Digitalizing Death: A Study of the Influence of Social Media on the Grieving Process

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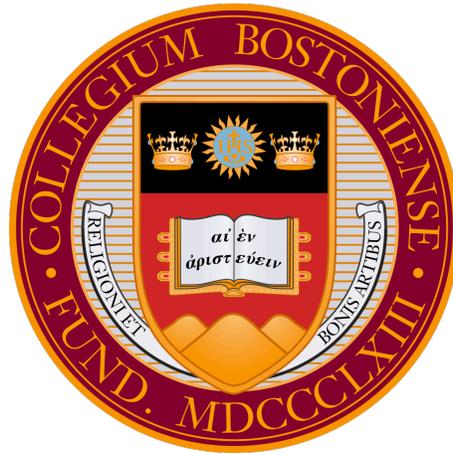
Digitalizing Death:
A Study of the Influence of Social Media on the Grieving Process

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Senior Honors Thesis
Written for the Department of Sociology
May 2018

Introduction

With the increasing digitalization of society, the line between private and public has blurred. Social network sites (SNSs) like Facebook and Instagram facilitate such a process, with users publicly displaying private emotions or events on the sites. What was once intimate conversation between two individuals or personal experience shared only with those in one's physical company have become public conversations and shared experiences for networks of Friends and Followers to comment on, like, share, and survey. These public displays of the previously private range from pictures and memories of family vacations to expressions of sorrow over the death of a loved one. In this way, social media has allowed for heightened expressions of grief, a formerly exclusively personal feeling, online through the use of images, words, and reactions. As social network sites continue to develop, researchers are investigating why they are used as forums for the expression of grief and how posting affects traditional grief processes.

While the literature on social media and grief has discovered some of the motivations for posting about death online and how such posting can be both positive and negative in the grieving process, few studies have actually compared people who do and do not share experiences of death on the SNS (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Moore, Magee, Gamreklidze, & Kowalewski, 2017; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015). The beliefs and opinions of people who have never posted about death online may say something not only about the population of non-posters, but about what makes people who post about grief experiences unique. Additionally, the demographic characteristics and personality types of the individuals posting about loss on the SNS have not been addressed greatly in the literature. Perhaps these

characteristics say something about the likelihood of an individual to post about personal experiences of death online.

The current study was developed to understand who uses social media to grieve the loss of a family member, why an individual might do this, and how such posting influences the grieving process for the social media user. An online survey and in-depth interviews were utilized to answer the aforementioned research questions. In order to address the gaps in the literature and expand on what is already known, the survey was open to both posters and non-posters and asked for demographic and personality characteristics from each respondent. The study focuses on the highly personal loss of a family member in the context of the increasingly public space of the SNS.

I. Literature Review

Social Network Sites: A History

Social network sites, or SNSs, have gained major popularity from the late 20th through to the 21st century. boyd and Ellison, in their work on the definition, history, and scholarship of social network sites, define SNSs as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Fulfilling all of these criteria, the first social network site was SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997. Unlike the more advanced SNSs of today, SixDegrees focused on the minimum: the ability to have a profile, accumulate a list of online Friends, and eventually search through the Friend lists of other people (boyd & Ellison, 2007). By the 21st century, Facebook was developed, originally limited to only Harvard students. In 2006, this popular social media platform expanded to include all people. Unlike the original

SNS, SixDegrees, Facebook offers a variety of different tools and components to users, like the ability to create events and generate pages for businesses. However, the main features of SNSs continues to be the personal profile, which is generally necessary to have an account anyways, and the Friend list. For example, three main elements of Facebook in its present form are "constructing and presenting a member profile, …establishing (a network of) links with other members, and…viewing and searching the networked links of members in your network" (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 5). Thus, the scope and features of social network sites have expanded over time, and yet the same minimum requirements to fit the definition of SNS still command the digital networking sphere.

