea (Bormann, 1983b). Anyone who has been part of a group in the past will be familiar with the concept. These triggers are brief references to something outside of the present moment that draws a group closer together through its retelling. They operate similarly to an inside joke. The inside joke resonates within the unified body but rattles around unsuccessfully with those who are not part of the group. A symbolic shared consciousness is the reason that a truncated retelling can succeed in creating and/or maintaining the unification between individuals. Triggers can quickly and concisely reference common attitudes and ideals that bring people together through the acknowledgements of shared rhetorical visions that produce identification in participants (Bormann, 1983a). Rather than persuading them to unify through dissonance, they are unified through identification. If a rhetorical vision can tap into what an individual already feels and accepts, she becomes symbolically connected to others who feel and accept similar attitudes and ideals. Bormann (1972) describes this as the creation of "subjective worlds of common expectations and meanings" (p. 400) that provide a tool with which to combat the feelings of isolation and hopelessness that may burden individuals. Visions that unify and allow individuals to unite in commonality despite other differences are the basis of community.

Symbolic convergence theory, through its emphasis on the creation of culture through communication rather than communication as a result of culture, operates hand-in-hand with the concept of ritual communication. Through the assessment of an established rhetorical vision, a critic can "take the social reality…and examine the social relationships, the motives, the qualitative impact of that symbolic world as though it were the substance of social reality for

those people who participated in the vision" (Bormann, 1972, p. 401).

The formal analysis of rhetorical visions, which can lead to a deeper understanding of a group's culture, begins with six underlying assumptions:

1. Meaning, emotion, and motive for action are in the manifest content of a message.

2. Reality is created symbolically.

3. Fantasy theme chaining creates symbolic convergence that is dramatistic in form.

4. Fantasy theme analysis is the basic method to capture symbolic reality.

5. Fantasy themes occur in and chain-out from all discourse.

6. At least three master analogues—righteous, social, and pragmatic—compete as alternative explanations of symbolic reality (Cragan & Shields, 1992, p. 200)

These assumptions provide a foundation for the theory's method of rhetorical analysis. Analysis seeks fantasies that have been chained out within a group or culture. Patterns are then identified within the content, considering commonalities in the stories told, the characters present, the plotlines and settings. These themes are observable records of "nature and content of the shared imagination" (Bormann, 1994, p. 42). Identifying the commonalities in these components allows a researcher to "reconstruct the rhetorical vision from the representative fantasy chains" similarly to how a film or literature genre could be extrapolated from the content of multiple movies or books (Bormann, 1972, p. 401). The reconstruction can then lead to and understanding of the vision's emotional and communal appeal, the skillful presentation of the vision, and a greater understanding of how present fantasies may be identified as common fantasy types.

Fantasy types are "stock scenarios which might appear in a number of different rhetorical visions" (Bormann, 1977, p. 130). They are stories that are retold with different characters at different times, but the standard scenario and messages in the stories remain the same (Bormann,

1983b). Bormann (1977) identified a stock fantasy typed that he termed "Fetching Good Out of Evil" which originated in the Puritan rhetorical vision and then appeared throughout America in situations of war, including the French and Indian War, aftermath of the Civil War, the American Revolution, and the Civil War (pp. 131-132). This fantasy type presented an explanation for the presence of evil and unified those affected by that evil, both through the creation of a nation (as in the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War) and the restoration of that nation (as in the Civil War). Through the use of this stock fantasy type, unifying concepts could be implied rather than mentioned, such as the implication that America was a chosen people. Much like the ancient Jews and early American Puritans in their attempts to establish a holy nation set apart for God, America was portrayed as a chosen people from its first creation through its rebuilding after the Civil War. The use of this rhetoric helped maintain an established rhetorical community comprised of individuals who participated in the rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1982). In the case of this fantasy theme analysis, the community was the American citizenry. Through the use of this fantasy type as presented through consistent rhetorical visions to the rhetorical community, a saga was created and enacted. These sagas are narratives that retell the "achievement and events in the life of a person, a group, a community, an organization, or a nation" (p. 53). Multiple fantasies lead to a rhetorical vision, which helps establish a rhetorical community. This community is unified through established rhetorical visions, which results in a sense of community that can be strengthened by the presence of fantasy types that are retold over and over until they become a saga that becomes a symbolic history of the rhetorical community.

Implications of Symbolic Convergence Theory

Retold fantasies and visions are more than a repeating of history. They may have their roots in a situation that actually occurred, but the retellings take on a symbolic meaning that

establishes a symbolic reality. These retellings of fantasies and visions, then, lack the muddied and unorganized nature of actual human experience. Fantasy themes operate through artistic organization (Bormann, 1982, 1983a). They are poetic and can be pithy summaries of how something happened and why it did. One historical event can be retold in two separate rhetorical visions, each with its own determination of which characters are the heroes and which are the villains. This is the unifying nature of symbolic convergence: the symbolic rewriting of history to unify a group of individuals into a cohesive unit or community. Deeper understandings of these communities can come through the analysis of the community's retold fantasies and rhetorical visions. This analysis can lead to what Bormann calls "consciousness building" (Bormann, 1982, p. 60).

Consciousness building is the result of repeated fantasy types that are intended to strengthen the bond between a community or invite new members into that community. Groups that seek to gain members typically operate with three goals in mind: (a) consciousness creating; (b) consciousness raising; and (c) consciousness sustaining (Bormann, 1983a, p. 76). These goals can extend the membership of a group to draw new members, encourage commitment in current members, and reinforce the established consciousness that unites members. Within the world of public interactions (rather than the world of a limited small group environment), groups frequently search out ways to rhetorically express a group's vision for who they are and what they are about. They seek methods of achieving identification between group members. This identification is often accomplished by establishing shared fantasies that celebrate those inside the group. By encouraging pride in a group member's membership status (informal though it may be), a stronger sense of identification is developed (Bormann, 1983a).

The rhetoric of a group often encourages individuals to rethink their established beliefs,

notions, and identification to better accept a new symbolic reality or shared consciousness (Bormann, 1983a). This introduces individuals to a way to identify with a community and the transition can often take the individuals from one rhetorical vision to another, thereby moving them from outside the group into it. Often a public affirmation of membership soon follows. This process revolves around a shared public consciousness that operates as a foundational element in a group's culture (Bormann, 1983b).

Organizational Approach

Bormann's development of symbolic convergence theory originated in the realm of small groups and then was also applied to the study of public rhetorical address and ensuing social movements. However, Bormann has also addressed its application to the organization (Bormann, 1983b, 1994). When contemplating the presence of a group or organization's culture, Bormann (1983b) notes that communicative culture includes "shared norms, reminiscences, stories, rites, and rituals that provide the members with unique symbolic common group" (Bormann, 1983b, p. 100). These things, while not exclusively dependent upon communication, nonetheless require the existence of communication for their creation and maintenance. Through communication and resulting symbolic convergence, organizational members can "come to share enough symbolic ground to take part in logical negation processes to achieve coorientation and…share a common sentiment or emotional involvement and commitment to symbols" (Bormann, 1983b, p.102). Bormann goes on to then explain that within an established organization shared consciousness leads members to identify with the organization and acknowledge that they are not a part of other organizations. They "become aware that because they are a member of the group they are personally somewhat different from others who are not symbolically tied together by the experience of sharing fantasies" (Bormann, 1983b, p. 105). This is the crux of the matter.

Individuals who have symbolically joined an organizational group by accepting shared consciousness as established by the presence of accepted rhetorical visions are able to collectively identify. The organization has developed an identity through the communication efforts of individual members. The routine communication of fantasies and resulting rhetorical visions operate as ritual communication that creates and maintains culture. That established culture provides the opportunity for individuals to accept a group identity with which to identify. This symbolic shared consciousness stems from communication and is fostered through the consistent communication of inside jokes, fantasy types, and rhetorical visions, which may be shared in-person or through mediated channels (Bormann, 1972, 1982, 1983b).

When applied to the organization, the concept of an organizational saga becomes clear as well. Bormann (1983b) notes that the presence of an organizational saga answers questions of identity by focusing on an organization's strengths and instances of identity that are a source of pride for members. Sagas can speak of the nature of the organization, the nature of organizational members, and what past and present purposes help clarify the mission of the organization. Therefore, studying the rhetoric present in an organization (and its inclusion of fantasies and rhetorical visions) can help researchers analyze the cultures and subcultures within an organization. This provides insights into the identity of the membership and the power of the communication that has formed and maintained the community. It can also explain the presence of conflicts, commitment (or lack thereof), and "general quality of life within the culture" (Bormann, 1983b, p. 122).

Symbolic Convergence Theory Application

In the decades that have followed its initial development, symbolic convergence theory has been applied to a variety of communication and group contexts. It has been applied to family

communication (Braithwaite et al., 2006; Endres, 1997), athletic team contexts (Zanin et al., 2016), organizational relations (Cragan & Shields, 1992; Palenchar & Heath, 2002), public rhetoric analyses (Benoit et al., 2010; Bormann et al., 1996; Edwards & Chen, 2000; Ford, 1989; King, 1974; M. R. Smith, 2004; Underation, 2012), online communities (McCabe, 2009; Simmons, 2014), and organizational identity contexts (Broom & Avazino, 2010; Gilmore & Kramer, 2018; Horila, 2021).

Many of the studies have focused attention on the small group application of symbolic convergence theory. Endres (1997) analyzed the communication between fathers and daughters in an attempt to identify common rhetorical visions present in relationships and Braithwaite et al. (2006) recommended additional work in applying symbolic convergence theory to family group contexts. Group identity has been studied within small group contexts, such as Zanin et al.'s (2016) work on identifying the rhetorical visions present within an all-female rugby club team. These small group studies identify common fantasy themes within similar group situations (Endres, 1997), or competing themes that introduce dialectical tension within the group (Zanin et al., 2016). Competing visions have also been noted in organizations comprised of groups of individuals who vary in their opinions and perspectives on a given situation (Broom & Avanzino, 2010; Palenchar & Heath, 2002) and groups that embrace two competing visions in tandem and therefore create an identity that embraces both (McCabe, 2009). Rhetorical visions have also been identified in organizational groups, as members of organizations band together and find commonality in their group identity, which is formed through symbolic convergence (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019). Additionally, symbolic convergence theory has been applied to corporate planning settings with the intention of building identification around an organizational mission (Cragan & Shields, 1992) and decision-making within those organizations (Horila,

2021). Broom & Avanzino's (2010) work studied a community coalition that was dedicated to the general addressing of community needs and solving of problems with a goal of identifying fantasies and rhetorical visions that may predict the future sustainability of the group.

Bormann's original intention for symbolic convergence theory, however, was to apply the communication uncovered in small group contexts and apply it to public communication contexts (Bormann, 1972). Studies have also focused on this line of application. Public messaging found in books, newspapers and radio programs has been analyzed to uncover powerful rhetorical visions that have been shared with audiences (Benoit et al., 2010; Edwards & Chen, 2000; Ford, 1989; M. R. Smith, 2004). The uncovering of these messages has helped explain the beliefs and actions of groups, which leads to greater understanding of the community-building power of communication. These messages also provide insights into how they can combine with struggles and negative experiences to move a group toward a rhetorical vision that gives purpose to struggles and unifies a group in belief, action, and identity.

In addition, symbolic convergence theory can provide deeper insights into the messaging of leaders. King (1974) analyzed the rhetoric of Booker T. Washington to uncover rhetorical visions in his communication that might provide an alternate explanation for his ultimate aims. In his time Washington was often looked upon as a messenger who was not strong enough in his appeals toward equality. Many critics that have analyzed his rhetoric concluded similarly that his methods and purposes were not what they should have been because they appeared to allude to earlier expectations of black deference. However, analyzing Washington's rhetoric through the concept of rhetorical vision, King noted that each of Washington's public addresses was rooted in the common rhetorical vision of the American dream. If Washington's rhetoric is identified as being rooted in the American dream as it relates to all Americans, rather than only African

Americans, King asserts that the messaging moves from being a mild acceptance of how things are to a common call toward doing what you can with what you currently have. This is the message of the American dream: the power of "character over circumstance" (King, 1974, p. 325). In works like this, Bormann's symbolic convergence theory allows scholars to uncover symbolic realities that were not first apparent but could be revealed through the identification of rhetorical visions.

Symbolic convergence theory also allows for the analysis of communication presented through new forms of technology. For the past few decades, the internet has been instrumental in allowing individuals to share experiences with others they may not have otherwise encountered. This technology has brought together people who have been able to build community around common experiences and visions thereby resulting in created cultures and shared rhetorical visions. These rhetorical communities are able to connect and relate across space because of the technological advancements of the internet, and they are also able to develop symbolic realities across that space because of it. McCabe (2009) uncovered a culture of eating disorders defined by two opposing fantasies that portrayed eating disorders both as friend and foe. Members of the online community participated in communication that created and maintained a symbolic reality that allowed them to participate in community with others who identified similarly but separated them from those outside the community that did not. Communication, therefore, created an identity with which to participate and community was strengthened through the repeated communicating of developed rhetorical visions. Simmons (2014) studied another online community dedicated to the sharing of Christian de-conversion stories. Through the sharing of their experiences among each other and the bridging work done by common fantasy themes present in individual stories, rhetorical visions were developed that affirmed community

members' experiences and differentiated them from others outside of the deconversion community. This definitional work enacted through communication was found to strengthen the community and resulting rhetorical visions.

Additional symbolic convergence theory research has been encouraged outside of the realm of corporate organizations (Broom & Avanzino, 2010; Olufowote, 2006) and into "terms of public address and mass communication as it feeds into community meaning" (Underation, 2012, p. 275). It is into this gap that this doctoral research situates itself. Christian nonprofits like the Rabbit Room have missions centered on the creation and maintenance of community. Their goals are to foster relationships within the context of a membership identity and these relationships are fostered through communication, which can be studied through the lens of symbolic convergence theory.

Summary

Community bonds and culture within a group are created through shared identity and experiences. This resulting symbolic reality is unique to individual groups and studying examples of these groups helps researchers better understand the dynamics of communication, particularly within specific group contexts. The communication present in Christian nonprofit organizations has not received adequate study and offers an area of religious communication that warrants additional attention. This chapter presented a review of the existing literature surrounding the intersection of Christianity and the internet, Christian community online, Christian nonprofit communication, and ritual communication. It was identified that there is a significant gap in the literature at the intersection of these topics. Symbolic convergence theory was then presented as a useful lens through which to study existing online communication and the resulting culture that originates from Christian nonprofit organizations. In the next chapter,

details on this study's research methodology will be addressed, including the rationale for its

case study method, as situated within the sociocultural tradition of communication studies.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how online communication expressed through a Christian nonprofit organization encouraged individuals to identify with and participate within Christianity. This study considered the online communication patterns of Christian nonprofits through the qualitative research methodology of the case study. Chapter three provides a rationale for the study's use of qualitative methodology positioned within the sociocultural tradition of the field of communication (Craig, 1999) and presents the case study as an ideal method of study for considering the Rabbit Room because it is a single case in which a phenomenon is explored within a particular context (Punch, 2014; Yin, 2018). The data collection and analysis procedures of the study are also outlined within this chapter.

Qualitative Method

This study explored the contextual and cultural online communication present within a Christian nonprofit organization that is not expressly denominational or congregational. Understandings related to how communication is impacted by context and how culture is impacted by communication are best studied through qualitative research methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative paradigm differs significantly from quantitative in that it considers words as data, rather than data that has been collected as numbers. For communication purposes, the study of text is particularly useful. While quantitative methods can successfully answer questions like who, what, where, when, and how many, qualitative research methods add depth of understanding by answering "why," "how," or "what" questions regarding behavior and constructed meanings (Bailey, 2014; Belk, 2017). Quantitative considerations like cause, effect, prediction, and distribution are of less concern for qualitative researchers than the exploration of interpretation, construction of worlds, and meaning attribution as a variety of ways to examine

realities (Cochran & Dolan, 1984; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, for organizations like the Rabbit Room that construct meanings within a group, qualitative methodologies are an appropriate method of study.

By employing qualitative methods, researchers aspire to achieve more comprehensive understanding of actions, content, and meaning through the process of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data are collected through text and images and the data in them are interpreted in an attempt to better understand how the messages are perceived and accepted. Aspers & Corte (2019) note that qualitative research is iterative and aims for improved understanding through analysis of a phenomenon. This analysis relies upon human perceptions and understandings, particularly as they relate to specific situations (Stake, 2010). The order of things and working of things are often influenced by contextual circumstances that are best approached through a qualitative lens more equipped to consider nuance and particularities dependent upon circumstance.

Qualitative methods have been noted to have a "creative complexity" (Tracy, 2010, p. 837) that requires a more diverse listing of what makes a quality qualitative work. Tracy notes that qualitative works are defined by (a) a worthy topic, (b), rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. Studying the Rabbit Room through qualitative means allowed for a depth of understanding that led to a deeper understanding of how Christian communication works, how it contributes to group identity, and how better understanding can provide insights for other Christian nonprofit organizations.

Qualitative study allows researchers to focus on "how things work in certain contexts, at certain times, and with certain people" (Stake, 2010, p. 14). In addition, it is through qualitative

research that researchers can focus on the complexity of a situation or the uniqueness of individuals. Qualitative efforts seek the unique aspects of phenomenon as well as the common. They are also interpretive (Stake, 2010). By exploring the details of a given situation, qualitative research methods attempt to uncover the interpretation that is the result of that reality. For the Rabbit Room, the phenomenon of online communication as a creator and maintainer of group culture is a particular situation which was served well by qualitative research methods.

This study was valuable because it provided deeper understanding of how Christian messaging is presented online and used to cultivate community. This provided potentially beneficial insights for the future missional work of the Christian Church. By studying a Christian nonprofit that expressly states its missional desire to cultivate Christian community, particularly through online communicative means, the study positioned itself as a significant contribution to existing knowledge regarding religious online communication.

Sociocultural Tradition

The field of communication can be described as existing within seven unique, yet interrelated traditions originally identified by Robert Craig (1999). This segmentation relies on a metamodel of communication which allows for the overarching interplay of seven distinct research approaches. The seven traditions that Craig identified were the rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical (p. 133). These traditions were briefly described by Craig as different ways of theorizing communication: (a) as the practical art of discourse (rhetorical), (b) as the intersubjective mediation by signs (semiotic), (c) as the experience of otherness (phenomenological), (d) as information processing (cybernetic), (e) as expression, interaction, and influence (sociopsychological), (f) as (re)production of social order (sociocultural), and (g) as discursive reflection (critical). This

study approached its research through the sociocultural tradition.

The sociocultural tradition focuses on how acts of communication produce or reproduce social order. Sapir and Whorf were among the first to research from this perspective, believing that language structures how people think and how they act (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Rather than considering language to be a result of an already-established reality, Sapir and Whorf argued that reality is largely created subconsciously by the language a group uses to communicate. In this tradition, language is considered formative rather than neutral, playing a substantial role in the creation of culture (Griffin et al., 2019).

The sociocultural tradition is represented well in the work of John Carey (1988), which considers communication as a "symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 23). With sociological roots, the sociocultural tradition analyzes communicative acts and exchanges, understanding them as the building blocks by which society and culture are created. These communicative acts both create new realities and replicate current realities, resulting in a cultural reality that is both being maintained and transformed simultaneously (Crouch, 2008). Communicative acts may follow more universal structures but are also often tailored to particular communities and contexts that are comprised of particular people, times, and spaces. As these acts are analyzed through sociocultural research, rhetorical theory is often utilized as an instrument by which relationships within a society can be improved (Craig, 1999). The analysis of language choices, for instance, can be used to uncover how individuals are encultured into a particular society through those communicative acts and common visions within the community (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

This tradition transfers well to the online realm. Whether presented orally, textually, or visually, online realities are created by communicative interactions. Therefore, online

communities are excellent subjects for studying how communication exchanges create, maintain, and transform a group's culture. Researching existing communication provides insights into the communication patterns that have resulted in a group's cultural reality.

Case Study Design

The case study is often attributed to anthropological and social science studies in the early twentieth century (Harrison et al., 2017). These studies focused on individual and cultural lives, seeking information on how lived experiences were interpreted. Case studies have been used in a myriad of fields since, including education (Degn, 2015; Motteram, 2006), housing research (Johansson, 2003), business (Chaudhury, 2020; Holma, 2012), and communication (Cardey et al., 2013; Huang-Horowitz et al., 2020). In the communication field specifically, the case study has been used to study online communication (Díez Bosch et al., 2017; Han et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2015; Vala & Huang, 2019), religion (Reddy, 2019a, 2019b; Underation, 2012), and relational and/or cultural expression (Balik, 2017; Çinar, 2016; Garner, 2015; Herrmann, 2018; Nita, 2018). Considering these previous studies, the design of the research as a case study fit well within existing research.

The design that this study used was a single case study. Case studies are useful in analyzing one specific case or a small grouping of them in great detail to better understand a phenomenon or general condition within its natural context, particularly when the context may conflate with the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989; Punch, 2014; Yin, 2018). Within case studies, data are gathered and analyzed to lead to detailed description and themes uncovered in the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Collection methods include archives, interviews, surveys, and observation which can be used to provide description, test theory, or generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies may be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory

in nature (Yin, 2018). Studying the online communication of a Christian nonprofit organization called for such attention to detail, bounded by time and activity, through the analysis of a variety of artifacts.

Heidi Campbell (2010) makes the case that online community often centers around story. These stories connect individuals across space so that geographical location matters far less than it does in offline community. They are typically unique to each community, developing as the result of a shared history, shared interests, the style with which they communication, and the group's general ideas of how community should be embodied (Campbell, 2010). These unspoken and yet agreed upon systems help define the community and its actions. Therefore, Campbell recommends the case study methodology because its flexibility in research techniques allows for the collection of thick and deep data, both of which are appropriate for understanding Christian communication, particularly within the context and setting of online communication.

Case studies are also best utilized when "how" or "why" questions are being asked of a situation which has current participants and is still occurring and can, therefore, be directly observed. A consideration of the recent past as it melds with the present also lends itself to the use of case study methodology. When studying the presence of online communication, there is a continuation of communication that ties the past with the present. Also, through the study of existing artifacts, the case study limits the ability of the researcher to affect or manipulate behaviors, as they have already happened and are, therefore, merely observed (Yin, 2018).

A case study may be framed as an intrinsic case which studies the innate value of one particular case or an instrumental case which aims to understand an issue, problem, or concern. The study of the Rabbit Room's online communication fit well as an instrumental case study, focusing on the issue of online Christian communication. Instrumental cases may consider one or

multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and this study's focus on one case allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon present within a particular context. Johansson (2003) summarizes case studies by citing them as cases that are (a) contemporary, complex and functioning, (b) existing within their natural context, (c) analyzed through various methods. This research focused on a current and contemporary organization which was currently functioning, existed within its natural online context, and was analyzed through various methods. Therefore, a case study was an appropriate method for this research.

According to Punch's (2014) list of case study characteristics, this proposed study fit the requirements of a case study because (a) the Rabbit Room was a bounded system, (b) the thing being studied was a case of something, that something being online community, (c) there was an attempt to achieve a full understanding of the Rabbit Room, and (d) the study considered the possibility for multiple data collection methods. A deep understanding of one successful organization's methods may help develop a deeper understanding of the types of communication that are employed in building online community among Christian groups. While case studies may be dismissed because of their presumed lack of generalizability (Punch, 2014), the goal of the researcher was to study the case intently enough that propositions could be made about the online communication that could or should be used by Christian nonprofits that seek to develop community. Therefore, this study suggests generalizability so that future research can endeavor to support or contradict the resulting propositions (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Case Selection

For this research, a case study was conducted on one particular example of a Christian nonprofit organization that had developed an online community of participants and observers. The chosen case, the Rabbit Room, is a Christian nonprofit that "fosters Christ-centered

community and spiritual formation through music, story, and art" (Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). The

nonprofit was selected based on the following criteria: (a) its status as a 501(c)(3) organization,

(b) its explicitly Christian nature, (c) its lack of denominational and congregational affiliation,

(d) its missional focus on cultivating community, (e) its consistent use of online communication

to aid in the accomplishment of its mission.

At the time of research, the organization had a staff of eleven and a board of eight

members (Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). The organization is based near Nashville, Tennessee; however,

majority of its communication occurs online through the organization's website and social media

content and is tailored to geographically diverse audiences. The origination of the Rabbit Room

was an experiment patterned after the camaraderie of the Inklings, an informal group of writers

that began because of the friendship of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. The Rabbit Room

nonprofit originally began as an online blog with contributors who identified as Christian

authors, songwriters, artists, and pastors (A. Peterson, 2007).

The Rabbit Room is expressly Christian in nature, seeking ways to support artists and

writers as they "tell the old, old story" of Jesus Christ (A. Peterson, 2007). Through this support,

the Rabbit Room's mission aims to cultivate and curate "stories, music, and art to nourish Christ-

centered communities for the life of the world" (Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). This mission considers

music as something that brings people together, storytelling as a power that can draw people into

the story of Christ, and art as an offering that points individuals toward the Truth present in

creation (Rabbit Room, n.d.-d).

As of 2022, this organization has an active podcast network, publishing house, online

music and book store, a periodic offering of live music called The Local Show, and an annual

conference called Hutchmoot. Each of these are or have been online offerings with the exception

of The Local Show, which offers live concerts near Nashville, Tennessee. Community

cultivation is done through the work of supporting artistic creators, but also through online

dialog that is available to registered users through blog commenting and online book group

discussions. Other consistent forms of communication and messaging are content posted on the

Rabbit Room website, linked content found at the Rabbit Room podcast network, and

interactions between participants and members that take place on Rabbit Room social media

pages.

Theoretical Construct

Symbolic convergence theory provided a useful and manageable way to handle the

analysis of The Rabbit Room's communication. Since symbolic convergence theory is a general

rhetorical theory that focuses on dramatizing messages that create a group's social reality

(Bormann, 1972, 1982; Bormann et al., 1994), the theory proves useful to online content shared

among group members and participants. The use of fantasy themes and messages that are shared

can result in a shared group consciousness that fosters identification between group participants

and thus affects the group's identity and culture (Duffy, 2003). The goal of symbolic

convergence theory is to identify fantasy themes that are present in a group's communication by

identifying dramatizing messages that create, raise, and maintain consciousness among group

members (Bormann et al., 1994). These messages may be present in group artifacts and/or group

communication exchanges and may become rhetorical visions that help individuals identify as

participants in the rhetorical visions and, thus, group members.

Rabbit Room artifacts were collected and analyzed through the lens of symbolic

convergence theory in order to assess the group's communication content. Symbolic

convergence theory has been used to analyze a variety of content, including textual (Duffy, 2003;

Engstrom, 2008; Ford, 1989; Hinnant & Hendrickson, 2012;), visual (Benoit et al., 2001; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2019; Thomson et al., 2018), oral (Serquiña, 2015), and combinations of these (Bishop, 2003). Expressly online content has also been used in and recommended for symbolic convergence studies (Kendall et al., 2006; McCabe, 2009).

The use of symbolic convergence theory enabled this research study to analyze a variety of cultural information as communicated by and within the organizational group. The theory allowed the researcher to focus on online communication, identifying rhetorical themes and visions that were present in that online communication and shared among the group. The nature of symbolic convergence theory allows for passive-observation of communication that is already happening and, therefore, collects interactions as they occur. The online communication of the Rabbit Room was collected from created content published as web content, blog writings, and podcast recordings. These artifacts also provided insights into participant responses and contributions by way of social media conversations and replies to article postings. Each of the opportunities for observation allowed for the collection of communication that demonstrated how members have participated in the sharing of fantasies and dramas that pointed to a shared rhetorical vision that, as a result, created a unique group culture.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: What fantasy themes are present within the Rabbit Room online community?

RQ2: Is there a subsequent rhetorical vision shared by the Rabbit Room online community and, if so, what is that rhetorical vision?

RQ3: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community of Christians that reflects a particular culture?

RQ4: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community and culture of both artists and non-artists?

Data Collection

This study focused on the Rabbit Room because of the nonprofit's reliance on the internet for much of its group communication. Each online method of communication held the potential to speak significantly to the mission and actions of the Rabbit Room. As such, each was taken into consideration when gleaning artifacts for study. According to Punch (2014), a case study includes strategically analyzing the case in depth and acknowledging the complexity of the subject. Case studies should be done holistically, not neglecting any aspects of the case so that a more complete understanding of the case can be developed. Because the focus of this study was to discover communication strategies and the presence of dramatizing messages within them, it was essential to glean information from each potential artifact. These included online-published text, observations, and audiovisual material.

First, the website itself was analyzed, focusing on its design, functionality, and the presence of particular content. The Rabbit Room also has a wide variety of documents that have been published on its website. These documents typically take the form of blogs and reviews, but also include a section of the website that offers information about the organization itself. Both types of written content were collected and analyzed. Blogs, articles, and reviews were categorized on the website by topics such as art, music, story, books, poetry, film, faith, humor, interviews, and videos. These written pieces were analyzed, as each included messaging dispersed directly to group participants through the website or social media platforms.

In addition to the text found at the Rabbit Room website, member interactions were examined through the analysis of online comments. These postings occurred in response to

posted articles and reviews, as well as on social media pages on Facebook (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-b; The Rabbit Room Chinwag, n.d.), Twitter (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-i), and Instagram (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-h). Observation of these postings allowed the researcher to be a participant-observer, belonging to the website and social media groups to observe communication without contributing or otherwise affecting it. Rather than conducting interviews which may have presented individual biases on the part of Rabbit Room organizers, the goal was to explore the communication that occurred naturally between Rabbit Room participants and contributors. In this way, fantasy themes were uncovered from the existing communication rather than from explanatory interviews that were not organic to the group's communication.

The Rabbit Room also provided digital audiovisual material through online channels. This material was also collected and analyzed, including website design and aesthetics, mass email communication, social media decisions and design, and podcast and video content linked from the website or social media pages. Primary data was collected from six months of content postings at the Rabbit Room's website, www.rabbitroom.com, as well as the social media postings on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and mass emails sent out to the organization's emailing list. The data collected was from items posted between November 1, 2021 through April 30, 2022. In addition, as research was conducted it proved necessary to collect background and contextual information from communication or events that occurred prior to this six-month period. For those communication artifacts that referenced past content or were situated as a continuation of a past event, there was a need to explore this additional communication to better understand the meaning and significance of communication data that occurred within the primary data collection's six-month window.

In summary, the proposed study collected and analyzed the following from November 1,

2021 to April 30, 2022: (a) the Rabbit Room website for design, functionality, and presence of content, (b) written content available on the website, (c) posts created by Rabbit Room on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, (d) community and individual responses present as comments on the website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, (e) posted content present on the Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook page, which is a community of Rabbit Room participants, (f) content of email newsletters, (g) audio and visual content present on the website or social media pages.

Steps and Phases for Research

A case study was determined to be the best research design for this study because its focus was to be a particular case, bounded in time and setting, that was not clearly definable from the context within which it is situated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Next, a review of existing literature was conducted. The study and its methodology was then proposed to the researcher's dissertation committee and was found to be exempt from review by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board. Data was then collected on the case in several stages.

First, the Rabbit Room website was analyzed as a cultural expression using Pauwels' (2012) recommendations:

1. Take note of what is first seen as the website is analyzed, being sure to note first impressions and reactions.

2. Record the major features and components on the website, noting the topics covered.

3. Thick and deep analysis should be done on the content available on the site, as well as considering the choices that were made in the creation and design of the website.

4. The underlying messages tones and assumed audiences should be explored and the researcher should also aim to discover the site's purpose(s).

5. Analysis should be done on how the website's information is organized, considering

        both location and spatial decisions.

6. After the above are observed and analyzed, a contextual analysis should be done

    (Pauwels, 2012, p. 252).

Pauwels' steps above assist in researching websites that contain various modes of

communication because it offers a system for researching how information is presented across

the site's various pages. In addition, Pauwels (2012) recommends that these suggestions be used

in the cultural analysis of a site, because how each of these items are presented on the site can

inform the researcher about the hosting organization's culture and the community it encourages.

    Next, textual documents were collected from the website, dating from November 1, 2021

through April 30, 2022. Coding and memoing was completed to identify common themes that

arose from the artifacts (Punch, 2014). Data collection occurred simultaneously with analysis. As

blogs, articles, reviews, and comments were collected, coding and memoing were used to

identify potential themes in the data. Analysis began with extensive note-taking as observations,

hunches, questions, and concerns were recorded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following

collection of website artifacts was the collection of social media data. This data was collected

manually from the Rabbit Room Facebook page and placed into a Microsoft Excel document.

Export Comments (https://exportcomments.com/) was used to collect posting data from Twitter,

Instagram, and the Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook page. All recorded data from social media

was accompanied by hyperlinks to the original postings so that the original data could be easily

accessed for reference, as needed. Finally, digital audiovisual data was collected from the same

dates and notes, questions, ideas, and codes were documented as the content was reviewed.

During each of these collection stages, evidence was reported clearly and fairly to minimize

potential biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Once collection of artifacts was complete,

the data was winnowed to focus more intentionally on essential items and themes. As these pieces of content were analyzed, a separate document was used to take notes on member and participant comments that were posted in response to the blogs, articles, or reviews.

In addition, the use of symbolic convergence theory provided a theoretical construct that focused on the researcher's observations and provided a theoretical basis for the findings as generalizations were made (Yin, 2018). Underation (2012) recommends that symbolic convergence theory be used for more than just small group situations, citing that Bormann initially intended the theory for groups attempting to cultivate a communal following. Therefore, the theory was considered to be a valuable theoretical construct during the data analysis stage. The theory's framework was used to identify fantasy themes and rhetorical visions that created a unique reality within a group that encouraged bonding, sharing, and unity. In particular, symbolic cues (trigger words that lead individuals to a shared understanding) were sought in existing Rabbit Room artifacts and observations, as were fantasy themes, a resulting rhetorical vision, and sanctioning agents (Bormann, 1972; Bormann, 1982).

Six assumptions as presented by Cragan and Shield (1992) were also utilized during the analysis stage that focused on fantasy themes. These assumptions allowed the researcher to more clearly focus on the case within the construct of symbolic convergence theory.

1. Meaning, emotion, and motive for action are in the manifest content of a message.

2. Reality is created symbolically.

3. Fantasy theme chaining creates symbolic convergence that is dramatistic in form.

4. Fantasy theme analysis is the basic method to capture symbolic reality.

5. Fantasy themes occur in and chain-out from all discourse.

6. At least three master analogues—righteous, social, and pragmatic—compete as

alternative explanations of symbolic reality (Cragan & Sheild, 1992, p. 200)

The Researcher's Role

Within qualitative research, the researcher works primarily in the area of data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This introduces potential biases as the researcher observes and interprets collected information. However, these biases need not be negative. In this study, online communication initiated and cultivated by the Rabbit Room nonprofit organization was researched. The researcher has been an active Christian throughout her life and, as such, has a thorough understanding of much of the religion's sacred terminology. The researcher was also familiar with common Christian tropes and many esteemed religious historical figures and stories. Within any culture, there is a level of understanding that is experienced by the members. As a member of the Christian culture, the researcher had a significant knowledge of existing religious beliefs, rituals, and their implications. She also had a particular interest in viewing Christianity as a foundational belief that is central to other aspects of life, rather than as a nominal influence. This better prepared her for the analysis of communication within an organization that seeks to include Christianity as a primary component of its mission. As research was done on the Rabbit Room, the researcher was able to be sensitive to the ways that Christianity integrated with topics that are not inherently religious. Additionally, since the nonprofit organization targets Christian audiences, her own experiences and Christianity enabled her to interpret the presented material similarly to the intended audience since her religious experiences aligned her with the intended audience.

Conclusion

This research study used the qualitative methodology of the case study to conduct an analysis of the communication presented by the Rabbit Room nonprofit organization. The

communication content included text, social media observation, and the analysis of audiovisual materials. Interpretations and meanings were sought through coding and memoing data after collection and then by seeking out dramatizing messages and fantasy themes by using symbolic convergence theory as a theoretical construct. The resulting research investigated how a sub-culture of Christians communed together over shared interests and values that provided more commonality between group members than just that of a shared Christianity. The next chapter will present the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Online communication is increasing as technology develops, enabling greater percentages of the population to participate online for larger amounts of time. Increased internet speed, availability, and reliability have contributed to the growing usefulness and presence of the internet (Mitchell, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2022a, Statista Research Department, 2022). As was the case with the extension of earlier media such as radio and television, the internet and online communication continue to enable individuals separated by time and space to connect and potentially identify together (McCabe, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2022b; Raushenbush, 2022). Beyond the connection of message creators to message receivers, however, the internet's development has paved the way for continuous and even, at times, synchronous communication across space. As a result, communities are made possible across thousands of miles, rather than smaller distances that make allowances for travel time (D. Li et al., 2020; Sun, 2019b; Whitehead, 2015).

Within the Christian church, use of online communication allows for communities to be bound despite differences in locale (Reddy, 2019a, 2019b; Vala & Huang, 2019). As a result, Christian online communities may operate differently than their in-person counterparts. This study endeavored to use a qualitative single case study to analyze one Christian community that communicates extensively online. The study thus increases the amount of research available on online Christian communication, particularly as it relates to the establishment of community. The Rabbit Room organization was selected for this case study because it is an organization that (a) is not limited to one particular place, (b) utilizes and encourages online communication, and (c) is expressly Christian in its mission. It, therefore, provides a picture of how an online Christian community binds together and establishes its own symbolic reality through its online

communication. The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

RQ1: What fantasy themes are present within the Rabbit Room online community?

RQ2: Is there a subsequent rhetorical vision shared by the Rabbit Room online community and, if so, what is that rhetorical vision?

RQ3: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community of Christians that reflects a particular culture?

RQ4: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community and culture of both artists and non-artists?

This chapter presents the study's central findings. Data collection was focused on online communication that originated from the formal organization itself, as well as online communication that was initiated and continued through individual participants on Rabbit Room-affiliated channels. The chapter begins by providing information about the organization selected for the case study to provide background context for the participation that occurs within the organization. Next, a cultural analysis of the Rabbit Room website is provided through the lens of Pauwels' (2012) guidelines. Findings from blog, email, and social media communication analysis follow. Finally, initial themes are identified and described. Chapter Five then presents a discussion and analysis of these findings.

The Rabbit Room

The Rabbit Room is a nonprofit organization based in the United States. It is headquartered near Nashville, Tennessee, where eleven employees are involved in the day-to-day operations of the organization (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). The Rabbit Room was established in 2007 after founder Andrew Peterson was inspired by a visit to a pub where a group of Christian writers (including C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien) had met in decades past (A.

Peterson, 2007). The writers—eventually referred to as a group called the Inklings—were known to meet weekly to share community and critique writings (Glyer, 2009). This meeting often took place in room in pub that was named the Rabbit Room. Peterson's nonprofit organization was inspired by this story of art in community and the organization's name came from the pub room in which they met (A. Peterson, 2007). The Rabbit Room evolved into an organization that encourages Christian artistry through a variety of means. Its primary functions as of July 2022 involved hosting artistic events like music concerts, posting online essays and articles that revolve around artistic themes and promote a community of artists, and operating as a small publisher of books that align with its organizational mission.

The Rabbit Room organization offers a membership option, but membership is not required for individuals to receive content or participate in most organizational events. The optional membership is primarily a way for individuals to monetarily support the mission of the organization. Membership requires annual contributions of at least $300 (paid annually or divided into monthly payments) and benefits include audio archives of past content, optional quarterly gifts, updates and advanced notice on organizational endeavors, and the invitation to participate on in-progress projects (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-f).

As of 2022, the Rabbit Room communicates through social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), an email newsletter, and the organization's website. Table 1 designates how many approximate followers there were for each communication channel as of July 2022 (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-b, n.d.-g, n.d.-h, n.d.-i). The website provides the most formal information about the organization and enables it to advance the organizational mission through article postings and an online store that helps promote select artists and sell the books the organization publishes. Social media accounts primarily announce new Rabbit Room content and events.

Table 1

Followers Per Communication Channel

Communication channel	Followers
Facebook	21,000
Twitter	12,000
Instagram	26,000
Email List	39,000
Website Monthly Page Views	122,200

Individuals who consume the content from the Rabbit Room are invited to post comments in response to online article postings, social media posts, and may choose to join and participate in a Facebook page called the Rabbit Room Chinwag, which has 9,900 members (The Rabbit Room Chinwag, n.d.). Content on this social media page is generated primarily by participants rather than the organization itself. It is, however, administrated by Rabbit Room employees.[1]

Website as Cultural Analysis

When considering online content as a creator and expression of a group's culture, Pauwels (2012) suggests analyzing an organization's website for expressions of norms, goals, and values of human behavior and material culture. Pauwels' recommended analysis includes considering initial impressions, major features of the website, analysis of content choices, communicated voice and implied audience, and organization and spacing.

Initial Impressions

The first impressions of the researcher, upon reviewing the Rabbit Room website, were that it offers clean-cut lines and is sparse in its decoration. As such, it seems to highlight the provided content, emphasizing the content over its style. The researcher had a positive initial

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[1] 1 John Barber, A Special Message from the Chinwag Admins, 2022, January 14, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/permalink/4984247648293825

impression because the website, at first, seems easy to navigate and offers a variety of navigational buttons through which to move throughout the website. However, a slightly more focused look left the researcher confused about the number of navigational buttons available at the top of the home page. Certain buttons like 'groups,' and 'login' were not clear in their purpose until clicked and several icon buttons were also unidentifiable to the researcher prior to hovering or clicking.

The website seems to take itself seriously and present its material in a sophisticated manner. Because the homepage focal point is a recently posted article, certain impressions given off by the text may change frequently. Photographs and graphics are present on the homepage, but text is most prevalent, both in the post titles and short paragraphs underneath the titles that provide the beginning content of each posted article. The website does make it apparent that the intention of the Rabbit Room is to provide essays, reviews of artistic content, and links to podcast episodes. Viewers immediately notice that content includes things like theatre, books, music, and creativity. Several of the short paragraphs under posted content also make it clear that the website at least considers Christian themes, as Bible passages and/or Christian terms (like Holy Saturday, sacred, pastor, Deuteronomy, and liturgy) are included.

The homepage works as a navigational draw. It does not provide the information, but points to different places to get information, which makes it different than a traditional blog which posts the most recent article at the top and provides the ability to scroll to earlier postings. The content on the homepage is focused on headings and article postings with the main navigation highlighting Podcasts, Groups, Store, and Events. Each of these main navigational buttons are for sections of the website that allow site visitors to participate and engage in the content provided by the Rabbit Room. Secondary navigational buttons highlight themes of the

community such as art, music, story, faith, and humor. Additional buttons also provide access to themed content such as archives, story, books, poetry, film, interviews, reviews, and videos. The order of these secondary navigational buttons falls primarily in alphabetical order, but not exclusively, which made the researcher curious as to the reason for the ordering. A donate and membership button are bolded, which may alert visitors to the nonprofit-nature of the organization.

The website positions itself as a place to engage, not in a particular way but in a myriad of ways. There's a store, but readers are not funneled to it. Funneling happens toward the articles first and podcasts second, with emphasis on the most popular or previously noted comments. Therefore, the site focuses on content first and engagement with that content second. Despite the name Rabbit Room, there are no rabbits on the website. This hints at a deeper meaning for the name, but the meaning is not showcased on the website in any prominent location.

The Rabbit Room website is primarily white but includes maroon as an accent color. This keeps the site somewhat conservative and fresh. The white brings to mind a blank canvas while the maroon maintains a classic appeal, bringing to mind the rich colors of wooden library shelves. Terminology seems to revolve around cultural expression itself, and engagement among participants. The researcher's initial impressions led to a formal feeling rather than anything whimsical. The site feels like a place of intentionality. The content may be creative, but its presentation is not.

Major Features

Features include two separate, traditional navigational panes, one larger and aligned with the site name. These navigational buttons lead to different areas of the site. There is also an area where it appears individuals can participate in forums, however there is no easy access to a list of

forums. This may have been active at one time but does not appear to be so any longer. Instead, the forum option allows for individuals to create a brief profile which then documents the individual's participation on the website by tracking the comments that were submitted to posted articles and blogs. Other features are the actual posted content and links to additional content. For instance, the website itself often links to other places where podcasts can be accessed. Recent podcasts are also embedded on the site's homepage.