Profile pages have become an important part of the online identity, as it is "where one can 'type oneself into being'" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 212). The individual is the crucial element of the site; without people to create and maintain profiles, there would be no SNSs. As Seargeant and Tagg (2014) note, the Internet is "no longer a place where you [go] predominantly to consume content and information. It [has become] a place where you participate; a dynamic space that [is] shaped…by your own actions and contributions" (p. 2). Through the profile page, individuals actively engage with the SNS to increase their own visibility and interact with others on the site. Identity, rather than being about how people behave in the real world, is "indicated through their social connections" on the SNS (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 5). Thus, the public profile is not only "egocentric…with the individual at the center of their own community," but consists of a wide network of Friends who affirm and authenticate one's virtual personal identity. As boyd and Ellison suggest (2007), "an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles" (p. 219).

Therefore, related to the creation of the profile page is the ability to make and view Friend lists. As boyd and Ellison (2007) mention, "most sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities" (p. 210). Although it seems counterintuitive, it is not unusual for SNS users to communicate not with new people, but with those they already know and have a relationship with, despite the concept of the site as a "social network" (boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, there are those that boyd and Ellison (2007) consider "latent ties," or people who share some common connection in the real world and then bond online because of that (p. 211). Similarly, there are also weak ties, or those that one knows minimally in real life, perhaps considering such a person an acquaintance, but knows more about them by connecting on the SNS. In this way, there is a difference between "Friends" (those online) and "friends" (those in the real-world) (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 220). This differentiation is important in establishing the reasons individuals use social media and how they use their SNS profiles to portray a certain identity. In this social network, one must distinguish between uni-directional and bi-directional virtual relationships. Facebook, for example, relies on bi-directional "Friends," since there needs to be a mutual agreement between two people to share information, profiles, and networks. Instagram, on the other hand, deals with uni-directional bonds in which one personal can "follow" another but not necessarily be "followed back" by that person. Therefore, these individuals are referred to as "Followers" and not "Friends" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 213). In this way, the user has the power to control who exists in their network on the SNS, based on their own criteria for who warrants such "Friending" or "Following." This sense of connection and control defines the user's experience on the SNS and ultimately reflects how comfortable the individual is in an online space.

The essential elements of an SNS – the profile page and the Friend list – suggests something about the creation and maintenance of an identity online. The user has the control to portray a self that is identical or radically different from the real-life self. Elements of control and self-presentation perhaps play a role in the utilization of the SNS for specific purposes, like the display of grief, depending on the individual user. Such questioning leads one to wonder who it is that uses social media to grieve a loss?

Social Network Sites and Health

In his article on social media and health behavior, Damon Centola (2013) wonders how virtual networks can be used to perform trials or analyze the behavioral changes of individuals through social diffusion. Although his research focuses mainly on physical health, like heart infarctions or lung cancer related to smoking, there are implications for his research in understanding responses to grief.

As Centola (2013) mentions, "peer-to-peer interaction in the health sector has a long history, starting with…support groups for…grief and trauma counseling" (p. 2135). While this began as an in-person endeavor, the potential for grief counseling now extends to formal and informal online forums. Social network sites would be considered "open technologies," as they are "large-scale virtual communication infrastructures that are designed for social interactions across many substantive domains" (Centola, 2013, p. 2136). Sites like Facebook and Instagram allow their users to engage in conversations about their individual health journeys and compare these stories to others on the site or in a specific group, which could potentially have implications for the grieving individual in such a case (Centola, 2013). With regard to this ability, Instagram seems to have a more public scope in that users' accounts are either public (for all to see) or private (for only followers to see), so any public grief account is open to all.