A donation page is present on the website. It allows for individuals to contribute once or to set up a recurring donation by keeping financial information on file within a created online account. The website also offers access to an online store where visitors can purchase online downloads of artwork, music, and tickets to events as well as physical copies of artwork, books, CDs, vinyl, and apparel. The online store also includes the ability to save items in a wishlist.

The major features of the Rabbit Room site include links to content (primarily podcasts, articles, events, and a link to the Rabbit Room online store) and six reading groups that can be joined. That joining requires intentionality, as the content is not available prior to joining— though there is no cost to join. One of the reading groups was actively led during Lent and the others are archived materials and discussions that allow for individuals to engage with the content post-creation. They are called courses and allow for engagement with content and materials in an asynchronous manner.

Creation, Design, and Content Choices

Verbal/written signifiers

Several of the words used across the website include words or terms that seem to have no inherent meaning. For instance, the name of the organization features prominently on the website but an explanation for the reason that it is called The Rabbit Room is only found through a blog

entry from 2007. According to the proprietor of the Rabbit Room, Andrew Peterson, upon

visiting the pub where C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and others of the famous "Inklings" group met

he noticed a sign that designated the name of the room where they met: the Rabbit Room. In his

recollection of this event, he noted that he didn't "know why it was called that. There was no

explanation to be found. But the name struck me, stuck with me, and grew into this website" (A.

Peterson, 2007). This information is not easily accessible and takes several navigational clicks to

locate on the website.

Similarly, the annual conference held by the organization is called Hutchmoot and the

researcher was unable to find a reason for that name on the Rabbit Room website. A wider

internet search led to a different blog that explained the name as being a working title that stuck,

since Hutch is a home for rabbits and Moot is a place to meet, akin to the Entmoot in Tolkien's

Lord of the Rings (S. D. Smith, 2010). Aside from these terms that are unique to the

organization, the homepage includes a number of terms that center upon the concept of artistic

creation. The terms art, music, story, books, poetry, film, reviews, podcasts, video, articles, and

events each imply some amount of creation and some level of interaction with created works.

The mission of the organization and website uses terms like cultivate, curate, nourish, and

community which highlight the communal aim of the organization. Content from the blog

commonly references terms like faith, Christianity, terms for various forms of art, love,

community, and a variety of names that play heavily in the world of writing. Works of art that

are mentioned are not always inherently spiritual, but some certainly are. For instance, reviews

are provided on a variety of films (none of which are expressly Christian in nature) but some

frequently-mentioned authors like C.S. Lewis are well-known for their Christian beliefs. Around

Christian holidays, the terms Advent and Lent are prominent, and terms of faith are, at times,

general but also lend themselves to specificities of the Christian religion. Most commonly, the name Christ is mentioned as a spiritual signifier.

The creation and design of the site feel a little as if the website was created and then added onto. Two separate and unhidden navigational menus make for many different opportunities for clicks from the front page. This focuses primarily on providing content to visitors, as this content is available directly from the homepage and doesn't require multiple clicks. However, it also leaves a newcomer a bit befuddled over where to head to first. The "About" button is a logical choice, but this leads to a static page that explains the reason for and leadership of the organization. Beyond that, most links are not immediately self-explanatory. The "Groups" button seems like it could lead to a discussion board of sorts, but it instead leads to reading groups that can be joined. Most groups are not currently active but provide archived content from when the groups were established. The "Store" button the most self-explanatory of the buttons, leading to the Rabbit Room online store. "Events" is also obvious, leading to in-person event listings, almost all of which are Open Hours at the organization's building: North Wind Manor. There is one additional in-person event listed for a night of music. That event was also to be held at North Wind Manor.

Most of the navigational buttons are sub-categories and lead to article postings. But this is unclear on the homepage, as it is just themes that seem highlighted through the button terminology. "Archives" provides prior year archives rather than current calendar year archives. Every other button links to articles and postings that were coded within its particular category. Therefore, the website primarily points to the written content or links to podcasts. The navigation near the bottom of the page provides more information about Rabbit Room Press, the organization's publishing arm. Lower navigation also gives guidance on how to submit articles

and information on two in-person events: The Local Show and Hutchmoot. There is also the ability to subscribe to the Rabbit Room newsletter.

At the top, without any notable highlighting, are image links to Rabbit Room Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Spotify pages. One additional button is unclear and unnamed (even with a mouse hover), but it leads to a user feed that lists the most recent activity on the site. Most recent updates include registration and profile updates. It seems to be an RSS feed of limited usefulness.

When one clicks on the button that appears to lead to the user's site profile, it takes the user to a page that lists the latest blog postings and comments, upcoming events, and a left-hand navigational menu that links to courses or groups the user has joined, and notifications similar to a social media page. This area is extremely difficult to navigate and is, possibly, hardly used. Finding groups is difficult and once groups are joined, is extremely difficult to find posted content or replies. It is possible this used to be utilized as a discussion board forum but is not used any longer, despite still being an active link.

Typographic signifiers

Fonts throughout the website are sans serif, keeping them clean and easy to read across a variety of electronic screens. Most text is also black or dark gray on white, which keeps the text in line with traditional printing. Bold is only used for blog titles, author names, active links, or to differentiate interview questions from answers. Lyrics or lines from narratives or poems are, at times, highlighted with slightly larger font, italics, and offset within a gray box. At other times they are set apart in a maroon font that mimics the accent color of the website.

Visual representational types and signifiers

Images projected onto screens through the website include photographs and graphics.

Certain images combine graphics with photography, other images are either graphics or

photography. There is one primary image associated with each blog entry. In the store, most

items include at least one photograph for physically available items. The color spectrum is wide

and varied for most images, though earth tones are favored. Resolution is high, resulting in

quality representations. Images are also secondary to the text. They are often centered and

proportionate as a heading or momentary focus within an article, but they do not dominate any

page. Many of the images highlight artistic works, including paintings, book designs, album

covers, or photographs of authors or artists. None of the images use borders and focal length,

lighting, and angles are varied depending upon the subject of each image. Videos are not present

on the website, nor are there moving or rotating images. Each webpage on the site remains static,

though size automatically adjusts depending on the size of one's electronic screen.

Sonic types and signifiers

Very little sound is present on the website. There are links to Spotify and Apple music for

listening to songs, and there are a few links to recent podcasts. These podcasts are focused on

spoken word, often in the form of interviews.

Layout and design signifiers

The Rabbit Room website has not chosen to follow or adapt to contemporary website

layouts that involve large images and long-scrolling. Rather than relying on the audience's

scrolling from one image to the next, the website encourages more intentional engagement with

posted text by requiring clicking to access content. Images complement article text rather than

the other way around. Audience engagement requires clicking from one navigational link to

another and each webpage centers on one item or blog post. Posts on each page remain

symmetrical and balanced. They also retain a sense of openness with clean lines. The white

background limits the busy-ness of each page and presents the audience with one point of focus, rather than keeping eyes jumping from one thing to another. In many ways this layout replicates that of traditional publishing. Each page centers on dark text on a white background, drawing focus to the written word rather than any complicated combination of images or backgrounds.

The Rabbit Room website does not rely solely on titles for each article's navigational link. Instead, it begins each blog post underneath the linked title, allowing for a more significant preview to the content prior to requiring the audience to click the link. This encourages beginning engagement with the content prior to clicking, prioritizing thoughtful browsing rather than quick and repeated clicks. The organization of the website is primarily one that showcases blog-style entries. These are articles written by individuals and the organization at large.

Inverted analysis of missing or incomplete content

While the Rabbit Room aligns missionally with the Christian faith, its posted content does not appear to center directly on Christian themes. Instead, content focuses on a variety of artistic pursuits which, then, may intersect with Christianity. This is an important differentiation because the website does not mention Christian art such as films that are expressly Christian in nature. Likewise, contemporary Christian fiction authors are not mentioned. Music is an area that intersects more heavily with Christianity, however the music artists mentioned are almost exclusively on the fringe of the Christian music industry. At the end of 2021, Billboard considered Lauren Daigle, Elevation Worship, and Casting Crowns to be among the top Christian artists (Billboard, 2022). Not one of the Billboard top 50, however, are mentioned on the Rabbit Room website content, nor sold through its store. Similarly, top books mentioned on the website include those published by the Rabbit Room and well known past works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy and C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, but do not

mention contemporary award-winning works, as determined by the Evangelical Christian

Publishers Association (Christian Book Award, 2022; Christy Award, 2022).

Audiences, Tone, and Purpose

The *About Us* page declares the organization's purpose to be for Christ-centered

communities. As such, it prescribes its audience as communities of Christian believers. This is an

important distinction because it does not claim to target individual Christians, but rather their

communities. As such, its audience becomes not individuals in isolation, but individuals that

have or will be brought together. These individuals are expected to have been brought together

through faith in Jesus Christ, but also an affinity for the things of the Rabbit Room: music, story,

and art. The statement at the bottom of the page states that, "We hope your interaction with the

Rabbit Room is a blessing. We're in the middle of a good story, and you're helping us tell it"

(The Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). This statement directs attention to the desire for "interaction" and

how such contributions contribute to a "good story." This draws the audience in to the online

content (creating community) and describes its purpose as communal storytelling. The "story" is

only alluded to and not directly defined, which leaves its definition malleable and adjustable,

depending on how the audience chooses to interact with the organization and its content.

Across the bulk of the website, however, articles take on blog-form and have a variety of

authors, which influences the point of view of the website. Some entries have single authors who

share personal preferences and experiences with art (Groves, 2022; McMichael, 2022; Sorensen,

2021; Townsend, 2022). Other articles posted by the Rabbit Room are whimsical in nature and

directly provide entertainment for the site's audience (The Rabbit Room, 2022d). Still other

postings by the Rabbit Room are informational in nature and provide content that focuses on

releases of books, music, or podcasts (The Rabbit Room, 2021b, 2022b). Still others provide

direct content to readers, by way of interviews or spiritual formation readings for Christian

holidays and seasons of preparation like Advent and Lent (The Rabbit Room, 2021e, 2021g,

2022c).

Website Organization

  The organization of the website prioritizes its content. More visitor effort goes into

finding out about the organization than finding the content that it posts. Most of the content is

accessible through navigational links near the top of the website. These links proclaim the focus

of the website to be art, music, story, books, poetry, film, faith, humor, interviews, reviews, and

videos (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-c). Links also direct visitors to information on the Rabbit Room,

its network of podcasts, Rabbit Room reading groups, the Rabbit Room store, and Rabbit Room

events. This organization highlights the reason for the Rabbit Room, as well as resources for

visitors (podcasts and store) and places where visitors can engage (groups and events). That

organization of the navigational links reiterates the organization's focus on communal

engagement through the arts.

  The remaining site organization hinges upon links that are accessible from the homepage.

Recently posted content is highlighted and easy to find. Because it highlights recent postings, the

organization is most useful for visitors that visit the site consistently—as they can easily keep

current with newly posted content. Organization on the pages accessed through hyperlinks like

art, music, story and others are reverse chronological postings of recent content. This

organization emphasizes the site's desire for visitors to be able to catch up on recent content.

  Links for Apple Music and Spotify direct visitors to music content similarly to the article

postings, as do links for recent podcast episodes. Some podcasts are produced by the Rabbit

Room, others by organizations with similar missions. There is no clear prioritization for one over

the other, but the organization again prioritizes recency.

Website Content Postings

Beyond analysis of the website itself, the Rabbit Room site's posted content was also examined. In the six months of collected data, the Rabbit Room averaged 21 article and blog-style postings per month. This posting schedule aligned with most weekdays, excluding holidays. The main postings on the Rabbit Room website were self-coded with category themes. These categories correspond closely to the navigational buttons available for finding content by theme. Each posting was self-coded with one or more categories. As displayed in Figure 1, faith was the most common categorization followed by story, interviews, and art.

Figure 1

Categorization of Rabbit Room Articles
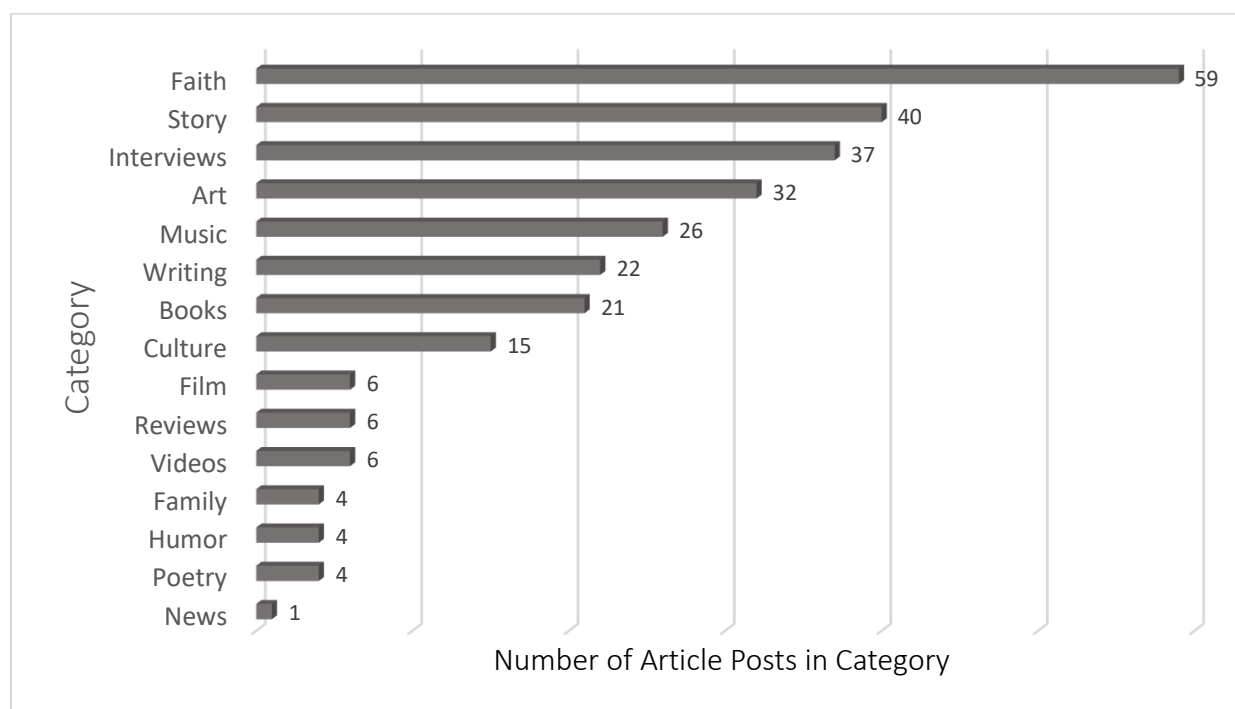
71 of the 125 total postings collected were credited to the Rabbit Room organization itself. These postings were most often information about Rabbit Room new releases, events, and

future plans. Little text was included in the more informational posts, but the very act of providing content that may be of interest to Rabbit Room followers implied certain things. The posting of information on podcasts, for instance, imparts the Rabbit Room's credibility to the content being promoted. Followers are led to assume that the podcast content aligns with the themes that the Rabbit Room seems to stand for and the quality of work it touts. Therefore, each posting about *The Habit* podcast, for example, aligned the podcast's interviewee with the purposes of the Rabbit Room even before the content was consumed by a listener.

The Rabbit Room itself also consistently posted blog entries that centered around the liturgical calendar during Advent and Lent. Near Christmas, weekly Advent readings were posted on the Rabbit Room website. These posts provided "curated collections of art, short essays, music, and more each Monday" (The Rabbit Room, 2021g, Introduction section, para. 1). Within these blog posts, there were scripture references, brief quotations from hymns or poems, writings that centered on spiritual preparation for the upcoming holiday, links to corresponding music, and photographs and descriptions of varieties of visual art that had been created by artists seeking to express sentiments similar to the emails' scriptural themes. For instance, one piece of artwork was titled "Incarnation" and a photograph of the work was followed by a description of the creative process that led to its creation. The artist, Tim Joyner, was quoted as saying that he seeks to use "themes of arrival, hope, joy at the other end of sorrow, healing at the other end of brokenness" in his advent-focused artwork (The Rabbit Room, 2021g, Incarnation by Tim Joyner section, para. 5). The description of the work included more than intentionality, but also a releasing of plans and purposes to "the brush" in order to discover what needed to be told through the art. The implication here is that a creator's willingness to be used by a higher power (commonly referenced as God or Jesus Christ within Rabbit Room communication) comes first

and then the creation of the art follows, ideally complemented by a power beyond the artist.

A Lenten post on Ash Wednesday similarly addressed spiritual themes. While the Advent season points to the eager anticipation of Jesus Christ's presence on earth, the Lenten season devotes "special attention to the ache of incompletion, suffering, and trial" (The Rabbit Room, 2022b, para. 1). Presented in this blog posting was a liturgy titled, "An Exhortation Making Space to Speak of Dying." It came from a volume of liturgies published by the Rabbit Room and was posted in its entirety. The liturgy contrasts the Living God with humans' death and proclaims that it is through death that life is found. This liturgy resonates strongly with scriptural messages of new life that is found in Jesus Christ but does so while speaking pointedly about the presence of death and its role in leading to life:

> Death reveals the utter vanity of all our
>
> Misplaced worship and all our feebly-invested hopes.
>
> And once we've seen, in light of death,
>
> how meaningless all our human strivings
>
> have been, then we can finally apprehend
>
> what the radical hope of a bodily resurrection
>
> means for mortals like us—and how
>
> the labors of Christ now reshape
>
> and reinterpret every facet of our lives,
>
> rebuilding the structures of our hopes
>
> till we know that nothing of eternal worth
>
> will ever be lost.

It continues:

Yes, hate death!

It is an enemy—

but an enemy whose end approaches, and

whose assault can inflict no lasting wound. (The Rabbit Room, 2022b)

Other Rabbit Room-authored postings introduced Rabbit Room members through member-written featured highlights. Since these featured highlights were curated by the Rabbit Room and shared with its audience only after curation, it was ensured that messaging was approved by the Rabbit Room. One such featured highlight states:

…because the center of the Rabbit Room is Jesus, creativity, and community, there is no inside or outside to membership. There are simply people who have been here a while, people who have been here even longer, and lonely travelers who have just stumbled upon a jovial caravan that's headed in their direction…membership is…a linking of arms and falling in step with people who are moving the same direction. (The Rabbit Room, 2021a, para. 6)

This commentary on community established the Rabbit Room as something to walk along with rather than consider oneself within or without. This picture of community is inclusive and open rather than limited and restricted to only those "allowed" in.

The posts not authored by the Rabbit Room organization were essays from individual contributors. One common theme from these was how creativity opens doors for an audience but is not received the same by each member of that audience. An essay on both critical and popular art asserted that "not relating to what others find relatable is perfectly acceptable" (Roycroft, 2021, Some Texts Must Wait section, para. 2). This alluded to the assumption that quality literature (or art) is expected to always be relatable or preferable to those who are wise in their

creative tastes. The essay made room for exceptions, noting that "adulation of good things" is not always a community experience and admitting that universality in appreciation is not always a thing to seek (Roycroft, 2021, Some Texts Must Wait section, para. 2). Roycroft continued, "if we must demure from what others are currently enjoying, we can do so without dismissing the wider interest, or the worth of the work in question" (Some Texts Must Wait section, para. 3). This offered compromise by making allowances for differences of preference but asserted that an individual's preference was not indicative of the value of the artistic work. In this vein, Roycroft recommended faithfulness in the reception and critique of creative works, warning against bearing false witness by publicly approving or condemning a work without adequate engagement with the text.

Still other posts discussed that art should lead audiences to what they need, rather than what the creator needed. In one such example, Drew Miller (2021) commended musician Sara Groves by stating her music resists the "urge to capture what she sees" and therefore "leaves open the possibility that we as listeners might see what we need to see for ourselves" (para 13). This sentiment related that the created artistry became a path for Truth. While that path is not prescribed, it is flexibly available for any which way the audience may need to take as they trek toward the Truth. In these blogs, personal paths of artistic appreciation and inquisition are esteemed.

Also, similar to many other blog posts published on the Rabbit Room website, Roycroft's (2021) essay highlighted the theme of redemption by acknowledging that the Harry Potter series presents the very real truth that "the world is broken, that I am broken, and that redemption of heart and cosmos are our most pressing need" (Redemption is a Big Story section, para. 2). Briggs (2022) wrote similarly, admitting a need for a Jesus Christ that interacts with "daily

sufferings." He declared a need for "a Christ who cares for my humanness—the joys, struggles, needs, wounds, and delights. I need a Lord and Savior who is redeeming me in my humanness" and claimed that "Christ is not erasing the human story…his final triumph is undying humanity—his physical resurrection, in which human thriving is defined" (para. 4). Clark (2021) also noted that our hearts yearn for the end of evil but suggested that yearning seeks peace in its place—a redemption of what is broken. This theme of brokenness and a need for redemption ran deeply through Rabbit Room blog posts.

The posts rarely prompted response by way of reply comments, with only 12 out of 125 receiving five or more comments. 98 of the 125 prompted one or fewer reply comments. These replies were most often brief statements of affirmation which concisely voice appreciation for the posting rather than initiating further dialogue regarding the posting's content. While commenting was welcomed, it was not expressly encouraged—no posted essays in the data collection period ended with requests for feedback or answers to posted questions.

Rabbit Room Mass Emailing

The Rabbit Room sent an average of eight emails per month to its distribution list during the data collection period of November 2021 through April 2022. A few emails originated from the Rabbit Room Store and provided information on items for sale or other important information about ordering, sales, shipping, and other store-related information. Store emails provided little in the way of content, other than commercial information related to the business side of the Rabbit Room Store. This focus on the business aspect of the nonprofit organization was positioned as what enables the Rabbit Room to support artists and spread the beauty of the created works to a larger audience (P. Peterson, 2021).