Facebook, on the other hand, has more restrictions on what individuals can see, whether they can post, and whether they can become members of a group. In both cases, the ability to post about individual experiences is critical to the sense of network and connectivity in the online domain. Centola (2013) notes that one "feature of social media is the remarkable, global importation of daily social experiences into the online domain" and because of this, the difference between online and offline is "blurred," leading to a new sense of "familiarity" in the online realm (p. 2138). Not only is the SNS a location of self-presentation, but it is also its own reality, often so similar to physical life that differentiation is difficult. For example, one might question if one had a conversation with someone in-person or commented back and forth with them online about the topic. This blurring of physical and digital reality could facilitate the expression of grief in the online setting. Perhaps the familiarity of the online setting lends itself to a comfortability that encourages the virtual dissemination of deeply personal information.

Similarly, Centola (2013) emphasizes that "the effects of social interactions on collective outcomes are qualitatively different in small groups than they are in large networks" (p. 2137). While he was referencing online forums for physical health, like alcoholics' or smokers' groups that encourage positive abstinence behaviors, the effects of this factor on behavioral change can encompass grief groups too. As it relates to SNSs, perhaps the increase in the number of friends one has will positively correlate to better grief outcomes, like coping with the loss more quickly or avoiding depression after a death occurs.

Centola (2013) also mentions factors in addition to network size that could affect causal outcomes, including the kinds of connections one has online and the sense of actual connectedness one feels in the online network. In the SNS, these factors are quite evident. Firstly, who are one's Friends in the social network? Differentiating between "weak ties" (mere

acquaintances or distant connections) and "strong ties" (family and friends) could be important in understanding both willingness to post and effects on grief after posting (Centola, 2013, p. 2139). Related to these types of ties is Centola's (2013) second factor mentioned above, or how close one is with one's online Friends. This research project deals specifically with the loss of a family member, something people may not actively wish to share with everyone on their Friend list.

Facebook and Instagram

As mentioned previously, Facebook became open to the public in 2006, with Instagram following a few years behind, launching in 2010 (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2012).Both have changed through the years but demonstrate the primary functions of SNSs addressed earlier in this paper – namely a personal profile, a network of Friends (for Facebook) or Followers (for Instagram), and the ability to search through other people's profiles and/or networks.

In her dissertation on information disclosure and presentation of the self on Facebook, E. Cabell Hankinson Gathman (2014) discusses the essence of Facebook specifically as "documentary by nature," though I would argue that the same is true for Instagram (p. 2). Both involve not only the sharing of written word, as in a post on Facebook or a picture caption on Instagram, but also images (Gathman, 2014). The focus on photos is important, because while Instagram deals solely with the presentation of the self through images, a Facebook profile becomes more authentic through the inclusion of photos. Gathman (2014) describes the SNS as a "functionally limitless space" because of the ability to post as many photos as one desires without any restriction on number (p. 9). Photos function as a "valuable source of information," but only in relation to the context that is given either by the poster or the viewers of it (Gathman, 2014, p. 11). Posting about the loss of a family member may be given the appropriate context

through an "R.I.P." caption, or through the comments of others viewing the picture and recognizing the poster's grief. The use of images in context is thus an influential element of the SNS.

With regard to news delivery via the SNS, Gathman (2014) recognizes that there can be a feeling of dissatisfaction "where the recipient feels that she has received news via an inappropriate medium, that is, one that is too impersonal for the content of the news" (p. 16). One may wonder how the use of SNSs like Facebook and Instagram to share the news of the death of a loved one may be perceived by the poster and the recipients. Gathman (2014) seems to suggest that the dissemination of such a difficult topic via an SNS may be a method employed specifically by the poster so as to avoid the discomfort in singling out a certain individual and telling him or her this information. Because the information is shared to all friends, this allows the recipient to make sense of how he or she feels about it, rather than putting the burden of "need-to-know" on the person doing the posting. Furthermore, this eliminates the need to have to tell the news over and over again, since there only needs to be a single post that reaches all of the necessary recipients. This particular feature of Facebook and Instagram may have a significant impact when dealing with such news as the death of a family member. The question remains to be answered as to whether posting about personal experiences of death is more for the benefit of the poster or for the poster's Friends and Followers.

Coping with Grief

Theoretical models on grief and bereavement are plentiful and varying. Due to the nature of grief and its many related factors, theorists of all backgrounds have attempted to understand the complexities of coping with a loss. In the following section, various perspectives on grief and bereavement are highlighted because of their relevance to survey and interview data, their

understanding of the complexities of grief, their popularity among the general population, and/or their focus on the loss of a family member or loved one specifically.

Symbolic Interaction Theory One of the ways in which grief has come to be understood is through a symbolic interactionist perspective. Two main components of this theory in the study of grief are: (1) the equating of an individual's significant loss with a loss of reality for that individual, and (2) the influence of other people on the individual's experience of the loss (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 102). It recognizes the loss of social context as one of the sources of grief, especially because a human life in that social world is now gone (Rosenblatt, 2003). What this does is "compel people to search for alternative bases for defining situation and self" (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 103). Essentially, a disturbance in the social reality of the individual causes him or her to feel lost in the world, with the need to redefine one's life situation in perhaps a new way now that the deceased is no longer present. One way to search for meaning is to turn to possessions or "things," especially something like photographs, as a remembrance of the relationship to the deceased and a potential "source of meaning for the self and one's life situation now" (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 103). Additionally, other people's responses and reactions to an individual's experience and expression of loss can impact how that individual comes to cope with such a disturbance in social reality. With more social support and assistance, the transition to understanding life in a new way without the deceased may be more easily facilitated. However, one must take into account difference in this perspective on grief, since cultural variations in grief responses are real and influence the ways in which individuals come to define their new realities after the universal experience of death (Rosenblatt, 2003). This may impact the ways in which an individual reacts to posting about grief and death online, and

whether or not the person would do something like that themselves to help them cope with the loss and sense of distortion of reality that comes with it.

  Family Systems Theory While there are cultural differences in the way grief is appropriately expressed, there are also variations in the ways family members cope with the loss of someone in their family due to the individual relationships each member had with the deceased (Rosenblatt, 2003). Family systems theory accounts for these differences by looking at the way "family rules and patterns shape loss experiences and how a significant loss affects and is played out in a system of family relationships" (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 102). Of special importance is the role that the deceased family member played in the family before he or she died, since this can affect the way that the family comes to address and interpret the loss (Rosenblatt, 2003). For example, if the deceased family member was the mediator of the family, then the resulting familial coping may succumb to mayhem and arguing because this family member is no longer present to bring everyone together. It is important for those within the family unit to extend themselves beyond this group to receive support from friends, acquaintances, or community members who can help individuals to cope more effectively with the loss (Rosenblatt, 2003). This theory may provide something unique to the current research project considering its focus on the loss of a family member and the assumption that those on the SNS are presenting their grief to others beyond the family unit for potential support.

  Classic Psychoanalytic View A fairly dated view on the grieving process stemming from the work of Freud, the psychoanalytic view of grief and grieving puts as "the primary task of mourning…the gradual surrender of one's psychological attachment to the deceased" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 439). What Freud considers "the work of mourning," the emphasis is on individuals giving up ties with the deceased as a way of coping with the loss (Wortman &

Boerner, 2011, p. 440). The goal of breaking bonds with the deceased could be compromised on the SNS, as individuals continue to post to or about the deceased as if he or she is still alive, at least virtually (Church, 2013).

     Attachment Theory and Other Stage Theories After Freud came the work of Bowlby who dealt with "affectional bonds," or relationships of love and care that individuals make with other people during the life course (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 440). Bowlby believed that when these bonds were threatened, "attachment behaviors" would be engaged; however, the problem that arises with the bond being completely broken through the death of a loved one is the tension between attachment behaviors trying to restore or protect the bond and the reality that the loved one is gone (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 440). Recognizing this tension, Bowlby proposed a four-stage model of grief that occurs to relieve this tension:

> (a) initial numbness, disbelief, or shock; (b) yearning or searching for the
>
> deceased, accompanied by anger and protest; (c) despair and disorganization as
>
> the bereaved gives up the search, accompanied by feelings of depression and
>
> hopelessness; and (d) reorganization or recovery as the loss is accepted, and there
>
> is a gradual return to former interests (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 440).