Most Rabbit Room emails were weekly digests, primarily compiling content and

information provided elsewhere on the Rabbit Room website or social media accounts. However, there was also a section included weekly in which Rabbit Room organizational members shared the artistic content they had been enjoying that week. Those newsletter sections provided links to content that was available online, as well as a link to a posting on the Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook page that asked for Rabbit Room readers to share their own lists of content that had inspired them in the recent week. Content included in the email was a combination of Christian and mainstream artistry under the heading, "Stuff We Liked This Week."

The strongest themes running through the recommendations were pieces of writing, music, and visual storytelling that prompted individuals to think deeply about faith, community, and the appreciation of edifying art. Several items mentioned were (a) a "theologically rich" children's book and history of the Christian faith (see Appendix A), (b) a podcast on how to read the Bible and a book on Christianity written for skeptics which were touted as useful and devotional in content (see Appendix B), (c) a podcast that covered the life of a megachurch and was commended for its journalistic expertise (see Appendix C), (d) a discussion of high-levels of storytelling and lyricism (see Appendix D), (e) a documentary that highlighted the influence that art can have on community (see Appendix E), (f) a recommendation for a book that intersected literature and theology, and a spoken appreciation for *The Batman* as a film that moved beyond vengeance (see Appendix F). In addition, Cone's book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* was commended for its "reflections on the importance of these two symbols of death and God's redemptive, life-giving power over them" (see Appendix G) and an opinion on how the *Severance* television show considered how the *imago Dei* in humans can be splintered and then put back together (see Appendix H). The recommendations were often recommended for their artistry or parallels with Christianity but were not required to be expressly Christian in content.

Content considered included the works of the Beatles, musician Sam Fender, Stephen Sondheim, U2, rapper Earl Sweatshirt, *Dash & Lily*, *Cobra Kai*, *Encanto*, *West Side Story*, *Better Call Saul*, and *All Creatures Great and Small*.

Rabbit Room Podcasts

One of the forms of content consistently distributed by the Rabbit Room was an assortment of podcasts (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-g). These podcasts ebb and flow and the Rabbit Room maintains links to all of them, whether they are still in production or not. During the period from November 1, 2021 through April 30, 2022, four podcasts were actively added to: *The Resistance*, *Artists &*, *Call it Good*, and *The Habit*. All four of these podcast series focused significantly on artistic process and the content was intended primarily for other artists. While non-artists may benefit from the podcasts, the podcasts themselves claim to interview artists for the purpose of encouraging other artists with inspiration, encouragement, or to feel less alone in their own processes (Hinton & Still, 2022a, 2022b; Conner, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; Rogers, 2021a, 2021b).

The Resistance podcast aired three episodes during the data collection period and focused on a variety of musicians that fight against the dialectical tension between the type of artists they want to be and the one they are (Conner, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g). This is what is described as the resistance: the fight to be true to one's calling. The musicians interviewed were involved with varieties of music including blues, Gospel/R&B, Broadway ballads, and rap. *Artists &* is a podcast that was introduced in February 2022, with its first and second episodes releasing in March and April, respectively. Those episodes highlighted visual artists and encouraged them to share about their processes and preferences (Hinton & Still, 2022a, 2022b). *Call it Good* was introduced as a podcast March 2022 and released its first four episodes on April 28, 2022. This

podcast included "conversations on creative confidence" (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-a) and spoke with artists about the natural inclination to be overly humble about their work (Conner, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

The Habit podcast provided weekly episodes that interviewed writers as they broadly explored the writing process its struggles (Rogers, 2019—present). It was self-described as "conversations with writers about writing" (The Habit, 2022). This podcast was the most consistent of the Rabbit Room's active podcasts, releasing 25 episodes during November 2021 through April 2022. *The Habit*'s releases equated to one per week, excluding the week between Christmas and New Year. The writers interviewed through this podcast were diverse in their foci, including writing for children, editing of creative writing, social justice, political and cultural commentary, food, and memoirs (Rogers, 2022c, 2021h, 2022e, 2022h, 2022p, 2022r). Themes within these podcasts included artistic identity, struggles in creating, the importance of art, and art as a complement to faith. Artistic identity was seen as a calling and several podcasts affirmed that it was not the quality of work you do that defines you, but your wrestling with what God has placed inside you as you aim for excellence (Conner, 2022b, 2022c, 2022e, 2022f; Hinton & Still, 2022b; Rogers, 2021c). Also highlighted was the need to share one's created work with audiences. This was considered a high calling that is essential because art can only reach audiences and influence others if it is shared (Conner, 2022c, 2022d, 2022g; Rogers, 2022c).

Scripture was also foundational to the podcasts. Reverend Thomas McKenzie was the first interviewee in *Call it Good.* His interview was an attempt to establish a strong theological grounding for how human creativity can be expressed and appreciated in light of God and His creation. This episode spoke strongly to the themes of creation in its consideration of what it means to be made in the image of God and a co-creator with Him. In the audio podcast,

McKenzie highlighted four items that provided foundational considerations for the work of the Rabbit Room and the *Call it Good* podcast:

1. There is a difference between God and humans in that God and His creation is always good while humans' may not be. However, this is not a reason to not participate in creation.

2. Creation should be done in community.

3. Human creation is a process, as the Genesis passage describes God's creation as a process.

4. Creation should come with the ability to reflect and evaluate. (Conner, 2022a)

Interviewed creators also frequently shared names of others that had been influential in their lives. Writers of books and poetry commonly list names such as C.S. Lewis, Wendell Berry, and Madeleine L'Engle, while musician lists named individuals that within singer/songwriter circles. For instance, Jill Phillips is a musician frequently recommended by the Rabbit Room and involved in Rabbit Room sponsored music events. She noted some of her inspiring writers as Aimee Mann, David Mead, and Rufus Wainwright (Rogers, 2022c).

Social Media Engagement

During the data collection window, the Rabbit Room was active on several social media platforms, including two Facebook pages, and Twitter and Instagram accounts. In addition, the Rabbit Room engaged through occasional synchronous online events such as an annual conference that was moved to an online platform during the years 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite not falling within the data collection window, a brief overview of this online version of the annual conference is included in these findings because of the online nature of the event and its transition from in-person to online and back again.

The research showed that most communication channels provided similar amounts of content but resulted in limited engagement by way of replies and comments. The notable exception was The Rabbit Room Chinwag page which was the most active of the Rabbit Room's social media accounts. Table 3 displays how many posts were placed on each platform and the resulting comments from Rabbit Room followers.

Table 2

Posts and Replies Count by Communication Channel

	Facebook		Instagram	Twitter	Website Blog Articles
	Rabbit Room Page	Rabbit Room Chinwag			
Initial Posts	224	574	178	177	125
Replies	607	18,043	728	23	130

Note. Numbers relate to posts from November 1, 2021 through April 30, 2022.

Facebook

Between November 1, 2021 and April 30, 2022, the Rabbit Room averaged 37.5 Facebook posts per month on its organizational Facebook page. 95 out of the 225 posts (42%) prompted 25 or more interactions from readers, including comments, like-button responses (such as "like," "love," or "care"), or link shares. While individuals could engage with the content by using Facebook's like button or clicking to share the content's link on their own Facebook pages, the most intentional engagement came in the form of typed comments. Six or fewer posts per month received more than five comments. The content that prompted the most written responses were live events and new releases or pop culture content opinions.

Overall, the Rabbit Room's Facebook page primarily featured posts that highlighted content from the Rabbit Room website. In this way, it operated as an advertising channel for the distribution of its chosen content. However, there were also links to content not generated

directly by the Rabbit Room. For instance, an April 26, 2022 post linked to an article published

by the magazine *Christianity Today*, and also linked to the author's newest book, available

through Amazon.[2] There was also a podcast and event hosted by The Trinity Forum[3] and

requests for support for artists' works.[4] Each of these postings encouraged participation in

community—within both the immediate Rabbit Room community and other artistic communities

beyond the Rabbit Room.

      The Rabbit Room Facebook page was also used as a channel for promoting its online

store. These posts revealed special promotions, new releases, or store information. For instance,

in advance of Mother's Day 2022, the Rabbit Room posted notice of a promotional code that

would grant its users 15% off of their orders (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-b).[5] Other content was

provided at no cost but was accompanied by a link to a location that offered more content. For

instance, the Rabbit Room has published two volumes of a work titled *Every Moment Holy*,

which is a collection of liturgies for various moments in life (The Rabbit Room, 2022a). On

February 24, the Rabbit Room posted a Facebook status update that shared a "Liturgy for

Grieving a National Tragedy" in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.[6] Another similar

update was posted in December of 2021, providing "A Liturgy For The Mark of The Start Of

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[2] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022 April 26,
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=365027139006434&set=a.342364557939359
[3] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, March 30,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid06DVDp9Pf1sovV2qcXx3LTyPGfE1qK5LJkVrcsuLMuMJ
wB4X7GyZqE31j99K5ooHHl
[4] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, March 2,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid02ohiK7YCxBxYKnYAw2aR7E68GKowaikr7qv76j9nb4G
mfMAQF4iG4Hhk7LDW76ygol
[5] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, April 26,
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=365027139006434&set=a.342364557939359
[6] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, February 24,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid0qD5kG8XvAAvHHppuB5qrEJfMavnq9AzVCfN62bWEk
3MbWQdN9KmdpoYaLeRMo5aal

The Christmas Season."[7] The link within both status updates led to the Every Moment Holy

website where this and additional liturgies could be downloaded for free. These liturgies

included common themes of grief, death, and praise (Every Moment Holy, n.d.).

Additionally, the Facebook page was a place for in-person event promotion. While the

Rabbit Room did not always have a physical presence, since its inception in 2007 it has

developed a periodic music event called "The Local Show," an annual conference called

"Hutchmoot," and it recently completed renovation of a building that is now known as North

Wind Manor—a place which hosts Rabbit Room film showings, concerts, and lectures with

artists. Events such as the North Wind Manor Lecture Series,[8] the Thomas McKenzie Film

Series,[9] North Wind Manor Open Hours,[10] and Local Shows[11] were all events hosted by the

Rabbit Room and held at North Wind Manor.

Facebook Chinwag Postings

In addition to a traditional Facebook organizational page, the Rabbit Room also hosts a

Facebook page called The Rabbit Room Chinwag (The Rabbit Room Chinwag, n.d.). This page

provides a platform for engagement between members, which served to encourage online

engagement while leaving the Rabbit Room Facebook page less cluttered for those seeking

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[7] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2021, December 6,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/videos/414356393693367/
[8] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, April 27,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid0GJXTVqWLHyTKNX9Sq733RjNVutQxe5nCSHuWKeQ
RBmFRJMTbyJRbazrWKfhM3kaLl
[9] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, March 23,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid06r5DvWWMhWsx7zwtyTyfU4aQUe3Wvo9AX9q1gcUW
R6DE1h5ti8M3thwHZqAJS7ucl
[10] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, February 14,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/photos/a.10151109674224500/10159754362209500/
[11] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, February 7,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid02hk4b6rqA4UZcXWwdEh7HnG4iRZJmVWX5fAY9iCpt
kSF3z9FyAsWeEFNkwfYxAqFUl

Rabbit Room content and information. During the collection period, engagement on the Chinwag page was significant for the nonprofit, averaging over 95 posts per month with that number of posts garnering a collective monthly average of more than 3,000 replying comments.

The Rabbit Room Chinwag page was actively monitored by Rabbit Room-affiliated administrators and a code of conduct was required to be followed. The posted requirements were:

a. Focus on discussion on art, music, and story. The Rabbit Room fosters Christ-centered community & spiritual formation through music, story, and art. The aim of this group is to discuss those themes, though discussion may at times go beyond them.

b. Remember: the audience here is diverse. This group covers a variety of theological, political, and social backgrounds. Keep in mind that the goal here is appreciation of art, rather than theological, political, or social debate.

c. Be good hosts. Everyone in the Rabbit Room Chinwag shares responsibility for being gracious hosts. Healthy discussion is welcome, but kindness is required. Please be respectful and considerate of other perspectives.

d. Focus on celebration! We aim to point to what is good, true, and beautiful, rather than tearing down what we don't like. Though we value healthy and respectful critique, it should be done in a spirit of humility. (The Rabbit Room Chinwag, n.d.)[12]

These guidelines set the tone for communication on the page, but the communication also must be approved. A featured post on the page explained the process for posting, which included submission of a post that would then be sent to the page administrators for approval. This was an

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[12] Guidelines retrieved 2022, July 13, from https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/about

attempt by the Rabbit Room to focus on things appropriate to the Rabbit Room in a curated

manner so that quality posts were not getting lost because of the quantity of posts. The Rabbit

Room Chinwag page states that denial of posts may be due to violation of one of the guidelines

but could also be because the administrators felt the post was repetitive, was unlikely to spark

much discussion, or because the day already had a significant number of posts.[13]

The content on the Chinwag page centered around art and faith and the posts that

received the most commentary engagement were those that asked for recommendations. These

recommendation requests were artistic or literary in nature,[14] considered leisure activities like

board games,[15] and asked for creative name ideas for a new robot vacuum.[16] Not all requests,

however, were lighthearted and there were also requests for assistance regarding how to speak to

a group of children that was going through the pain of grieving the death of a loved one[17] and

what creative content on grief, heaven, or healing would be helpful for a new widow.[18] These

posts that requested feedback or opinions typically received the most comments. This

highlighted the communal nature of the Facebook Chinwag group. Individuals also frequently

posted when they were seeking artistic recommendations on content that was enjoyed by other

Rabbit Room followers. Many of these recommendations followed the pattern of Rabbit Room

artistry, as they were lesser-known options than would show up on national bestseller lists.

However, there were times that commenters still recommended items that American culture

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[13] Rabbit Room Chinwag posting process and guidelines, 2021, January 21,
https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/permalink/4984247648293825
[14] Charissa Sylvia, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, March 6, https://www.facebook.com/5161641817221073
[15] Anna Dufek, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, December 23, https://www.facebook.com/4909976029054321
[16] Jennifer Armstrong Rodgers, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, March 26,
https://www.facebook.com/5214165711968683
[17] Erling Rantrud, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, January 22, https://www.facebook.com/5018434074875182
[18] Susan Richmond, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, December 12,
https://www.facebook.com/4863267057058552

gives value to, such as superhero movies.[19] In posts like these, Rabbit Room participants that

chose to reply were generally affirming of the original poster's appreciation for the works of art.

However, in some scenarios there was an underlying need to qualify certain preferences of habit

or taste. One individual qualified a need for reading "structure" as something that worked for

him though it was not the same as the "enchantment" others may desire. [20] Several others

commented within suggestion threads that there was a need embrace personal preferences no

matter what they were rather than, as one commenter phrased it, selecting works "out of sheer

literary snobbishness."[21] In some comments like these, there was an underlying assumption that

individuals may aim to appreciate the things they should, rather than enjoy their natural

preferences. Similarly, one contributor sought out others with whom she could process her

preferences over a television show, despite feeling those preferences did not naturally align with

the identity she had claimed for herself. She stated:

> I'm halfway through season 2 of Ted Lasso and I need a safe space to process what I'm
>
> watching. In particular, why, when someone asked me yesterday who my favorite
>
> character was, did I hear myself saying it was Roy? My high school Sunday School
>
> teacher would not approve. My MIL would be horrified and fear for my children's
>
> salvation. And yet, here I am, a Jesus-loving homeschool mom who finds Roy Kent
>
> absolutely endearing.[22]
>
> Other Chinwag posts are silly in nature, submitted for the purpose of sharing joyful

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[19] Amanda Dykes, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, December 31, https://www.facebook.com/4938091579576099
[20] Samuel N. Harris, Rabbit Room Chinwag comment, 2021, November 22,
https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4795347747183817/
[21] Sarah Wilson, Rabbit Room Chinwag comment, 2021, November 22,
https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4795347747183817/
[22] Ariaun Austin Loveday, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, February 10,
https://www.facebook.com/5088873101164612

laughter. One post that received over 120 reply comments was a screenshot of a social media

post that combined a contemporary Christian music (CCM) lyric with the phrase, "The CDC

recommends..."[23] Requests for additional combinations poured in, quoting a variety of CCM

artists including Avalon, Michael W. Smith, Jars of Clay, Relient K, Newsboys, and others.

Some responses combined a contemporary knowledge of COVID-19 restrictions with classic

CCM lyrics. One such combination referenced Audio Adrenaline by commenting, "The CDC

recommends a big, big house with lots and lots of room…"[24] adding additional, timely humor to

the nostalgic post.

There were also themes of grief and hope throughout the Chinwag posts. Considerations

included the Russia-Ukraine conflict, tornadoes in certain areas of the country, and individuals

that admitted to physical or mental health struggles. Each of these posts expressed difficult

circumstances but grasped for or shared a hope realized. One woman shared her health struggles

that made it impossible to continue in her passion of DSLR photography. Still this post

showcased how God provided her with a beautiful moment in nature that was able to be captured

accurately by her smartphone's camera. She wrote:

> God giveth (an eye for creativity) and so doth the husband (professional grade Canon
>
> photo gear). God also taketh away (the ability to use said photo gear due to three separate
>
> medical conditions that affect my hands) and so the photo gear went away too. I've been
>
> mourning the loss of the gear and the use of my hands (I can't even cut my own meat any
>
> more). Ah, but then today, on a trip to the southern end of CA's Big Sur, a decent eye for

[23] Brenda Slomka, Rabbit Room Chinwag post [image], 2022, January 1,
https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4941369365914987/
[24] Laura Beth Payne, Rabbit Room Chinwag comment, 2022, January 1,
https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4941369365914987/

composition met perfect conditions and believing the best camera is the one you have with you, my iPhone 12 Pro did the job as well as any of my Canon lenses could have. I am encouraged in oh so many ways. (UPDATE one week after posting: To you all 635 of you, thank you for your kindness. Please feel free to take this photo and do with it as you will (except claim it as your own, of course). If the res is insufficient I can email you the original. I don't consider this photo mine. It was a God-given gift and I offer it freely.[25]

Another individual shared about her experience in ministry as she sought advice on how to cope with loneliness in ministry and singleness.[26]

Thoughtful questions were also frequent and these prompted readers for their preferences and opinions. These were often presented by asking for thoughts on particular artists or artwork such as Wes Anderson films,[27] but also inquired about motivations for certain pieces of art[28] or even preferences over the size of a teacup that leads to a deeper contemplation:

Can we talk a bit about that quote (supposedly from C.S. Lewis) about never having a cup of tea big enough? I adore Lewis, but I'm not sure I agree with him on this. After years of gargantuan tea mugs, I've thrifted a few smaller tea cups lately and I have been a bit shocked by how much I am enjoying them. There's an intensity and an immediacy to a little cup--a call to focus on and savor the tea itself, not just use it as a companion for another activity. Have you discovered anything like this? In a world of excess, what have you found that you enjoy most in smaller doses?[29]

[25] Marcia Hirst, Rabbit Room Chinwag comment [image], 2022, February 8, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/508124098594490/

[26] Rachel Hawkins, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, April 20, https://www.facebook.com/5279807248737862

[27] Gage Hunt, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, November 8, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4752054161513176/

[28] James Boocock, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, March 4, https://www.facebook.com/5155326971185891

[29] Becca Kate, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, April 3, https://www.facebook.com/5305774926141094

Theological questions also arose, as individuals sough answers to their own questions, or questions from those they were in relationship with. Another asked how to stay in tune with the Spirit as she read authors whose ideas opposed each other but both seemed Biblically based.[30]

Additionally, community was sought both in the posts as well as through them. Missionaries asked for assistance locating housing for a two-month respite from ministry [31] and advice was sought on how to establish an artistic group at a local church. [32] Many individuals used the Rabbit Room Chinwag page as a source of immediate community, but still others reached out to the page to connect with members that lived in their vicinity or were attending events near them.

Throughout these posts, the term rabbit was used liberally as a term of endearment for those participating in the group. Participants were frequently referred to as rabbits and the term "rabbity" made appearances within requests for suggestions on things like hobbies,[33] cross country road trips,[34] family television shows,[35] home décor ideas,[36] and as a descriptor for other likeminded individuals who wished to participate or contribute in different forms of community.[37, 38, 39, 40]

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[30] Chelsea Hatfield Satterfield, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, December 19, https://www.facebook.com/4892154457503145

[31] Elizabeth O'Brien, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, March 29, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/5222474357804485/

[32] Karen 'Fletcher' Smith, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, January 12, https://www.facebook.com/4973087752743148

[33] Anna Morgan, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, January 18, https://www.facebook.com/5003051463080110

[34] Anna Morgan, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, April 2, https://www.facebook.com/5231895543529033

[35] Emily Feicht, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, January 30, https://www.facebook.com/5053655268019729

[36] TJ Marshall, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, January 14, https://www.facebook.com/4980280915357165

[37] Anna Jubilee, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, March 28, https://www.facebook.com/5219062691478985

[38] Brandon Jamison, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, January 21, https://www.facebook.com/5010753158976607

[39] Sharye Cressler, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2021, November 1, https://www.facebook.com/4730663553652237

[40] Amber Schellenberger, Rabbit Room Chinwag post, 2022, January 13, https://www.facebook.com/4975994485785808

Twitter Tweets

Between November 2021 and the end of April 2022, the Rabbit Room tweeted 177 times

on Twitter. Out of those 177 tweets, 17 received comments, with most (13) receiving just one

comment (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-i). The common theme among these comments was the

sharing of affinity for the content of the posts. The replies did not express new content, prompt

dialogue, nor ask questions. Instead, they were simple words of affirmation. One exception to

this was a comment that joked about how the commenter had misread the title of the blog post

being promoted, which was advertising a new episode in *The Habit* podcast. Smucker (2022)

wrote, "I misread this as 'The Hobbit Podcast' and briefly got really excited." While not

affirmation for the presented content, the comment still connected the follower to the Rabbit

Room by alluding to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

Twitter, as a social media channel that puts a premium on words, garnered

149 (out of 177) Rabbit Room tweets that were favorited by followers, with most receiving ten

or fewer favorites. 130 tweets out of 177 were retweeted by followers who decided to share the

content to their own Twitter feeds. All but one of these 130 received seven or fewer retweets,

with one tweet being retweeted 21 times.[41] This post correlated to the February 24 Facebook post

that similarly shared "A Liturgy for Grieving a National Tragedy" in the wake of the Russia-

Ukraine conflict and was shared many times by Facebook users.[42]

Overall, the content posted on the Rabbit Room's Twitter feed was similar to that of its

Facebook page—it aligned very closely to the postings that occurred on the Rabbit Room

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[41] Rabbit Room Twitter tweet, 2022, February 24,
https://twitter.com/TheRabbitRoom/status/1496894609661825032?s=20&t=FT74cMiRXjN7BG_vMBgeyg
[42] Rabbit Room Facebook post, 2022, February 24,
https://www.facebook.com/TheRabbitRoom/posts/pfbid0qD5kG8XvAAvHHppuB5qrEJfMavnq9AzVCfN62bWEk
3MbWQdN9KmdpoYaLeRMo5aal

website. In that way, the Rabbit Room Twitter feed did not offer new content to Rabbit Room

followers through Twitter but, instead, offered a different channel through which to engage.