This stage model gave way to other ones like it, the most famous of which being Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage grief model, including "denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and…acceptance" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 440). Although they are relatively under-supported in the research on grief, "stage models have strongly influenced the common understanding of grief in our society" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 440). This expectation that everyone must progress through some type of grief model in their experience of bereavement is highly misconceived and can be detrimental to individual experiences of grief. Such an

expectation could also influence the expression of and reactions to grieving on the SNS, particularly for those who post often and may seem to be stuck in the same stage of grief.

Stress and Coping Approach Also known as the "Cognitive Coping Approach," the "Stress and Coping Approach" posits that the loss of a loved one becomes problematic when there is a perception by the bereaved that it is too difficult or insurmountable (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 441). This approach deals more with the individual act of grieving, emphasizing that "a person's appraisal, or subjective assessment of what has been lost, is hypothesized to influence his or her emotional reaction to the stressor and the coping strategies that are employed" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 441). This theory is considered more appropriate in studying grief because of its recognition of individual difference in the experience of grief and refusal to universalize the definitions and perceptions associated with it. Such a model influenced the survey questions about trauma and suddenness of the loss for those who posted about the death of a family member to understand if the actual interpretation of the loss influenced the decision to post about it on the SNS.

Continuing Bond Theory This model of grief suggests that it is beneficial for the bereaved to "maintain a relationship with the deceased" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, Discussion section, para. 2). Contrary to Freud's classic psychoanalytic perspective, the mourner is encouraged to prolong communication with or relation to the deceased despite a lack of physical presence. However, there have been critiques that trying to maintain connection with the dead can be harmful to the grieving process (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013). This is particularly relevant on the SNS, which the bereaved might use to continue some sort of digital communication with the deceased.

Theoretical Models Specific to the Death of a Loved One While the previous theories

and approaches proposed general explanations of the experience of grief and mourning, some

have proposed theories specifically dealing with the loss of a loved one. These include

"Bonanno's Four-Component Model" and "Stroebe and Schut's Dual-Process Model" (Wortman

& Boerner, 2011, p. 441). The four components of the grieving process in Bonanno's Model are:

> the context in which the loss occurs; …the subjective meanings associated with
>
> the loss; …changes in the representation of the lost loved one over time…and the
>
> role of coping and emotion regulation processes that can mitigate or exacerbate
>
> the stress of loss (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 441).

These components help the bereaved understand their loss and can influence the expression of

grief that the bereaved displays. For example, if someone experiences a loss that is sudden or

traumatic, the experience of grief will be different than for someone who experiences a sad but

expected loss. As with the Stress and Coping Approach, this model influenced the inclusion of

questions about the respondent's appraisal of the loss in the survey.

According to the Dual-Process Model, "following a loved one's death, bereaved people

alternate between two different kinds of coping: loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented

coping" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 442). This model describes "loss-oriented coping" as

dealing with the resolution of some part of the loss itself, and "restoration-oriented coping" as

dealing with new challenges of everyday life now that a loved one is gone (Wortman & Boerner,

2011, p. 442). Thus, loss-oriented coping deals more with the expression of grief and emotion

related to the loss, while restoration-oriented coping might entail support-seeking and other

bonding experiences after a loss (Rossetto et al., 2015). This model is effective in that it accounts

for differences in how individuals move between these two types of coping. For example, it is

suggested that women deal more with loss-oriented coping than men do (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). Such differences in the focus of coping may influence the expression of grief on the SNS and may help to understand why a user was motivated to post online about a loss that he or she experienced.

Thus, each of these perspectives and theories offers something unique to the study of bereavement and coping with a loss through grief processes. Through this research, these perspectives will be utilized to come to a better understanding of how individual experiences of grief are conceptualized, experienced, and coped with in the virtual landscape.

Addressing "Coping Myths"

According to Boerner and Wortman (2011), there are five prevailing coping myths in the grief literature. By recognizing and addressing such myths, the hope as a researcher is to avoid generalizations and understand that grief is complex. Before beginning survey development or interviews, it was important to acknowledge these myths so as to avoid potential biases based on false stereotypes about what grief should look like.

The first myth is the belief that bereaved individuals are supposed to be exceptionally distressed following the loss of a loved one (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). This view suggests that anyone who is not incredibly depressed or saddened by the death of someone known to them is not grieving correctly, or may experience emotional or psychological problems in the future because of this improper reaction (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). However, one's reaction to a loss depends on a variety of factors, including the type of loss and the context in which it occurs, to name a few (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). This significant realization played a key role in the development of survey questions, as discussed later, which asked for respondent's own

evaluation of the severity and trauma of the loss. Interview questions were also formulated in such a way as to avoid assuming that those interviewed grieved in a particular way after the loss.

A second coping myth prevalent in the literature is that there are no positive emotions during bereavement, only negative ones (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). The belief is that such positive emotions are inappropriate when given the context of someone having recently died (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). However, research suggests that many individuals experience positive feelings during the grieving process, and that these emotions can actually be beneficial when coping with "bereavement-related distress" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 448). Thus, it would not be unusual for the use of social media to post about the loss of a loved one to elicit positive emotions despite the context; receiving supportive comments and responses could be helpful in coping with the loss and not be suggestive of an inappropriate reaction to death.

Additionally, the grief literature suggests that an individual "must confront and 'work through' his or her feelings about the loss" after a loved one dies (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 439). This is a bereavement strategy supported by Freud, as mentioned above, because it is a form of "grief work" in which the individual is making an effort to progressively cut ties with the deceased (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). However, the supposed necessity of "working through" one's grief is merely a myth, since "confrontative coping," or directly addressing one's emotions about a loss, can be insignificant or even disadvantageous for certain grieving individuals (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). Once again, although this myth is prevalent, it is important to understand that context and the situational nature of a loved one's death means that the act of mourning is not a standardized practice.

Furthermore, through the act of confrontative coping, the grief literature emphasizes that the end goal should be for the bereaved to give up his or her attachment to the lost loved one

during bereavement (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). The point of this would be to complete the act of "grief work" and finally come to the realization that the deceased is no longer a part of the physical world and thus not a part of the bereaved's present life (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). On the other hand, according to some research, it is not only normal to continue some sort of bond with the deceased, but it can actually be beneficial in adjusting to a new life without the deceased to maintain some sort of connection (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). This is especially significant, as will be discussed, when understanding the use of SNSs as a coping mechanism during bereavement, since many individuals post messages to the deceased as if they are still alive and can read these words on SNS accounts. The question becomes whether such maintained relationship is advantageous or whether maintaining the bond should not last for such a long period of time, since it keeps the bereaved attached to an individual who is no longer alive. As per Freud's Classic Psychoanalytic Model, some believe it is emotionally and psychologically detrimental to maintain such bonds, as the purpose of grief is to work through the loss to the point of progressively relinquishing all connections to the deceased.

Finally, the fifth coping myth in the grieving literature relates to the end goal of bereavement and is the belief that "Within a year or two, the bereaved will be able to come to terms with what has happened, recover from the loss, and resume his or her earlier level of functioning" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 439). In this way, bereavement is seen as a process with a distinct end, but this is not an accurate representation of the complexities of the experience of death. Boerner and Wortman (2011) discuss the many risk factors, like demographics, personal history, relationship with the deceased, and access to resources, that affect the ability to adjust to the loss of a loved one (p. 459). Because of variations in life context and personal traits, there should not be an expectation that everyone will be able to reach some

defined point of overcoming grief. This is why, in this study, demography and personality were important components of the survey methodology, since these aspects of a person's identity play a role in their own experiences, especially traumatic ones like the death of a family member.