However, the engagement, by way of favorites, comments, and retweets, was quite limited. The

only unique content provided by the Rabbit Room's Twitter feed were occasional retweets of

other Twitter content. 20 out of the 177 Rabbit Room Tweets were actually retweets, sharing

content from other users who had referenced Rabbit Room content such as Every Moment

Holy[43] or content that was curated and posted on the Rabbit Room website.[44]

Instagram Postings

There were 178 Instagram posts between November 2021 and the end of April 2022.

Reply comments were more common on Instagram than on Twitter, with 128 posts out of 178

receiving one or more comment. Likes were far more common on Instagram than either of the

other social media channels. Every image or video post received at least 38 likes, with 142

receiving at least 100. At the high end, several received close to or over 1,000. Videos were also

frequently viewed, with every posted video (11) receiving over 500 views and most (8) receiving

between 1,000 and 3,500 (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-h).

Overall, Instagram comments reflected appreciation for the Rabbit Room, its posts, and

its provided content. This was similar to reply comments on both Facebook and Twitter. Further

commenting occurred when opinions and comments were expressly requested but was still

typically limited in number and breadth. For instance, on December 1, 2021 the Rabbit Room

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[43] Rabbit Room Twitter retweet, 2022, January 11,
https://twitter.com/rchendrickse/status/1481016593383624705?s=20&t=S70HYFVs20We842-78KCug
[44] Rabbit Room Twitter retweet, 2022, February 11,
https://twitter.com/NashFaithWork/status/1492166835285991429?s=20&t=HVIz1CP7dXY1h9vqk2FcDQ

posted about membership and asked members (both new and old) to "feel free to introduce yourself below! We'd love to meet and learn about each other!"[45] Responding members gave brief responses, often mentioning why they had recently moved from merely following the Rabbit Room into participating through membership.[46] However, requests like this received only small numbers of responses – this specific request received 12 reply comments.

Also like Twitter, the content provided on Instagram primarily took Rabbit Room content that was posted elsewhere and adapted it for the Instagram platform, preferencing images over text. This immediate delivery of content to social media followers did allows the Rabbit Room to post event information in a timely manner. Things like film nights hosted at the Rabbit Room headquarters, North Wind Manor, were promoted in real time.[47]

Encouraging Community Beyond the Rabbit Room

Content within these online channels also frequently encouraged interaction beyond them. Despite the active engagement with the Rabbit Room online, there were significant amounts of content that turned attention toward in-person expressions of community rather than online expressions. Several examples of this were seen in the information surrounding the Rabbit Room's annual conference, Hutchmoot; the Rabbit Room's event site, North Wind Manor; and the venerating of well-known Christian artists who have gone before.

Hutchmoot

Since 2010, the Rabbit Room's annual conference, Hutchmoot, has been an in-person, communal expression of the Rabbit Room's online community. However, when the COVID-19

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[45] Rabbit Room Instagram post, 2021, December 1, https://www.instagram.com/p/CW9NaBfpTkb/
[46] Agazefixed Instagram reply comment, 2021, December 1, *I've been following and benefiting from the Rabbit Room for a couple of years now, but now I'm delighted to contribute and collaborate as a member.* https://www.instagram.com/p/CW9NaBfpTkb/
[47] Rabbit Room Instagram post, 2021, November 9, https://www.instagram.com/p/CWE6m7IMN_U/

pandemic derailed the plans for the traditional, in-person, Hutchmoot in 2020, the Rabbit Room organization adjusted and created Hutchmoot: Homebound. For both 2020 and 2021, the annual conference was moved online and opened to greater numbers, without heavy regard to space or territorial limitations. Instead of hosting approximately 300 attendees as usual (a number determined by the practical requirements of an in-person event, not interest levels), Hutchmoot: Homebound hosted over 3,000 attendees (Miller, 2020). While these online events were outside of the researcher's data collection window, the existence of them initiated several social media posts and comments in relation to the event. This was an opportunity to consider feedback from the Rabbit Room's large-scale foray into a large-scale live, multi-day online event. Drew Miller (2020) described the first Hutchmoot: Homebound as a moment of remedy for the "loneliness and isolation" of 2020 and one that mourned the loss of in-person community even while embodying Wendell Berry's claim that "the impeded stream is the one that sings" (Berry, 2011). Many agreed over social media, thankful for the opportunity to meet together online, in real-time, and participate in community centered around faith and art.

When the Rabbit Room later posted on March 7, 2022 (at which point Hutchmoot: Homebound had occurred once in 2020 and once in 2021), it alerted the Rabbit Room followers that the Homebound version of Hutchmoot would not continue into 2022 and beyond. This led to sadness and grieving from individuals who felt limited by their ability to travel to in-person events or their ability to obtain a ticket to the event that sells out within minutes (Clark, 2022). Within its post, the Rabbit Room acknowledged that grief and the organization's difficulty in deciding against continuation of an online event that welcomed so many more attendees than would be possible for any in-person event. However, the organization also centered its rationale on the need for intentional community, best accomplished in smaller groups that experience life

together. A segment of the Rabbit Room posting is below:

>…we trust that Homebound has inspired you to nourish your unique community,
>enabling you to bolster one another and reflect the Kingdom through friendship, art, and
>beauty. Remember that there are other gatherings with kindred organizations across the
>US, like the Anselm Society and Square Halo Books who are about the same work—as
>well as regional "moots" by folks embodying the spirit of Hutchmoot in their own areas.
>Our greatest joy with Homebound was watching so many of you gather around good
>content with your own communities. As we emerge from a period in which many of us
>were isolated from local community, we can begin finding creative ways to cultivate that
>same spirit where we are. That will still be possible with all that's to come—so look
>toward the future with hope. (The Rabbit Room, 2022c)

Ultimately, the choice to hold Hutchmoot: Homebound online was not made because of the
Rabbit Room's preference for online events, but as a reactionary decision affected by the
isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it spoke to the Rabbit Room's desire
and willingness to meet despite obstacles, but the organization's devotion to smaller, engaged
communities was also supported by its reversion to a smaller in-person conference to be hosted
in October 2022 (The Rabbit Room, 2022c).

North Wind Manor

North Wind Manor, the current headquarters and event space for the Rabbit Room, was
the result of a fundraising effort to renovate an old farmhouse which was completed in 2019 and
intended for ministry (A. Peterson, 2019). It is now used for these various ministries, a number
of which will be livestreamed for future online audiences (Thiessen, 2022). Its name originated
from a George MacDonald work, *At the Back of the North Wind* (K. J. Johnson, 2021). The

connection is a clear one, as MacDonald's (1871/2001) book describes its character North Wind as descending on a rabbit-warren and inspiring the rabbits living there to approach and gather around North Wind as she speaks to a young child poetically about who she is and is not (MacDonald, 1871/2001). This connection affirms not only the name of North Wind, but also connects the concept of the Rabbit Room's "rabbits" with that North Wind. Additionally, while North Wind Manor is a structure that exists in space and time, rather than exclusively over the internet, it is described as, "not the 'last homely house,'" but one that would hopefully inspire others to "steward yet more hospitable places in which the Creator God, the Incarnate Christ, and the Holy Spirit can be made known through music, story, and art in community" (K. J. Johnson, 2021).

While North Wind Manor exists as an in-person expression of the online community that is present on the Rabbit Room website and social media channels, it is also a consistent reminder of the work that the Rabbit Room encourages. Online communication and events are not the primary goal or focus of the Rabbit Room. Rather, the Rabbit Room seeks to nourish Christ-communities through art. By promoting events held at North Wind Manor, the Rabbit Room encourages attendance by those within a reasonable geographical distance. For those who live outside of the Nashville, Tennessee area, this promotion of events operates as a consistent encouragement to engage in like-minded in-person expressions of community in other geographic locations. Social media posts support this expectation through posts that seek in-person community. One such post invited Rabbit Room members to an in-person gathering in North Carolina. The event was described as a place for "meeting new friends doing rabbity

activities…"[48] Other posts expressed interest in starting communities far removed from the

Nashville-area, but still centered around common themes like in the example below:

> I live in Jakarta, Indonesia and a few friends and I are trying to start a community of
>
> Christ-following "creative" types, to encourage each other and help foster beauty and
>
> truth in our city. If anyone has any helpful and practical ideas for how to pursue this, we'd
>
> love any advice/ideas you could share… Fellowship is hard to come by in the worlds
>
> largest Muslim city, and the arts scene in general is very nascent.[49]

The Rabbit Room expresses communal themes through online communication but also

encourages the extension of those into local communities.

Identifying with the Past

Many members and Rabbit Room posts also referenced a similar cast of characters.

Names like Lewis and MacDonald were prevalent and lent a credible air to claims and opinions.

These names were also often linked to the more contemporary work of the Rabbit Room. One

participant posted, "I am a lifelong fan of Tolkien, Lewis, Sayers, MacDonald, and L'Engle. I

am looking forward to seeing some of the new works created by Rabbit Room contributors."[50]

This implied connection between respected writers and the new work of Rabbit Room-affiliated

creators lent an unspoken credibility to the Rabbit Room's participants.

The most commonly referenced names throughout the Rabbit Room content were

Wendell Berry, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the broader group known as

the Inklings. Wendell Berry is known for his poetry, novels, and essays, many of which esteem

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[48] Anna Jubilee, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, March 3,
https://www.facebook.com/5219062691478985
[49] Henry Jones, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, January 11,
https://www.facebook.com/4971614756223781
[50] Blakegrail Instagram reply comment, 2021, December 1, https://www.instagram.com/p/CW9NaBfpTkb/

community and family (Poetry Foundation, n.d.). He has been considered exceptional at considering life at its most basic level, admonishing individuals to live in harmony with the world around them and idealizing the rural life. This idealized life has been held as a standard for those in the Rabbit Room, but also criticized by others (Murphy, 2017; Stanton, 2018). George MacDonald was the earliest writer of this commonly cited group, writing in the 1800s. MacDonald was influential in both the lives of Lewis and Tolkien, his stories having been considered deeply by both (Kilby, 2016) and his themes are considered a valuable example in how writing can encourage readers to seek Truth.

Lewis and Tolkien are widely known as members of the Inklings. C.S. Lewis, known within Christian circles for his Chronicles of Narnia children's book series, as well as theological works such as *Mere Christianity*, was a 20th century writer whose conversion from atheism to Christianity greatly influenced his writing (C.S. Lewis, n.d.). Lewis wrote a variety of books, from science fiction and fantasy to works that prompted theological thoughts on heaven, hell, and the viability of atheism (Kilby, 2016). Tolkien is well-known for his book series, *The Lord of the Rings* and its prequel, *The Hobbit*. He was also friends with C.S. Lewis and, as a devout Catholic, is credited as helping to persuade C.S. Lewis to become a Christian (Wheaton College, n.d.). His works strongly combine fantasy and mythology with Christian truths and his works have been applauded for their work in sub-creation.

These artists are esteemed for their work and venerated in the Rabbit Room community. As such, they are held up as standards in artistic expression. They enter the theming of the Rabbit Room through the presence of their names and allusions to their creative works. In this way, the Rabbit Room communication extends beyond itself and its location, including a variety of individuals in its community despite not only location, but also time.

Research Questions

The study's four research questions were answered by analyzing the findings presented in this chapter. In-depth analysis will be presented in Chapter Five, but the next section provides a brief overview of the research question findings. For the first two questions, a fantasy theme analysis that considered the data through the lens of symbolic convergence theory was conducted. The second two questions analyzed the culture of the Rabbit Room in light of the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision that were uncovered.

Research question one was, "what fantasy themes are present within The Rabbit Room online community?" This was answered by conducting an analysis of the collected data and searching for fantasy themes. It was uncovered that three fantasy themes were present within the Rabbit Room online communication. These were identified as (a) *Art Nourishes Community and Community Nourishes Art*, (b) *Good Art vs. Bad Art*, (c) *From Broken to Redeemed.* These themes were present throughout the Rabbit Room website, podcasts, and its social media content. Next, research question two was, "is there a subsequent rhetorical vision shared by The Rabbit Room online community and, if so, what is that rhetorical vision?" It was found that the aforementioned fantasy themes combined into one primary rhetorical vision. This vision was identified as *The Light of the World*, which emphasized the role of art in spreading Truth to the world and its alignment with Jesus as the Light of the World.

Research question three was, "how do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community of Christians that reflects a particular culture?" It was uncovered that the Rabbit Room culture could be further defined as having three complementing natures: artistic, redemptive, and Christian. Lastly, research question four was, "how do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community and culture of both artists and

non-artists?" It was found throughout the communication of the Rabbit Room that each fantasy theme and the resulting rhetorical vision were intentional in how they placed both the artist and non-artist within the themes. In this way, the two were positioned as interrelated and interdependent.

Summary

This chapter has provided initial findings from the analysis of the Rabbit Room's online communication. The Rabbit Room website was analyzed as an indicator of culture and the online communication content of the Rabbit Room was analyzed for patterns and theming. An analysis using symbolic convergence theory was briefly presented and uncovered three fantasy themes within the Rabbit Room communication as well as one rhetorical vision that signified a symbolic reality within the Rabbit Room. These themes and vision were then presented as reflecting an artistic, redemptive, Christian culture present within the Rabbit Room that addressed both artists and non-artists. Chapter five will continue to with a detailed analysis of these themes and visions in light of their application to the Rabbit Room's online communication and possible implications for the online communication of other faith groups.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to understand how one Christian organization utilizes online communication to cultivate culture. Christian organizations have been understudied in their communication, particularly in their use of online communication. Since communication is a building block for creating and maintaining social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bormann, 1972; Carey, 1988), it is essential to better understand how organizations are utilizing communication to create culture. With advancements in technology that include online asynchronous communication, it is also important to research how online communication can be used as a tool for advancing the missional work of Christian organizations. This case study sought to better understand how one Christian organization has used online communication to create community and culture and, thus, further its mission.

Chapter five begins with a summary of the findings followed by a deeper analysis of the research question answers, and the empirical, theoretical, and practical implications of the findings. The chapter then discusses the delimitations and limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. Chapter five ends with the conclusion of the study.

Summary of findings

This study focused on answering four research questions.

RQ1: What fantasy themes are present within the Rabbit Room online community?

RQ2: Is there a subsequent rhetorical vision shared by the Rabbit Room online community and, if so, what is that rhetorical vision?

RQ3: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community of Christians that reflects a particular culture?

RQ4: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community and culture of both artists and non-artists?

The first two questions applied symbolic convergence theory through fantasy theme analysis to identify fantasy themes and possible resulting rhetorical vision(s) that were present in the Rabbit Room's online communication. The final two research questions apply the findings from the first questions to the overarching culture and community of the Rabbit Room. The study found three fantasy themes and one rhetorical vision present in the online communication of the Rabbit Room. The resulting themes and vision were found to reflect an artistic, redemptive, and Christian culture within the Rabbit Room that equally addressed both artists and non-artists, creating an interdependent relationship between the two groups.

Research Question Analysis

RQ1 Analysis

RQ1: What fantasy themes are present within the Rabbit Room online community?

By considering symbolic convergence theory, fantasy themes were identified throughout the Rabbit Room's online communication, both the communication initiated by the Rabbit Room as well as the communication initiated by Rabbit Room participants. Fantasy themes are common stories within a group's communication and are often identified by common characters, settings, and plotlines. These fantasy themes, then, are often referenced through symbolic cues, or brief words or phrases that bring participants into the fantasy theme quickly and without a retelling of the longer themes (Cragan & Shields, 1992).

Fantasy Theme #1: Art Nourishes Community and Community Nourishes Art

The first fantasy theme identified inside the Rabbit Room online communication was *Art Nourishes Community and Community Nourishes Art*. This fantasy theme title originates from

the Rabbit Room itself (Rogers, 2021d) and revolves around the claim that art is not meant to exist in isolation because that art is further prompted and refined through the contribution of others. In this fantasy theme, isolation and loneliness are considered villains. The heroes are individuals or communities that participate together in the creating and consuming of artistic works, as well as the artists that boldly present their art to audiences despite the risk of rejection. The struggle of the artist is feeling misunderstood, unheard, or unappreciated. The joy and success of the artist is presence within a group that is listening to her, lovingly critiquing and affirming her art, and recognizing the work that it takes to put something creative into the world.

On the other side of the sharing process, consumers of art are enriched because of the art that exists in their lives. Without art, lessons may remain unlearned, and Truth may remain undiscovered. Through connection with the artist and his work, a reader, listener, observer, or viewer can enter into an artistic space that emphasizes aspects of reality that are often unseen or lost in daily life. These two sides of the artistic relationship are interdependent: the artist needs support, and the audience needs the art. It is assumed that the artistic community becomes better at creation and using art to find Truth and beauty when they do so together.

Artists interviewed on Rabbit Room podcasts commonly cited isolation and a lack of understanding by others as struggles. In one example, artist Orion Dyson-Smith discussed the need for adapting how he speaks about his visual artwork with others who may not naturally understand a visual artists' working process or end product. He mentioned that even those who don't work creatively typically appreciate story and so he chooses to give a summary of the story of his pieces of artwork, which has brought others into his circle and limited the struggle of feeling alone or misunderstood (Hinton & Still, 2022b). This was described as increasing the reach and service of the art he creates, as well as improving the community around him by which

his art is aided.

The role of an artist's creation is also framed as a service to his audience. Humans are framed as being made in the image of God and, therefore, beings created with their own creative inclinations and responsibilities (Conner, 2022a; Rogers, 2021j). As a result, humans are called to do the work of creation and then share it. The Rabbit Room organization is founded on this principle, speaking of art as nourishment (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-d) and as an opportunity to spread the good and beautiful (P. Peterson, 2021). For example, when the Rabbit Room shared its plans for local concerts in 2022, it described the need for these local shows to be in-person and truly local because they are intended to help change culture by moving it toward redemption (Thiessen, 2022). Thiessen positions this change as the result of good and faithful work that is shared with audiences in spaces that allow for connection. This online communication about the need for in-person community emphasizes the place of art in the world. It uses online channels to broadcast the need for sharing, even beyond the online realm.

Similarly, George MacDonald, an author esteemed by the Rabbit Room who wrote in the late 1800s, is commonly referenced as having used story as a method of teaching. Through the sharing of story he was described as "pulling people back to an imaginative engagement with the world, with each other, with their communities, and, thus, with God" (The Rabbit Room, 2021c). Ben Palpant similarly asserts that when authors are writing, their writing should not be about what they can get from an audience but what they can give (The Rabbit Room, 2021f). In doing so, the art becomes a service to others rather than a service to the artist himself. Leslie Bustard (2021) refers to this as generational thinking. It is through generational thinking that artists engage with those who have gone before them, interacting with good art that already exists so that they can be inspired to create new things which can be appreciated in future generations. In

this way, art is described as a continuum of process that requires its own sharing. It is through the

sharing of art that the future can be molded and changed for the better.

Other artists reach into community to improve their art. In one example, a Facebook post

sought inspiration for a future piece of artwork by asking for "ideas for favorite female saints."[51]

149 comments followed, suggesting women of faith that could be honored. Ned Bustard, the

author of the original post later commented, "Thanks! y'all never disappoint...." Through the

work of the community, Bustard successfully collected inspiration for his creative work,

presumably receiving more names than he had come up with himself. Rabbit Room podcasts that

discuss the creative communities in which art flourishes similarly speak about the need for others

in the pursuit of better art. Each time artists discuss the other artists that inspire them, the idea of

community nourishing art is referenced (Rogers, 2022b, 2021c, 2022f).

Rabbit Room blogs also discuss how the need for imagination and story (and fairy tales

in particular) prepare people for life. Hutson (2022) described a moment when her family was

served by their frequent interaction with fairy tales and story. After a particularly frightening

scene in their neighborhood that included police officers, yelling, guns, helicopters, and a chase

for a stolen vehicle that resolved in front of their home, their children processed through the

event by retelling the story. The retelling included imagined versions including bubble guns and

rusty cars, all of which led the children to process through the trauma through imagination and

laughter. Hutson thus asserts that fairy tales can make readers see the world around them with

fresh eyes and train children in how to recognize good and evil and process through it. The artist

and her good work make this sort of learning possible only if she creates her art and then shares

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[51] Ned Bustard, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2021, December 7,
https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4846465975405327/

it beyond herself.

This sharing then creates community that is both useful and powerful. A community built around the sharing of these good and true things is positioned as desirable and trustworthy. One woman posted on Facebook seeking suggestions for how to encourage her children to find a group of friends that enjoy high quality literature, art, and music instead of popular culture.[52] In this post, community is considered essential—and not just any community, but a community that reflects the quality and culture of the Rabbit Room community. Each social media post that asked for recommendations on a variety of topics also displayed itself as seeking community from those who were, artistically, trusted. Artistic community is framed as a place where quality advice is given, both on art as well as life. Therefore, this fantasy theme reflects a need for artists to be in community with each other, artists to be in community with their audiences, and audiences to be in community with both the artists and other consumers. Art nourishes community and community nourishes art.