The Bereaved and Their Grief

As stated previously, many individuals without background in grief theory still believe in a stage theory of grief (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). Because of this, there is a prevailing assumption that the "bereaved will go through a period of intense distress" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 469). This, however, is not the norm; in fact, there is no "normal" way to grieve, as is evident in the fact that there are many different perspectives on grief and bereavement. However, despite this notion of there being no "normal" way of grieving, there are studied ways in which other people can help the bereaved in their grieving processes, no matter what variation they take. For example, other people encouraging the bereaved to get over their loss quickly is not helpful, and "unsupportive social interactions account for a significant amount of the variance in depression among the bereaved" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011, p. 469). According to research, the best way to help the bereaved through their grieving process is simply to allow them to vent their feelings and show them support and concern (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). One may wonder whether this same sense of support and concern can be achieved adequately on the SNS, or whether in-person expressions offer greater benefit to the grieving individual.

In his article "Shared Grief is Good Grief," George Dickinson (2011) recounts the desire of the bereaved for support, specifically in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. He suggests that after a sudden or traumatic death, like those that occurred on 9/11, "more guilt may occur…because there is no opportunity to say goodbye, express feelings, make amends, etc." (Dickinson, 2011, Impact of the Media on Grieving section, para. 2). In order to

begin coping with such a terrible loss, these individuals may use social networks, online grief groups, or other means of connecting to share their grief with others. Dickinson (2011) notes that "a sharing of grief, even by strangers, seems to console; it helps to know that others care" (Impact of the Media on Grieving section, para. 5). Boerner and Wortman (2011) corroborate this notion with the conclusion that "connection with similar others can…reassure the bereaved that their own feelings and behaviors are normal" (p. 470). Thus, even though there is no "normal" way to grieve or to feel while mourning, there are ways that the bereaved can reach out and receive support during these times of sorrow.

Using Social Media as a Grieving Tool

History of Grief Rituals Throughout history, means of expressing and addressing grief have evolved, although some rituals have maintained meaning. For instance, in Victorian England, mourning individuals used highly visible symbols to identify themselves, like wearing black, sometimes for years (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Today, we still see common customs of wearing black or dark colors to death rituals like funerals or memorial services. However, in modern-day America, the expression of grief has shifted, and the bereaved are discouraged from showing emotions, instead encouraged to limit the amount of time that they are in mourning (Carroll & Landry, 2010). There is a sense of finiteness in the traditional death rituals common in the US; funerals and wakes are usually one-day events shortly after death. Once these mourning rituals are over, it is expected that individuals return to "normal" life by going back to work, doing regular tasks, and essentially acting as if nothing has changed. The bereaved are limited in the time and space they have to grieve, which is perhaps part of the reason why the use of SNSs as forums of grief expression have become increasingly more popular, especially in the US.

The SNS: Changing the Way People Grieve As noted above, the SNS has become a blossoming site of exchange, especially for the bereaved. Unlike a funeral or wake, which has a specified temporal and geographic nature, the SNS has become a community for grievers that transcends time and space (Katims, 2010). In this way, the material body is becoming less important because people have access to the dead online (Cann, 2014). Because of this accessibility to the dead via the SNS, the deceased have essentially become virtually immortal through their continued presence online (Cann, 2014). As noted in studies of grieving on Facebook, "online selves can persist long after the person's physical body has gone" (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p. 347). This is especially true of deceased SNS users, since profile pages generally remain intact unless family or friends actively try to change the profile's status.