Fantasy Theme #2: Good Art vs. Bad Art

Another prevalent fantasy theme in the Rabbit Room is one of *Good Art vs. Bad Art*. This fantasy theme is expressly stated, but also affirmed in subtle ways. Blog posts such as Rogers' (2022a) discusses what he claims are "the right kind of bad art" and the "wrong kind of bad art." In this post he talks about how there will be bad art that happens during the process of becoming a better artist. This type of bad art is worthwhile and ultimately good because it is in the service of truly good art. However, truly bad art (or "bad bad art" as Rogers phrases it), is the result of artists that "aren't even trying to do good work" (Rogers, 2022a). This post paints the lazy or

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[52] Elizabeth Giger, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, March 29, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/5222327811152473/

thoughtless artist as the villain and the hard-working artist as the hero. This theme is legitimized

by quoting an author of presumed "good" art, Flannery O'Connor. She is noted as lamenting

how poor writers accept subpar work without working to improve. The plotline is that the artist

must struggle to work and struggle to improve. The struggle is imperative and if an artist gives in

without struggle, laziness wins the day and bad art is created rather than good. This claim also

implies that good art can be recognized by both the effort and the product, but that it is more

common to find bad art:

> We are surrounded by cultural artifacts produced by people who believe that non-artistic
>
> concerns (including but not limited to theological, ideological, emotional, and especially
>
> commercial concerns) excuse the artist from the rigors imposed by art. I'm not just
>
> talking about "Christian" art. This criticism applies equally to Ayn Rand, Hallmark
>
> movies, pedantic children's books, and much of the music produced in my adopted
>
> hometown of Nashville, Tennessee… (Rogers, 2022a)

Rogers is pointed in his call for creators to take seriously the work of their art by participating in

the daily habit of working toward good art. This takes embracing effort and work and denying

laziness and distraction. It takes work to achieve something good, and then through that work he

believes grace meets the artist and the result is something truly good. This blog post paves the

way for two entwined expressions of the *Good Art vs. Bad Art* fantasy theme: one from the

artist's perspective and one from the perspective of the person consuming the art.

Rabbit Room communication from artists frequently seeks out assistance in creating good

(or at least better) art. During *The Habit* podcast, host Jonathan Rogers routinely wraps up each

interview by asking guests which writers inspire them in their own writing (Rogers, 2019—

present). The implication here is that there are certain writers that are inspirational. Similarly,

there are certain writers that are good. The podcast chooses to seek out and recognize those artists whose work has produced other (good) work in people. It also implies that the artists being interviewed do the good work of seeking to be better. In that way, it makes heroes of the interviewees by implying that they work at their art and thus, if their work is not good, it will only be good bad art rather than bad bad art.

Social media posts similarly frame themselves as in the pursuit of good art. In one post, a visual artist discusses her struggle in translating non-visual, textual details into visual art. The term she uses, which operates as a symbolic cue, is "wrestle" which aligns herself with artists that are working hard to create well and improve in their craft. She goes on to explain her creative process for a recent project, stating, "the idea of it has been in my mind for several years, and I've done lots of failed sketches of it."[53] She seeks out others that have struggled similarly, aligning herself with other visual artists who labor in pursuit of worthy and good art. Another social media post admitted to circling around the Rabbit Room for several years before deciding to post and seek community.[54] The post describes his own struggle of longing for help writing. The writer admits to previously not having time to dive into writing or establish a community of critique and encouragement around the pursuit. This admits to his not being able to feel fulfilled or reach his potential, implying that it will take more time dedicated to the struggling and wrestling with his art inside community in order to make it better and into, presumably, "good" art.

The theme of *Good Art vs. Bad Art* is also present in those that appreciate art. For

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[53] Ayisha Synnestvedt, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, January 24, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/5030172797034643/
[54] Kellen Smith, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2021, November 9, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4750076891710903/

instance, the Rabbit Room's decision to provide a beginner's reading list on its website for those who are looking to understand the work of the Rabbit room strongly endorses the works of these artists, promoting them as good and worthy of attention (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-e). This encourages those who trust the work, taste, and critique of the Rabbit Room organization to read certain things and, possibly, even align their tastes with those presented on the website.

The Rabbit Room's publishing house and online store act similarly. The act of publishing and offering certain works for sale operates as an endorsement of the Rabbit Room organization. Therefore, when a new release is offered such as *The Lost Tales of Sir Galahad*, it will be expected that the content aligns with Rabbit Room standards. However, the for-sale items available on the Rabbit Room's website are not limited to the books that the Rabbit Room publishes. There are also works from other publishers for sale[55] and other forms of art like music[56] and prints of drawings and illustrated liturgies.[57] The sale of these items, again, implies endorsement. Since the Rabbit Room store does not offer a large number of works for sale, this suggests that those they do sell have content that aligns well with the mission and purpose of the Rabbit Room. As with the Rabbit Room's online blog content, the presence of an item or content immediately fuses that content with the purposes of the Rabbit Room. Particularly for site visitors that are familiar with the Rabbit Room and its work, any content that is found within the site (in the online store or elsewhere) will be naturally connected to the Rabbit Room's mission in their minds—even before the content is consumed. This positions the artistic content as maintenance of culture. The fact that it is there, in the first place, aligned it with a culture that is

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[55] Manning, B. *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 2008. Multnomah. https://store.rabbitroom.com/products/the-ragamuffin-gospel?variant=4928671619

[56] Music section of the Rabbit Room online store, https://store.rabbitroom.com/collections/music

[57] Art & Posters section of the Rabbit Room online store, https://store.rabbitroom.com/collections/art

presumed to already exist, but then by experiencing the art that is recommended, the symbolic reality (or culture) is maintained through the sharing of artistic thoughts and ideas present in the works.

Rabbit Room followers similarly affirm this fantasy theme by seeking after recommendations and suggestions endorsed by those affiliated with the Rabbit Room (even if just social media followers). The assumption is that those who esteem the Rabbit Room must be cultured enough in their tastes to recognize and be able to recommend "good" art. One post sought recommendations for the best films of the year. While the author of the post mentioned she typically didn't enjoy R-rated films, she trusted those responding to make their case for one if they really felt it was worth watching.[58] This request sought information from those she has considered credible and also left the door open to deferring to their opinion if it, at first glance, seemed to not fit with the category of her preferred films. The assumption was that "good art" may not fit into her own self-prescribed box, so she was willing to consider something outside of it if it was recommended by someone else inside the Rabbit Room culture.

Another post sought guidance for how to properly appreciate a novel written by the Rabbit Room's founder, Andrew Peterson:

On the advice of 1046.27 of you, I purchased this book. Not sure what I've tied into here. I expect to finish & declare the author brilliant, but may need some help getting there. I've read children's books & YA from Seuss to Mains to Potter to Collins & L'Engle & beyond…. I've read fantasy & science fiction from Tolkien to Gaiman to Adams…. But this is different. So a few suggestions as to what to look for, how to translate, the purpose

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[58] Anna Morgan, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2021, December 21, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/4896816033703654/

of perceived silliness etc would be helpful. I do not want to stumble on the path to appreciation. Thanks![59]

This post attributes the quality of good art to those who are trusted to have worked at their craft, and have been received as good by other trusted individuals. This places the audience or consumer of art as one that also must work at learning the proper techniques of appreciation. The Facebook user that posted this is "expecting" to figure out how to appreciate the book because he is assuming it is of high quality based on the opinions of others within the trusted Rabbit Room culture. In response, replies position the reading of the book as the first in a series, and necessary for proper appreciation of the following books. Again, this is framed as the "work" of good art. It may take time and effort to properly appreciate the "good art" that has been made by the hard-working artist. But the expectation is that anyone within the established culture is able to appreciate the right kind of art ("good art") if they look deep enough or spend enough time trying to appreciate it.

The result is a culture that is referred to as "rabbity" or comprised of individuals known as "rabbits." This phrase quickly enters the group into an understanding of the expected culture where community is cherished,[60] recommendations are trusted and esteemed,[61] and certain observations are expected to be appreciated. For instance, one Facebook user posted, "I need my fellow Rabbits to know that when I was in London today there was a building dressed up as an

[59] Al Shirmacher, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post [image], 2022, February 1, https://www.facebook.com/groups/rrchinwag/posts/5059113040807285/

[60] Amber Schellenberger, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, January 13, https://www.facebook.com/4975994485785808

[61] Kelly Keyes Hellmuth, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, April 27, https://www.facebook.com/5297278576990729

Advent calendar. That is all."[62] A shared experience such as this implies that the Rabbit Room participants will similarly appreciate the observation simply because of their participation in the culture of the Rabbit Room. It is expected because that culture is considered informative, influential, and a pathway to an appreciation of similar "good art." This is a symbolic cue that points to the existence (as well as the creation and maintenance) of a symbolic reality.

Fantasy Theme #3: From Broken to Redeemed

The third fantasy theme identified was *From Broken to Redeemed*. Told stories that fit into this theme fall along a continuum that includes negatively portrayed things like grief, pain, and brokenness on one side and joy, hope, and redemption on the other. In these bits of communication art is portrayed as a guide that can lead individuals from the side of brokenness toward the side of hope, healing, and redemption. Here the brokenness is the enemy while God and his redeeming power through Jesus Christ is positioned as the hero. Along the path are saints that help guide individuals to hope and redemption.

This theme is most obvious in the communication that originates its direction from the Rabbit Room. Frequent blog posts allude to the world as dark and broken (Roycroft, 2021). One Rabbit Room member noted that, "as believers, we can and should bring light to the far reaches of the world—and as artists, we are called to push back the darkness through our art" (The Rabbit Room, 2021d). Advent readings provided by the Rabbit Room likewise speak of the difference between the struggle of this world and the hope of the next:

> We tell the children in our communities that baby Jesus "no crying he makes," but these same children face anxieties that they struggle to articulate and fear to make public.

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[62] Andrew Roycroft, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2021, December 6, https://www.facebook.com/4843608235691101

We're told to "repeat the sounding joy" three times, but what we really feel is deeply

frustrated by all sorts of strained family dynamics that never seem to improve.

And we extol the simplicity of the manger but find ourselves drowning in a torrent of

messages that tell us to do more and to be more, because our happiness presumably lies

in the exact opposite of what Mary and Joseph possessed at the hour of Christ's birth. (W.

D. O. Taylor, 2021)

An Advent writing by Jen Rose Yokel acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come as a Savior and

has thus brought hope and rightness into the world and yet, it is lamented that we "are still well

aware that we're living in the wait" (The Rabbit Room, 2021e). This acknowledgment again

references that continuum between brokenness and hope. Jesus Christ is positioned as having

come, but there is still more to wait for because he will bring a continued hope until He brings a

complete redemption of the world. Audiences are awaiting a complete redemption that will fix

all that is still broken in this world.

Philip Yancey spoke significantly of the brokenness in his own life during an episode of

The Habit. In the interview he referenced his testimony and why he felt compelled as a writer to

share it. He claims he did so because it speaks of God's grace. It shares portions of his story of

being in a dark place, without God, lost, and broken and then redeemed by a God of grace

(Rogers, 2022b). But beyond speaking of his own life in these terms, he paints the world as the

broken place, regardless of the actors in it.

Social media posts also support this theme. In one example a story is told about the

writer's own path from bleak brokenness to hope, which included influence from a song written

by Rabbit Room founder, Andrew Peterson. She writes:

"Do you feel…" the new Andrew Peterson song began. And at that time, for that season,

the answer to anything that began with "Do you feel…" would have been no. For some time, I had been completely numb. I had known depression before. Who with chronic illness hasn't? But this was different. All emotion was gone. It would be a month or so later after listening to the song that I would find the answer. In fact, I believe God spoke to me. I woke from a nap and the words were so clear in my mind that I felt I heard them, "It's the medicine." The medicine I had begun taking for my chronic pain. When I went off it, my emotion returned, both the good and bad. But I felt myself again. But in that moment, I was in a place of darkness. I felt like I was walking through the world unable to interact with it. But then that new Andrew Peterson song started. "Do you feel the world is broken?" And I did. "Do you feel the shadows deepen?" Of course, I did. All there was were shadows. "But do you know that all the dark won't Stop [sic] the light from getting through?" And somehow, the light broke through the darkness that was being pushed upon me. And I felt the Light. I wept and wept with emotion. With the pain of my illness. With the hope of my Savior. I wept because I could feel. I wept because the words of the song were true. I wept because for a moment, my soul could worship.[63]

The post continues, relating the necessity of realizing our own selves are not enough to change our lives, but that through Peterson's music she realized that the hope that God was enough moved her from one side of the continuum to the other. Despite a remaining struggle with pain and resulting depression that would likely continue for her entire life, she was brought closer to the side of hope than the side of grief and brokenness through art.

…He is still worthy, even when my soul doesn't feel it. He is still in control, even when

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[63] Sheri Dawn Cornett, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, April 3,
https://www.facebook.com/5235093746542546

my world feels like chaos. I still have chronic pain. And I will probably still have season of depression on and off throughout my life, though I hope never again like the darkness that medicine brought on me. And unless the Lord chooses to heal me, I will bear that weight until heaven. But my pain will never diminish the truth that there is One who can open the scroll. And that He is "the Lion of Judah who conquered the grave." It is good that we remind ourselves of this.[64]

Another social media discussed the pain that the holidays can bring to some. One response was a poem:

Near to you, O Lord, are the hearts that are broken. Saved in Your bottle is every tear cried. Safe in your shadow, as your wings are always open, We're carried and held, ever to abide. Hide us in Your hand as we wrestle and mourn, let Your light smooth out our edges, weary and torn. And we'll rest in this season, safe against Your breast, Our hearts leaning on You, Whose heart knows us best.[65]

In examples like this, hope is then positioned on the opposite side of pain and brokenness. The story of hope realized despite fibromyalgia is present in another post. Again, hope is placed on the side of redemption, even if that redemption is not fully realized here on earth. The hope in that post was realized through a community of faith that included stores from Scripture. She states:

That's what the Israelites had. They had past evidence of grace. He was with them in Egypt, with them in the wilderness, with them as they crossed Jordan. But I'm sure it was hard to hold to that hope in all those years of silence. But then, suddenly, that hope was

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[64] See footnote 63.
[65] Amy L. George, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2021, December 9, https://www.facebook.com/4853204868064771

fulfilled. It was no longer looking forward to a future grace. He was there. They saw His face. They knew. And only love remained. And now, that story is our past evidence of grace. The fact that they saw His face is our hope, our future grace, that one day we will. The fact that their diseases were healed lets me believe that He will heal mine. They waited in expectation, and their hope was fulfilled.[66]

This fantasy theme, *From Broken to Redeemed*, runs throughout Rabbit Room online communication. The words broken, redeemed, and hope all work as symbolic cues for stories that include a realization that individuals are not called to remain broken, but to remain in the hope that has been shown to a host of witnesses within the Christian faith, or to realize the redemption that is being worked out on earth even while they wait for a complete redemption that will come.

RQ2 Analysis

RQ2: Is there a subsequent rhetorical vision shared by the Rabbit Room online community and, if so, what is that rhetorical vision?

Once developed, fantasy themes may combine into one or more rhetorical visions that create a group's symbolic reality (Bormann, 1972). Within these visions are sanctioning agents that legitimize the vision (Cragan & Shields, 1992). The three fantasy themes identified within the Rabbit Room's online communication were found to combine into one rhetorical vision.

Rhetorical Vision: The Light of the World

Rhetorical vision is a composite drama that catches people up into a common symbolic reality, typically created through the existence of fantasy themes (Bormann, 1972; Bormann et

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[66] Sheri Dawn Cornett, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2021, November 30, https://www.facebook.com/4822701481115110

al., 1996; Cragan & Sheilds, 1992). Rhetorical visions reflect a life cycle of consciousness creating, raising, sustaining, declining, and terminus. The rhetorical vision present in the Rabbit Room was identified as *The Light of the World*. This vision is rooted in both the artistic work of the Rabbit Room as well as its foundation of Christian principles.

In this vision art is a light for a darkened world. "Good" art's ability to speak into the realities of pain, grief, and brokenness enables it to act as a light that is entering the dark spaces of the earth and shining Truth and beauty where they were previously hidden or shadowed. This combines the three fantasy themes by noting that good art must be created, shared, and utilized to help transition the world (or parts of it) from brokenness into hope and redemption. The vision does not solely refer to art's ability to be light, however, but also alludes to Jesus as the Light of the world. These phrases and symbolic cues seamlessly link the Rabbit Room's work and Scriptural themes in those familiar with terminology of Christianity. It is through these words that the Rabbit Room speaks to its own purposes while aligning them with the purposes of Jesus in Christian Scriptures. In John 8:12, Jesus declares that he is the Light of the world and that those who follow him will not walk in darkness (New International Version, 1973/1984). This applies to Rabbit Room artists as they create art for their communities, both experiencing the Light of Christ themselves and sharing it through their art. This frames God as the sanctioning agent of the Rabbit Room's work and rhetorical vision. Communication positions God as the guide of the Rabbit Room's work and God as the one who directs the work in usefulness.

This vision includes both righteous and social master analogues. The implication is that it is right and good to create art and share truths—but it is imperative to do it correctly. The Rabbit Room expresses how important it is to create good art through effort and habit and how that good work combines with grace from God to become a useful tool for bringing Truth and

redemption to the world (Rogers, 2022a). This highlights the social master analogue, as well. The relational aspect of the Rabbit Room is focused on friendships and trust between those within the Rabbit Room. Relationships are positioned as an important role player in the artistic creation process, but also in the ability to share and refine each other. Rabbit Room participants exhibit great trust in each other as they communicate about their art, their lives, and the intersections of the two. The Rabbit Room's consistent focus on the need for and role of community strongly asserts that the purposes of the Rabbit Room exist within community and will be ineffective if kept away from it.

RQ3 Analysis

RQ3: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community of Christians that reflects a particular culture?

Through common fantasy themes, the Rabbit Room's online communication remains centered and consistent in its messaging. In this way, the Rabbit Room creates a culture that focuses on certain topics and continues to maintain culture by a) continuing to post communication that reflects these topics and b) by posting or allowing posts, thus endorsing communication from others that align with this culture. This communication maintenance continues to cultivate the created culture, which is characterized as artistic, redemptive, and Christian.

Artistic Culture

One primary aspect of the Rabbit Room culture established by online communication is its artistic culture. This culture is focused on the artistic actions of creation and sharing. Artistry, as expressed by the online communication, includes a variety of creative outlets including writing (fiction, nonfiction, journalism, and poetry), musicianship (musical and lyrical), visual

artistry (using any medium), performance arts (such as theatre and dance), and arts that combine several of these components such as film, television, and podcasts. However, since individuals are viewed as inherently creative because of their relationship to God as the Creator, creative work is not limited only to these more traditional artistic expressions. Though not as commonly cited as traditional artistic works, the Rabbit Room also considers things like cooking, baking, decorating, hospitality, and gardening as artistic works. In this way, the Rabbit Room positions all humans as creators and encourages every individual to contribute their own artistry to the world. Online communication enables the sharing of artistic creations easily, across time and space. The introduction of images presents an even greater opportunity to share artistic endeavors over the internet.

The Rabbit Room website and its content (even mere navigational content) focus on these aspects of artistry by organizing the website to highlight these aspects, posting blog content that considers this broad definition of artistry, and encouraging communicative participation that centers around artistry. Within the Rabbit Room's online communication artists share their work or information about their work, they share the processes that lead to (or hinder) their artistic output, and they share appreciation for certain pieces of artistry. Through this communicative sharing, the Rabbit Room community gives examples of good art and cultivates an understanding throughout its following of what constitutes good art. This maintains a culture that appreciates art in various forms and extends that culture beyond one geographical area. However, the Rabbit Room does not equally appreciate just any artistic output and employs additional aspects of culture to narrow its scope of what should be considered good art.

Redemptive Culture

The focus on redemption within the Rabbit Room's online communication is one aspect

of its culture that helps narrow the types of artistic work that the community is encouraged to esteem. Artistry that exposes Truth or leads to a deeper appreciation of beauty is framed as the most worthy and worthwhile. Certain artists are held in esteem, such as George MacDonald, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis. These artists, among others, are esteemed for their quality art that uses story to enlighten audiences. Musicians like Rabbit Room founder Andrew Peterson are similarly esteemed, though they are considered to be generational followers to other great artists. In this way, the Rabbit Room culture frames the work of contemporary artists as standing on the shoulder of giants. New artistry is compared to esteemed works of the past, not to seek out which is "better" but to judge whether the same qualities that made earlier artists great is present (or at least developing) in these new artists.

This quality is most often one of redemption. C.S. Lewis' *Chronicle of Narnia* series is held in high esteem for its ability to expose aspects of the Gospel story within a Narnian story (Block, 2016). Tolkien is similarly esteemed for his extensive work in sub-creation and his creating a work that is "true" despite being fiction (S. D. Smith, 2013). MacDonald's faerie[67] tales of imagination are commended for how the stories lead readers to considerations of Truth without directly exposing Truth in the writing (K. J. Johnson, 2021). Works of imagination are therefore expected to lead audiences to deeper understandings of Truth. This very act is considered redemptive because of how the Rabbit Room communication positions the earthly world as broken and in need. Therefore, the Rabbit Room's expectation is that artistic works of contemporary artists should similarly enlighten audiences and bring light to the darkness of the

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[67] Distinct from fairy (which typically means a small being), *faerie* is considered a world of enchantment in which certain fantasy stories take place. For a deeper discussion of the term, see Michelson, P. E. (2014) George MacDonald and J.R.R. Tolkien on Faerie and Fairy Stories. *Inklings Forever, 9*(11). https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklins_forever/vol9/iss1/11

world. This standard is held to every artist regardless of art form: to beautifully speak of Truth and tell stories that speak of redemptive themes. As the light of the world, art is expected to expose darkness and bring light into the world.

This focus on redemption makes certain expressions of art more acceptable and worthy than others. Art must be good, and this goodness is defined by the hard work and habit that art requires, as well as its ability to bring light and goodness into a world that needs it. Still, this focus on redemption is not the sole cultural descriptor that narrows what the Rabbit Room claims as worthy art. The words truth and beauty are abstract and, therefore, extremely flexible in how they can be interpreted. To avoid defining these terms too broadly (and thus defining the proper role of art too broadly), the Rabbit Room also communicates a *Christian* culture through its online communication.

Christian Culture

The Rabbit Room's Christian culture goes hand-in-hand with its redemptive culture, providing guidance for determining which sort of things are correctly redemptive and therefore good. The Rabbit Room mission is expressly Christian in nature, not adhering to any particular Christian denomination, but it describes its Christian focus as Christ-centered (The Rabbit Room, n.d.-d). This Christ-centered focus aligns redemption with the redeeming work of Jesus Christ as expressed in the Christian scriptures. The scriptures are referred to as the great Story, aligning the need for artistic stories (told in a variety of artistic media) with the need to tell this one great Story of Jesus Christ. This story aligns with the New Testament account of Jesus: his being born as both God and man, living the perfect life of love and service, and dying an atoning death on the cross which redeemed humanity through the power of his resurrection three days later. This is considered to bring new life to all those who trust in Jesus' saving power and choose to live in

His steps. This also refers to the Old Testament prophecies that point to a need for a Savior.

Redemption is considered both complete and incomplete in that Jesus' atoning work is

considered sufficient for humans currently living and serving God, all the while the broken earth

is still awaiting his glorious return during which He will make the entire world right, and good.

He has brought redemption but will bring completed redemption upon his return.

In this way, redemption is situated as an expression of Jesus and his atoning work. It is

related to the suffering of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world and described as necessary

because this redemption is the only thing that can make right all that is wrong in the world.

While things like love, beauty, and truth are esteemed, the Rabbit Room situates those nouns

within the Christian religion and Christ-centered communities. The Rabbit Room's online

communication reflects tenets of the Apostle's Creed:

> I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus
> Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the
> Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he
> descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is
> seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I
> believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the
> forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.
> (Zondervan Academic, 2018)

This creed is recognized across multiple Christian denominations and focuses attention on

several unifying tenets of the Christian faith. This includes the lordship of Jesus Christ, his birth

by the power of the Holy Spirit, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the ensuing redemption of

the world that is made possible because of his conquering of death through that resurrection.

These tenets of faith are communicated foundationally throughout the Rabbit Room's communication and further define the culture of the organization. The Rabbit Room's culture is artistic, yes, but it's acceptance of artistry depends on the very Christian, redemptive nature of those artistic endeavors.

RQ4 Analysis

RQ4: How do these fantasy themes and/or rhetorical vision(s) encourage an online community and culture of both artists and non-artists?

The themes identified within the Rabbit Room's online communication frequently take on two separate perspectives: that of the artist and that of the artist's audience. In this way, theming ties to both artists and non-artists alike, differentiating their roles while also unifying them in common themes and visions. Each of the Rabbit Room's fantasy themes as well as the resulting rhetorical vision make a place for both artists and non-artists in the communal work of the Rabbit Room and the resulting work in the world at large.

Within the first fantasy theme, *Art Nourishes Community and Community Nourishes Art*, the artist is positioned as a servant of community through the expectation that the art will be both created and shared. Rabbit Room online communication speaks of a human's responsibility to create as a divine calling and implies that the sharing of the art with audiences is all but required if an artist is to fulfill his calling. The artist's created art is called to be in service to an audience. The audience, however, is also given a role. Individuals are called to community in that they are to contribute to a group of individuals where art can be refined and flourish. They are called to support artists with their words and actions. These are the Christ-centered communities spoken of by the Rabbit Room—places where art can enter and be received as it was intended.

Art is framed as requiring an audience that can respond to it. This is the role of the non-

artist. It is also important to note that a non-artist is not necessarily someone who does not participate in artistic creation. Rather, it is any individual who is supporting another in his own work. In this way, even the most active musician has moments of serving other artists because he is able to support them in their work, even as they may endeavor in their own. In addition, when the Rabbit Room expands the definition of art to include things that are outside the bounds of traditional art (things like home décor or gardening) they imply a call to all humans to both create and help others create.

Within the second fantasy theme of *Good Art vs. Bad Art*, there are also positioned the artist and non-artist. Artists are called to work hard to improve their artistic skills. They are called to take their creative work seriously, learning from others and refining their trade so that the things they present to their audience increasingly speak of beauty and Truth in the service of God. However, non-artists are also called to become more thoughtful consumers of art, immersing themselves in good art and further learning of all the ways that art can speak beauty and Truth into the world. As established earlier, however, that beauty and Truth is called to be aligned with the Christian redemption story. In this way, non-artists are called to ground themselves in (Christian) spiritual truth. This grounding is assumed to lead them to appreciating and encouraging artists that are endeavoring to do the good work of creation. Both artists and non-artists alike are called to recognize bad art so that more good art can be created and honored.

The third theme, *From Broken to Redeemed*, encourages artists to create works that speak of the brokenness of the world and how the world is then redeemed by the Truth of Jesus Christ. Rabbit Room communication calls artists to "honor grief" (Ivester, 2015) all the while planting seeds that sow the truth of redemption in the hearts and minds of the audience. They are called to point to "a world that reflects, with eager anticipation, the bursting resurrection of the life to

come" (S. D. Smith, 2013). Non-artists are, likewise, asked to recognize the brokenness of the world and the hope that has been promised. The Rabbit Room communication encourages the sharing of moments of grief and the hope (or fulfilled redemption) that follows. Personal stories are honored. Individuals share their poignant interactions with art that helps them see the hope they need in their own lives. Both the artists and non-artist are encouraged to recognize that the world is broken, but that Jesus Christ redeems both now and in the future.

Implications

As the internet has developed, research has uncovered how the use of technology is influencing the lifestyles of individuals, particularly in their religious or spiritual expression (Campbell & Evolvi, 2019; Harwig et al., 2018; Neumaier, 2016; van Geuns, 2019). Use of the internet has been cited as a sign of decreased interest in religion (Dolan, 2018; Specktor, 2018), but also an opportunity for sharing religious content with audiences (Cheong et al., 2009; Chow & Kurlberg, 2020; Frost & Youngblood, 2014; Holmes, 2021; Hutchings, 2007; Reddy, 2019a, 2019b). Within religious circles, the internet has been viewed as a tool that could cultivate group participation in religious activities (Krotoski, 2011; Raushenbush, 2022). Despite this supposed opportunity, much of the existing literature has analyzed either the religious offerings placed online by traditional religious institutions, or the spiritual conversations engaged upon online by individuals (Baab, 2008; Díez Bosch et al., 2017; Kolodziejska & Arat, 2016; Lewis, 2014).

Existing literature is primarily focused on the religious online communication originating from a traditional organization or an online group's communication that had no connection with a more formal religious group. This study sought to speak into the existing literature gap by studying the online communication from a Christian nonprofit organization—communication that originated both from the organization as well as from those who participated in the

organization. In this way the study extended the research available by providing deeper research into a nontraditional Christian organization (a nonprofit rather than a traditional Christian church) as well as exploring the culture that resulted from the interconnected communication that occurred online. This study provided detailed analysis through a case study of the Rabbit Room, a Christian nonprofit missionally focused on increasing Christian community through its communication offerings. The following sections will examine the implications between this study and existing empirical and theoretical literature.

Empirical Implications

Studies in online community have been frequently capitalistic in nature, focusing on how an organization can use online communication to attain something from the cultivated community (Etter & Fieseler, 2010; Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). These studies frequently viewed the two-way online communication as social capital (Etter & Fieseler, 2010; Fisher, 2019) and increased participation by online community members was attributed to topic consistency, social learning, and efficacy (Butler et al., 2014; Jin et al., 2015; Park & You, 2019). The Rabbit Room's online communication, however, was most frequently positioned as a call to contribute to each other rather than to the organization. Even calls to purchase content from the Rabbit Room's online store were usually positioned as a call to support artists rather than the Rabbit Room organization.

Other studies found that a shared self-identity and social-identity helped cultivate online communities (Chiu et al., 2019; Çinar, 2016; Hsu, 2019; Kumar, 2021). Few of these studies, however, have focused research on the community within religious groups. Even fewer have focused on religious groups that do not identify with a particular denomination or congregation. Those that have more often researched in-person community rather than online community

(Balik, 2017; Nita, 2018). This study on the Rabbit Room situated itself within that gap in the literature, seeking answers to how online communication encouraged a Christian community of individuals that were not affiliated with one particular denomination or congregation.

This study found that an organization's communication could encourage participation by online community members by providing a religious place in which participants could strongly identify through established communication norms. This aligned with findings on social norms being influential in encouraging online engagement and the self- and social-identity. These findings also aligned with Nita (2018) which found that religious in-person community encouraged culture that was found to be a direct critique of culture outside of the community. While Nita's study analyzed an in-person Christian festival, the Rabbit Room online community similarly alluded to a lack of artistic focus and support outside of the Rabbit Room community. Blog and social platform postings positioned the Rabbit Room as novel in its offerings, directly stating or implying that the community present within the Rabbit Room was lacking elsewhere. The Rabbit Room's encouragement to cultivate Christ-centered communities through artistic modes also implies a need for this type of communication in the world outside of the Rabbit Room.

This study also affirmed findings that authenticity is considered essential in Christian online communities (Whitehead, 2015) and that online group content could encourage offline religious practice (Vala & Huang, 2019). Research on the Rabbit Room affirmed these claims by encouraging authenticity within its online communication through examples of sharing and openness posted as blogs and podcasts and then a similar pattern was displayed in social media posts by Rabbit Room participants. This study also demonstrated that a group's online communication encouraged offline expressions of community. Frequent social media posts

suggested that participants sought and implemented suggestions for how to include the Rabbit Room's culture in the offline world. Recommendations on reading, insights on building community within in-person groups, and suggestions on how to improve artistic output all imply the Rabbit Room is used as a source of inspiration for actions that occur in the offline world.

This study on the Rabbit Room also affirmed previous findings that participation in multiple groups and diverse participation in outside groups may produce a membership that is more generative (Kim et al., 2018). The Rabbit Room organization posts content from other organizations such as The Trinity Forum and conferences held by other organizations. In addition, individual participants commonly discuss experiences from outside of their Rabbit Room membership, which provided additional fodder for online communication within the Rabbit Room. This suggests that collaboration across established groups may generate additional thoughts and communication that contribute from one community group to another.

Theoretical Implications

This study on the Rabbit Room was conducted through the sociocultural communication lens (Craig, 1999). This lens considered Berger & Luckmann's concept of social reality as a construction of human communication and interaction. As groups communicate, that communication can bring the group's individuals together in a way that produces a common result or culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Carey, 1988; Crouch, 2008; Schatzki, 1988). Culture is created, ordered, and maintained through consistent communication to create a "symbolic order" by agreement or seeking agreement where it does not yet exist (Carey, 1988, p. 19).

The themes uncovered through the study's analysis found that a particular artistic, redemptive, Christian culture was cultivated in the online communication of the Rabbit Room, as

discussed earlier in this chapter. This culture was defined by its focused attention (and thus, its established social norms) on discussions that were artistic, redemptive, and aligned with interdenominational Christianity. Online communication cultivated a definition of art that considered the effort, purposes, and excellence behind its creation, while redemptive themes were also clarified and encouraged through online communication present in both Rabbit Room-initiated and participant-initiated communication. Likewise, Christian theming was present throughout online communication, both in explicit and implicit ways. Framing quality artistic community through the presented saga of Inklings such as Tolkien and Lewis encouraged a particular expression of culture that mirrored the stories of those artists who were held in high esteem by the Rabbit Room. That esteem was established and maintained through the online communication present within the Rabbit Room.

Rothenbuhler's (2000) assertions that the study of mediated communication within community include underlying unchecked assumptions that assume (a) community-building communication relies on commonality; (b) community is ideal; (c) community is presumed to already exist. His resulting recommendation was that research focus beyond these assumptions to uncover how communication may create community, solve problems, and deal with negative experiences (Rothenbuhler, 2000). This case study suggested symbolic convergence theory as an appropriate theoretical lens for this kind of research. Symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1972) was utilized to uncover how communicative theming affected the development of the community's culture by establishing a communicated norm through the presence of fantasy themes. These themes may function as a unifier through which individuals experience but also work through potential differences. The theming uncovered within the Rabbit Room's online communication created a community focused on artistry, redemption, and Christian ideals.

Throughout the Rabbit Room's communication, it was asserted that similar communities were infrequently available, and many participants mentioned lacking the sort of community provided by the Rabbit Room, particularly in their daily offline lives. This implied the creation of a particular online community (the Rabbit Room) and its culture.

Much of the content also implied difference in that artists discussed challenges that they felt were unique to them. Visual artists discussed the difficulty of being in communities that rarely understand their artistic work and processes while others discussed being involved in in-person groups that did not innately esteem the same sort of ideals. Mothers spoke about the need to encourage their children to find a community with a culture similar to the Rabbit Room because they did not yet have one.

Through communication, the Rabbit Room also focused significantly on the need to use art to tell redemptive stories that bring Truth and beauty to audiences. Through lessons and commentary on good art and bad art, the Rabbit Room cultivated a perspective that defined certain things as good and others as bad. Through the recommendations of certain stories, music, and other pieces of art, ideals were created and maintained through the consistent communication made possible by the internet. The Rabbit Room also worked as a place of maintenance by providing a platform for participants to collect recommendations on a variety of things. These recommendations consistently sought content or suggestions that were asked to align well with the established culture of the Rabbit Room. Requests for things like wedding rituals implied that the suggestions should align with Rabbit Room ideals:

> I'm getting married in September and was thinking about any rituals (i.e. candle lighting, etc.) that we could include in the ceremony. I thought this would be the perfect place to ask for suggestions! I would love to include something meaningful, but the content of all

the bridal websites I've found is just...not for me. I would like something Christian-based, or leaning that way. Any rabbit-y suggestions?[68]

Posts like this imply that a culture has been created through symbolic cues like "rabbit-y." This succinct term quickly refers its audience to the established preferences and culture of the Rabbit Room. Posts frequently describe the culture in slightly more detail, as this one sought something "meaningful" and "Christian-based." These themes were established through the consistent communication of the Rabbit Room, of which this post is one example. The post also implies that a community such as the Rabbit Room does not inherently exist, even within Christian-circles. This is further emphasized by considering the reply comments that responded to the original post. A variety of opinions were presented (110 replies were posted), several of which presented ideas that were not echoed by others, while still others provided comments that ran contrary to others. For example, replies commonly considered the inclusion of the Christian sacrament of communion within the wedding ceremony. Some individuals mentioned its beauty and pertinence to the act of marriage while others stipulated that it should not be done during a wedding unless all attendees were afforded the opportunity to participate. Some hesitated to recommend it because of the way it could naturally exclude certain attendees since Christian communion is only for Christian individuals.[69] Still others mentioned that certain churches may dissuade a couple from including communion in their wedding ceremony, noting that it can be considered a sacrament that is meant to be shared by the church body in traditional service, rather than a collection of wedding attendees. In examples such as these, the established Rabbit Room culture draws participants near each other through an assumed common culture, as this

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[68] Shannon Hawkins, Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook post, 2022, April 5,
https://www.facebook.com/5238312712887316
[69] Variations on who may take communion (Eucharist) exist between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox faiths.

post positions Rabbit Room suggestions as more desirable than those found on bridal websites. However, the social media thread still presents communication that recognizes differences of opinion, action, and identity that leave participants without perfect unity.

The use of symbolic convergence theory in analysis found themes to be consistent across Rabbit Room communication, however this consistency does not imply perfect agreement or unification. In this way, the study extended the work of symbolic convergence theory while also approaching the study through Rothenbuhler's (2000) assumptions that sought to encourage researchers to study community without traditional assumptions. Through the cultivation of communication norms, a particular culture was cultivated and maintained, which resulted in a strong group identity centered on emerging fantasy themes and a resulting rhetorical vision. At the same time, the Rabbit Room's online communication also allowed for the labor of unifying opinions, as was the case for individuals who sought insight into what made certain art "good" so that they could align their preferences with those of the community.

Practical Implications

This case study on the Rabbit Room provides a variety of implications that may be useful for other religious or nonprofit organizations as they endeavor to create community and cultivate a particular culture in their own organizations. First, the nature of online communication lends itself well to bridging individuals across time and space. Developments in technology have allowed for communities like the Rabbit Room to extend their reach and allow geographically separate individuals to find each other and discover how commonalities (both existing and cultivated) can create an active community drawn together through technology. Online communication that is consistently presented provides a community for individuals who feel they are lacking that type of community. However, the Rabbit Room's process of online community

is also important. First, it consistently provides its own content (or content it has curated) to ensure consistent messaging. Second, it allows for participants to engage with content in a variety of ways. Content may be consumed, but the Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook page is also an example of providing a two-way communication channel through which community participants can engage. The use of a popular social media platform for this channel allows for the easier ability to engage, whether through reading/viewing, contributing, or sharing with other personal social networks.

It is also important to note that the Rabbit Room remains in control of its content. Even on the Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook page, comments are moderated by Rabbit Room administrators, which helps ensure that postings stay on-message and contribute significantly to the purposes of the group. The Rabbit Room established a focus in its communication and has maintained that focus. Greater expansion has not resulted in a community that considers topics beyond art and Christian faith but has only continued to define what is included in the term "art." This suggests that organizations would do well to focus their online communities on a particular topic and work to keep communication focused on that topic. Other organizations may consider this template as they design their own online communication offerings. The Rabbit Room's willingness to consider expressions of art personal insofar as members are led to express themselves by including a Christian redemptive nature both loosely and tightly defines the organization's primary artistic focus. Other organizations may benefit from creatively considering how to focus their missions on one particular theme all the while allowing others to contribute creatively to that theme as long as it maintains a connection to the broadly accepted tenets of the Christian faith. Denominational or congregational churches may benefit from this by artfully focusing their church on a specific purpose, more tightly defined by the inclusion of

Christian tenets. In the case of the Rabbit Room, these Christian views were broad enough to welcome individuals from a variety of Christian contexts but were also narrow enough to provide a platform of commonality within the group. This positioned the community's culture as an alternative to the culture outside of the group. This encourages engagement by implying that the culture inside the community is not easily attained outside of the community. This, then created a culture that was both inclusive and exclusive which encouraged the expansion of the community while still allowing the community's culture to provide a tight sense of belonging to those who entered in.

Interestingly, the Rabbit Room also encourages engagement outside of the online community rather than solely within. Decisions such as not to provide its annual conference in an annual online version limits deeper engagement opportunities online for those who are separated from the community by geographical location. However, rather than creating more and more opportunities for individuals to engage online, Rabbit Room communication encourages the cultivation of smaller in-person and local communities to encourage the participants in its online community to take the work of the Rabbit Room beyond the Rabbit Room online areas. While using online community to encourage offline community may seem counterintuitive, it bolsters a desire to plug in to the Rabbit Room culture for the eventual purpose of carrying the culture elsewhere. This may encourage greater engagement by requiring participants to be so rooted in the culture that they are able to begin developing the culture outside of the Rabbit Room community. Other Christian nonprofits may do the same by attempting to provide a common and powerful culture within the nonprofit organization, but with a focus on carrying that culture outward. This aligns well with the Great Commission described in Matthew 28 which calls followers of Jesus to make disciples, "teaching them to obey" the words of Jesus (New

International Version, 1973/1984, Matt. 28:20).

<div align="center">**Delimitations and Limitations**</div>

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study included collecting the online communication from the Rabbit Room, a Christian, non-profit organization with an established online presence. Online communication was considered the organizational website and its content, mass emails sent out by the organization to its mailing list, podcasts within the Rabbit Room Podcast Network, and social media posts found on the Rabbit Room Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages. In addition, Rabbit Room communication was collected from the Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook page, a page moderated by Rabbit Room administrators but provided as a platform where followers of the Rabbit Room could initiate social media posting threads. Delimitations also included data that was communicated online between November 1, 2021 and April 30, 2022. These delimitations allowed for the collection of a manageable amount of data and allowed for analysis of communication that initiated from the Rabbit Room organization itself, as well as the followers that participate within the Rabbit Room community. The delimitations also ensured that the collected communication was directly affiliated with and approved by the Rabbit Room, ensuring that the communication would relate to the organization's community and culture.

Limitations

The design of this research as a case study inherently limits the scope of the research. Generalizability of results, in particular, are limited as the findings from one case may not be transferable to other cases. However, the use of the case study method is not entirely negative, as the deep study of one case may be more thoroughly compared to future case studies. Another limitation is the data collection's six-month window. Six months is a relatively short span in the

life of an organization and thus limits the collection of communication that may develop over time. In addition, due to the constantly evolving nature of the internet and available online communication channels, this study provides data from a particular time within the life of the organization. This may limit future applicability of the study as communication technology advances.

For an organization that holds annual events like the Rabbit Room, the six-month data window does not necessarily collect communication from all significant events held by the organization. The Rabbit Room's annual conference, for instance, was not considered in this study because it fell outside of the six-month data collection window. While this data could have been considered useful for the study, it was also deemed to be an outlier. Since the study sought to uncover the ways that the organization intentionally created and maintained culture through online communication, the most useful data to be collected are instances of communication that were considered common for the organization. If the online version of the 2021 annual conference had been collected, it would have been considered something of an anomaly since the online version only existed in the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic. All other annual conferences have been (and are intended to continue to be) in-person and thus outside of the scope of this study on online communication.

Personal interviews were also not conducted and therefore limited the collection of communication that would inform about communication intentionality. This limited the data collection to naturally occurring communication, rather than allowing individuals to provide their own interpretations of the communication. This was purposeful, as the scope of the research was intended to collect communication organic to the organization. Limiting data collection to the communication that is organically initiated by the Rabbit Room or approved by the Rabbit Room

(in the case of Rabbit Room Chinwag Facebook posts which must be approved by a Rabbit Room administrator prior to appearing on the social media page) does not allow for as many possible communication anomalies. Because the researcher chose to limit data collection to these channels, there was less opportunity to uncover themes that may run contrary to the culture that the Rabbit Room, itself, attempts to create and maintain.

Finally, the nature of qualitative research allows for the researcher's background and assumptions to be reflected in the study. For this researcher, her own experiences in Christianity and with Christian organizations may have affected her interpretation of the data. Though a limitation, this did also enable the researcher to better understand the Christian community within the Rabbit Room, since certain Christian terminology and concepts were familiar.

Recommendations for Future Research

First, it is recommended that additional study be done inside the literature gaps identified within this study. Rothenbuhler's (2000) identification of gaps in community research include the need to uncover how mediated communication may create a community not already in existence, particularly through the communication of difference rather than commonality. This focus on seeing community as an achievement rather than existing is an important area of focus for future work on community. This case study provided one example of communal group that had created and cultivated a particular communal identity, but it is recommended that more studies be done on the communities cultivated through mediated communication. This study also situated itself within the current literature gap relating to the study of online communication of religious nonprofit organizations. While this case study has provided analysis of the recent communication of one Christian nonprofit organization, more studies are needed to find common themes within the data. While the findings of this study have been shown to be the experience of

the Rabbit Room, case studies work best when they are compared to others (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Additional case studies can be compared to this study on the Rabbit Room to find supporting or contradicting evidence for its claims.

Additionally, online communication is ever-evolving as technology consistently advances and changes. While this study focused significantly on the content available through a traditional website, podcasts, and Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram social media platforms, more research is needed on alternative options in mediated communication. Communities which rely on their own forms of online technology (self-hosted forums or the like), or developing social media platforms like TikTok, may differ in the ways they create and cultivate community through online communication. Groups that utilize more synchronous online communication may also differ from those that use asynchronous channels. Continued work in the areas of developing technology is essential for the usefulness of this line of research.

The study's findings also suggest that more research be done on the presence of in-groups and out-groups within one community. An interesting finding of this study was that the online community focused on garnering an audience of both artists and non-artists. By referencing to the concept of *imago Dei* in which all humans are created in the image of God (their Creator) and therefore assumed to have similar creative tendencies, the Rabbit Room created a community of individuals that did not have as many immediately noticeable common traits. Through focusing on the interdependence of the artists and their non-artistic audiences, the Rabbit Room drew together a group of individuals with different outlooks. In this way, they increased community by further explaining the deep need for both roles—those who create and those who interact with the works that are created. More research is needed to uncover how often communities attempt this sort of interdependent fusion and how successful those attempts are.

Additionally, the Rabbit Room significantly aligned its communication and purposes with the Christian faith. As a Christian nonprofit organization, it was expected that its mission reflects some sort of faith-based aim. However, findings uncovered a Christian theming present consistently throughout its online communication. This theming was explicit at times, but also discovered to be implicit in some fantasy themes and the group's rhetorical vision. Communicating patterns of the redemptive cycle were common and provided a consistent unification of individual stories to a larger, Christian story. It is suggested that additional research be done on Christian organizations that may similarly communicate through the integration of Christian faith and purposes that are not inherently Christian. For the Rabbit Room, this meant that the organization's cultural focus of artistry was more tightly defined by the theme of Christian redemption expected to run through that artistry. Analysis of other organizations that frame organizational culture through specific foci that are further defined by the integration of Christian faith could provide additional practical insights for other Christian organizations. This research would be particularly useful for Christian nonprofits to uncover if the depth to which Christianity is embedded in the organizational culture affects the creation and development of community.

Lastly, the Rabbit Room's tight and loose definitions of terms like art, redemption, and Christianity propose an intriguing assertion: that an organization's culture has the ability to define terms in a way that opens a community to a broad audience all the while also narrowing that community so that it is somewhat exclusive. The Rabbit Room's communication clearly proclaimed that those who belong to the Christian faith and appreciate artistic endeavors are welcomed openly. These loose definitions of faith and art embrace fairly broad audiences. However, the Rabbit Room's communication also worked to narrow the concept of faith to one

further defined by redemptive Christian themes and a traditional view of the Apostle's Creed. In addition, the loose term of art was narrowed through communication to imply that there is worthy (good) art and unworthy (bad) art rather than deeming that all art has inherent value. Through definitional dichotomy, this research suggests that organizations may most effectively create a welcoming and enduring culture by using terms that are generically familiar to their audience but then, through communication and the norms that are created through that communication, may narrow those definitions to tighten the cultural bonds that develop within the community. Future research should consider a community's definitional terms in order to look for further proof of the effectiveness of the combination of both loose and tight definitions.

Conclusion

This study examined how online communication can create and maintain culture from the sociocultural tradition, which considers how communicative acts create realities (Craig, 1999). Symbolic convergence theory was used as a lens through which to analyze the online communication present in the Rabbit Room because its focus on the thematic messaging of the group could provide insights into the resulting culture. The purpose of this study was to better understand how Christian communication is communicated through online channels and thus develops a group's culture.

The case study focused on the online communication of one Christian nonprofit organization, the Rabbit Room. Data was collected through public, online platforms including the Rabbit Room website, affiliated podcasts, and publicly-available social media pages. Communication posted between November 1, 2021 and April 30, 2022 was collected and coded, using symbolic convergence theory to identify themes communicated through the group's online communication, which were then used to better understand the culture created and maintained

within the Rabbit Room. The study concluded with a review of the findings and a discussion of the significance of the identified themes and communication patterns.

The Rabbit Room's culture was discovered to be a result of fantasy themes communicated by the Rabbit Room and cultivated through continued communication by Rabbit Room members and participants. The asynchronous nature of online communication allowed for a variety of individuals from various geographical locations to contribute easily, and the use of multiple platforms broadened the reach of the organizational content. Design and content of the organization website, use of particular social media channels, and the themes present within the communicated content resulted in a culture that centered around redemptive and Christian artistry and the culture unified artists and non-artists alike.

This study provided one example of an organization that infused messaging with both explicit and implicit Christian theming that applied to both faith and the nature of art. In doing so, the Rabbit Room demonstrated how consistent theming can unify otherwise diverse audiences that may differ denominationally and in their own personal hobbies. Additionally, the case study suggested that an organization that has limits to how extensively it encourages online communication may better cultivate a thriving community that exists beyond its own walls. By encouraging online communication but also limiting it (through moderating participant comments and choosing not to hold all events online), the Rabbit Room fostered a community that encouraged common themes in the online realm but also encouraged their advancement into in-person communities. In this way, the Rabbit Room provides one example of how Christian nonprofit organizations may develop their organizational mission and cultivate a community centered on growth, unity, and Christian ideals. With continued study, it is the researcher's hope that Christians and their organizations will continue to better understand ways in which a

Christian culture can be cultivated so that the Gospel of redemption may spread to the ends of

the earth through the communal work of the Church. Soli Deo gloria.

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APPENDIX A

December 3, 2021 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? [We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!](#)

Pete Peterson: "I liked *[Hawkeye](#)*."

Steve Guthrie: "This week I read *[Dominion: How The Christian Revolution Remade the World](#)*, by British historian Tom Holland. It is an epic overview of the history of Christianity in the West. Holland is not a Christian, but the book is deeply sympathetic toward Christianity. Holland's own position outside the faith makes his appreciation of Christianity's contributions all the more compelling.

I also read *[Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World](#)* by theologian and New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener. About ten years ago Keener published a two-volume study of miracles, complete with extensive documented accounts of miracles in the modern world. It was terrific, but it was also over 1100 pages, and a bit much to digest. This much shorter summary of miracles in the modern world is a lot easier to get through (and worth it)."

Wayne Garvey: "The Center for Christianity, Culture, and the Arts, out of Biola, does an Advent Project, which is a daily devotional combining thoughts from one of the staff, poetry, an illustrative art piece, and music. [On Tuesday, the music was by Melanie Penn and The Arcadian Wild](#) (they include data about each writer, art, poet, musician, and composer.)"

Rob Wheeler: "Saw a copy this beautiful, theologically rich children's book this week—I highly recommend *The Story of God With Us* written by Kenneth Padgett and Shay Gregorie and illustrated by Aedan Peterson."

Chris Thiessen: "I'm just about two thirds of the way through *The Beatles: Get Back*, and I'm just mesmerized by the whole thing—the intimate relational conversations, the songwriting processes, the absurd humor."

Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook.

APPENDIX B

December 10, 2021 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!

Steve Guthrie: "This week I read Tim Keller's *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*. It's been years since I've read anything by Keller, and I kind of picked up this book on a whim. I was really impressed—surprised, honestly—with just how thoughtful, careful, and nuanced it is from start to finish. Also, though it is addressed to skeptics, I found lots of it very meaningful and helpful devotionally.

I don't read self-help books very often, but this week I read *Designing Your Life* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, for a class I'll be teaching next semester. Burnett and Evans teach at Stanford's Design Lab, and the book is based on a popular course they teach at Stanford on Life Design. It is now the book I will recommend to anyone mulling career, vocation, or life-direction decisions, or just wanting to take stock of where they are in life."

Chris Thiessen: "The thing I liked this week is *Seventeen Going Under* by Sam Fender, a great rock record I highly recommend to any Killers or Springsteen fans."

Shigé Clark: "This week I've really enjoyed the Bible Project Podcast episode 'How (Not) to Read the Bible,' talking over what we do with the more difficult passages in the Bible, like violence, slavery, and the treatment of women. Dan Kimball talks about the way our patterns of approaching and reading the Bible lead to the misinterpretation and misuse of scripture, and how

we can avoid that."

Pete Peterson: "I'll see Shige's love for the Bible Project podcast and raise it by the Lord of Spirits podcast episodes on the Angel of the Lord and the Word of the Lord."

Rob Wheeler: "This remarkable one hour documentary, *Making Peace with Creation*, features a beloved Regent College professor named Loren Wilkinson. He's had a positive influence on many—teaching, living, and modeling a reconciled relationship with creation for more than 40 years."

Drew Miller: "I've been a Stephen Sondheim fan ever since two of my closest friends initiated me into *Company*, *Into the Woods*, and *Sweeney Todd* while in college, so I was very sad to hear that he passed away. He is such a deeply inspiring lyricist, and the layers of meaning he was able to pack into such deliciously compact phrasing has given me chills countless times. But I'd never really learned about his life, influences, and the overarching story of his career, so when I saw that The Daily had put out a podcast episode about him, I was overjoyed to listen! I highly recommend it if you'd like a brief introduction to this amazing writer. And now I'm looking forward to diving deeper with NPR's three-part tribute."

Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook.

APPENDIX C

December 17, 2021 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!

Pete Peterson: "The final episode of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. The whole series has been a masterpiece of journalism and I'm really grateful for the way they told that whole story."

Steve Guthrie: "I read *For the Life of The World: Theology that Makes a Difference* by Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun. This book is addressed to professional, pastoral, and lay theologians, and is a really lovely reflection on what theology is and should do. I also read *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* by Brad Jersak. It's very readable and is a balanced and evenhanded challenge to traditional understandings of hell and eternal punishment. I saw a recommendation on Scot McKnight's blog of *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible* by Michael Bird, and read that this week. It's a little bit basic, but for someone just beginning to think about what the Bible is and how to read it intelligently, it would be a great place to start."

Rob Wheeler: "It was a delight to welcome Gisela Kreglinger to Nashville where she guided our Friends of L'Abri group through a 'Taste and See' wine tasting evening at North Wind Manor. In preparation for the evening, I read and highly recommend her book, *The Soul of Wine: Savoring the Goodness of God*. Gisela has written another book about wine and spirituality, a book about George MacDonald, and has a website if you'd like to learn more."

Andy Patton: "I liked reading *Powers of Two: How Relationships Drive Creativity* by Joshua Wolf Shenk this week. It's about how many great endeavors have two people behind them, not one...reminds me of something."

Carly Anderson: "I've been enjoying Tim Keller's daily advent devotionals. He also sends out a video with a Q&A every Sunday morning leading up to Christmas, and it's all been really well done."

Chris Thiessen: "I've been compiling my sprawling list of (now 75-ish) albums I've quite enjoyed this year. Many of these are not family-friendly, and genre-wise they're all over the board from dance pop to folk to underground hip-hop to hardcore to experimental jazz. Feel free to scroll through and find something you might be interested in."

Drew Miller: "Kelsey and I wholeheartedly enjoyed *Dash & Lily* on Netflix. It is Rom-Com executed just about perfectly, and I'm here for that.

I also loved listening to *Spell Songs II: Let the Light In*, recorded to supplement Robert Macfarlane & Jackie Morris's most recent collaboration *The Lost Spells*. Although I didn't immediately connect with every single song on the album, there were quite a few musically and lyrically gorgeous moments that stood out to me. At heart, I just love what they're doing and am so grateful for these fourteen songs. My favorites after just one listen are 'Bird of the Blizzard,' 'Swallow,' and 'Moth.'"

Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook.

APPENDIX D

January 28, 2022 Rabbit Room Digest

Welcome to your weekly Rabbit Room digest.

Scroll down to read what showed up on our blog this week.

And scroll all the way down to see the books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we've especially enjoyed this week.

Every Moment Holy, Vol. 2: Pocket Edition

We're excited to share that Every Moment Holy, Vol. 2: Pocket Edition is now available for pre-order in the Rabbit Room Store—the complete second volume of Douglas McKelvey's book of liturgies, at a fraction of the size and cost of the original.

All orders will begin shipping on Tuesday, February 25th, and you can pre-order it now in the Rabbit Room Store.

Pre-order in the Rabbit Room Store

God of the Garden Reading List

Andrew Peterson shares the books he's been reading over the last couple years that have shaped the writing of his own book, The God of the Garden.

"If God intends for us to flourish, we disregard the flourishing of his creation at our peril. Infrastructure, city planning, creation care, justice, neighborliness, and stewardship of resources are all theological concerns."

Read Full Piece Here

View The God of the Garden in the Rabbit Room Store

Imagination as a Spiritual Practice (Part 2 of 3)

In Part 2 of her three-part blog series, Hannah Mitchell charts her journey to recovering her

imagination as a vital component of her spirtuality. [sic]

"We squeeze every ounce of mystery we can out of faith because we so desperately want to know we're doing okay. But when we deflect the weight of mystery, we toss away chances to experience God more deeply."

Read Full Piece Here

Rabbit Trails #36:

Thwappit Trails

Jonny Jimison is back with a special, Creaturepedia-themed edition of his beloved comic, Rabbit Trails.

Click the button below to pick up a copy of his latest full-color graphic novel, The River Fox, in the Rabbit Room Store.

View The River Fox in the Rabbit Room Store

The Habit Podcast:

David French Tries to Move the Elephant

This week on The Habit Podcast, Jonathan Rogers talks with political and cultural commentator David French. French is senior editor at The Dispatch, a contributing writer at The Atlantic Monthly, and the author of several books, including Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation as well as the French Press newsletter. He's the co-host—with Curtis Chang—of the new podcast, Good Faith.

In this episode, Jonathan and David discuss persuasion in a polarized and ideologically super-charged climate.

Listen Here

This Week's Featured Rabbit Room Member:

Meet Candace

"The folks who make the Rabbit Room happen have their finger on the pulse of redeemed arts. I love that when my husband and I look at each other and ask, 'What movie should we watch?' or 'Wanna listen to something new?' we don't have to start at ground zero. A recent Rabbit Room email update introduced us to fabulous new artists shining light through their work. While a few years back, updates like that were entertaining and informative, the world feels darker these days, so finding those places where the light shines is like finding oxygen for my soul.

I love the way the Rabbit Room connects today's writers and thinkers with great Christian writers and thinkers of the past, like C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Inklings. But more powerfully, my engagement with this brilliant community also helps me to look forward to the day when all of us will be together in a world unstained by sin, using our God-given gifts to bring him glory! Any organization that enables you to look both forward and back while being inspired right where you are is worth joining.

Plus, the mugs are fabulous."

—Candace, Rabbit Room member

Become a Rabbit Room Member

Learn More about Rabbit Room Membership

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!

Shigé Clark: "Julien Baker's album Sprained Ankle is one of my new favorite things. Her

lyricism is superb—she strips the lines down to their barest bones like a good poem, and the way she integrates the vocals and composition makes a powerful, comprehensive work. This is a perfect example of a Christian album without being a 'Christian' album (and the better for it). The conversation and wrestling she has with God here is remarkably real, and raw, and true. I can't get over 'Rejoice'—geez, what an incredible song. Like all my favorite writing, this work leaves you dwelling in the murky-grey of a question, but holding a tether to truth that you can feel more than express."

Steve Guthrie: "I assigned this short article from James K. A. Smith for one of my classes this week. It's a really engaging essay that argues that art and beauty reorient our hearts, in a way that bare concepts can't."

Drew Miller: "I've been enjoying every page of Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World by Tara Isabella Burton—a tour of the landscape of contemporary American quasi-religions, accompanied by their historical roots. On the note of sub-culture humor, this Relevant Magazine article by Tyler Huckabee has been circulating this week, and it's hilariously precise. In case you're wondering, my coming-of-age experience was about 60% the Jars of Clay paragraph and 40% the Switchfoot one."

 Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook.

APPENDIX E

February 4, 2022 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? [We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!](#)

Pete Peterson: "[Tick, Tick... Boom!](#) is a fantastically realistic look at the process of creating something."

Chris Thiessen: "I watched the documentary [You're Watching Video Music Box](#) which was an incredible walk through hip-hop history and also beautiful reminder that pouring wholeheartedly into your local community and art can really change the world."

Drew Miller: "Thanks to Chris, I had the rare and wonderful experience of falling completely in love with a brand new, [self-titled record by Anäis Mitchell](#). It's one of those albums whose songs all sound similar to each other, but not at all in a monotonous way—it's more like all ten songs strung together are one complete thought. She's a fantastic lyricist and storyteller. Highlights for me include ['Revenant,'](#) ['The Words,'](#) and ['Watershed.'](#)"

[Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook](#).

APPENDIX F

March 11, 2022 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!

Andrew Peterson: "*The Borderland* by Roger Lloyd. A wonderful little book about the intersection of literature and theology. An English contemporary of C. S. Lewis, he reflects on the differing roles of the artist and the theologian, and how some authors (like Lewis, Sayers, Chesterton, MacDonald) live on the borderlands between the two, translating the lofty work of the theologian into stories that work on the masses in a different way."

Pete Peterson: "*The Batman*: Not only is it a really good movie, but I was delighted to see the character moving beyond 'vengeance.' Also, I've been re-reading sections of Helprin's *Winter's Tale* and Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and marveling over their wonders."

Shigé Clark: "I've been absolutely loving Adia Victoria's music. 'South Gotta Change' caught me and sent me digging into her album *A Southern Gothic*. There's such beauty and hope in the love she holds for her place while facing the harsh reality and pain of its history and current failures. Her call for change resounds with hope. And her sound is just *spectacular*. I can't stop listening. Bring me all the Adia Victoria.

Also, I would like everyone to read this beautiful poem by Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka."

Steve Guthrie: "Along with some members of the Rabbit Room staff, I've been watching a four-part documentary called 'Why Are We Here.' It features Oxford physicist and Christian

apologist Ard Louis, and includes conversations with all sorts of notable thinkers about science, belief, and meaning. Unfortunately, the documentary itself is a little hard to get hold of (it's available [here via CuriosityStream](#)), but [here is the excellent website that accompanies the film](#)."

Chris Thiessen: "The new Tears For Fears album, *[The Tipping Point](#)*, is delightfully well-crafted, hopeful, and just brings this calming peace with it.

Also, *[The Batman](#)* is trying to be my favorite Batman film…"

Drew Miller: "Piggy-backing on Steve's recommendation, I greatly enjoyed the entirety of the [John Cottingham interview](#) featured on the 'Why Are We Here' website. And it's available to watch for free!"

[Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook.](#)

APPENDIX G

March 25, 2022 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!

Andrew Peterson: "Anaïs Mitchell's new record, all day long."

Pete Peterson: "The movie *Coda*, about a child of deaf parents who wants to be a singer. There were a lot of tears in the Peterson house (the best kind, not the sad kind)."

Andy Patton: Andrew Fellows has translated Lewis Hyde's masterpiece The Gift into theological terms in his lecture, 'Living in the Creator's Gift Economy.' It's a very good look at how generosity can build community."

Shigé Clark: "This is my thing I liked this week, by our own Andy Patton. Systems thinking and board games! What could be better?

Also, John Barber, Jennifer, Chris, and I had a great conversation yesterday about romance in movies. I've come to love Pop Culture Detective's video essays, and this video I saw yesterday is apropos and illuminating to one of many ways film tends to fail us in that regard. He's doing good work in the world, more people should check him out!"

Pieter Clark: "I've enjoyed listening to this remix of 'We Don't Talk About Bruno' this week—silly, but fun!"

Chris Thiessen: "My Lent reading this year is *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James H. Cone, in which Cone offers very powerful reflections on the importance of those two symbols of

death and God's redemptive, life-giving power over them."

[Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook](#).

APPENDIX H

April 29, 2022 Rabbit Room Digest: Stuff We Liked This Week

Stuff We Liked This Week

Each week, we share here some books, music, movies, podcasts, and such that we have enjoyed over the past seven days.

What have you enjoyed this week? We invite you to head over to the Rabbit Room Chinwag on Facebook and share!

Andy Patton: "Jim Roland, a pastor and dear friend, is a gifted reader and is bringing my writing on why people leave Christianity to the audio format. His new podcast is called Strideafar and the original writing on de-conversion can be found on Still Point."

Shigé Clark: "A full month later, I'm still thinking about the documentary *Why Are We Here?* with Ard Louis. It asked so many good questions and what it explored in beauty and meaning will remain with me."

Chris Thiessen: "Old news, but I've had Steely Dan's 'Kid Charlemagne' on repeat. It's perfect."

Leslie E. Thompson: "I finished Leslie Leyland Fields' memoir, *Surviving the Island of Grace.* Leslie is a member of the Chrysostom Society of writers (which has included Walter Wangerin, Jr., Madeleine L'Engle, Eugene Peterson, and Philip Yancey) and spends her summers as a commercial fisherwoman on a remote island in Alaska. The book covers her first few years on the island as a new Bible School graduate and newlywed. Her telling of those isolating years is compelling. I learned she hosts writing retreats on the island every summer, and since reading the book I have the aim to go to one of them!"

Drew Miller: "I watched the first season of *Severance* this past week. I expected a fun show to pass the time, and I got a work of art—possibly the best season finale I've ever seen. Beyond the

obviously intriguing central conceit of the show, I was drawn in by encountering how all the characters are simultaneously deeply alienated from themselves and yet subliminally aware of their predicament. It's ultimately a show about profound fragmentation and how the *imago Dei* in human beings will always find a way to put the splintered pieces back together again. Disclaimer, though: there is some disturbing material that at times becomes violent. It was right at the edge of my personal comfort zone, but I know that's different for different people."

Click here to continue the conversation with us on Facebook.