Additionally, despite the varied ways in which individuals might use the SNS, there are particular online rituals that create a discourse of appropriate conduct, like one might expect for a traditional death ritual. Posting messages on anniversaries and birthdays of the deceased, as well as posting pictures with the deceased when he/she was still alive are common on the SNS and considered acceptable means of expressing grief about a loss (Cann, 2014). Similarly, some believe that "traditional forms of grieving are simply being transformed into methods able to be performed online" (Moore et al., 2017). Thus, perhaps grieving on the SNS is not replacing funerals or wakes, but rather is a means of expressing similar ritualistic bereavement in a different form. For example, as one study of Facebook memorialization concludes, "the traditional eulogy addresses a community of mourners, whereas the digital gravescape allows the community of mourners to deflect their attention from each other to the deceased" (Church, 2013, p. 187). In this way, the bereaved are transforming the traditional funerary act of the eulogy into a means of communicating directly with the virtual presence of the deceased, with

the peripheral comments or acknowledgements of others on the SNS usually present. This alteration of a traditional death ritual emphasizes the potential of the SNS as a site of renewed bereavement action rather than a replacement for funerals, wakes, and other memorial services. In a way, the SNS provides more options than physical death rituals, since it can eliminate "the material restrictions of death by facilitating continued communication between the grieving and the dead" (Church, 2013, p. 188). The confines of grief expression are not limited to physical, living human bodies on the SNS.

Finally, one of the main ways that the SNS has changed the way individuals grieve according to related literature is by increasingly recognizing and connecting marginalized grievers, those who may not be given proper space to grieve in the physical world (Cann, 2014). By transforming traditional death rituals, the SNS actually becomes a space where more people can become involved in bereavement, rather than just the primary family members who are commonly recognized through rituals like obituaries and funerals. In this way, "the Internet [has] democratized the process of grieving" (Cann, 2014, p. 106). Rather than an obituary, which has language and information produced primarily by direct family, the SNS expands the potential for expressions of grief to the disenfranchised – friends, coworkers, ex-spouses, and others. The ability of the Internet to "enable or empower" disenfranchised grievers who cannot mourn traditionally is probably one of its most divergent qualities from those of traditional bereavement acts (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p. 341). Similarly, such disenfranchised grievers can connect with one another, forming a community of individuals who may not be socially recognized outside of the SNS but can relate to one another's experiences. Ultimately, this helps to normalize the experience of disenfranchised loss for the marginalized griever.

Why grieve on the SNS? Studies examining online bereavement have uncovered a multitude of reasons and motivations for grieving on the SNS. One of the main beneficial outcomes of online memorialization of death is the creation of a "communal discourse" as a result of individuals coming together on the SNS to share stories and memories of the deceased (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p. 342). Thus, one of the main motivations for grieving on the SNS is related to its function as a "public meeting place for mourners to share their experiences" (Rossetto et al., 2015, p. 985). The bereaved want to feel as though they are not alone, and the SNS helps to accomplish this (Katims, 2010). Related to this sense of community is the notion of connectedness, either to the deceased or to other grievers (Carroll & Landry, 2010). A study by Moore and colleagues (2017) found that by connecting with those not in one's network, it made "grief a more global process" (p. 8). As with the communal discourse of grief on the SNS, some literature suggests that a sense of community, which is formed by connecting with others who are grieving, encourages the bereaved to feel like other people care (Moore et al., 2017). Thus, even though individuals log on and post on the SNS independently, mourning online still becomes a "group experience" through the support, kind words, and stories of others (Moore et al., 2017, p. 15). The potential for support from others provides one of the reasons the bereaved post or continue to post about their grief on the SNS; there is value in the ability to "create a sense of solidarity with other mourners" (Church, 2013, p. 185). This finding also points to the contradictions in the literature about motivations for grieving on the SNS. Even though some argue that the SNS creates a community of grievers and supporters, others, as mentioned previously, have concluded that the SNS allows the bereaved to ignore one another and communicate directly with the deceased. Thus, the literature on grief and social media use can at

times reflect the conflicting results of their respective researchers, but such contradictory results are included here for their potential relevancy to the present study.

Another motivation that the bereaved have in deciding to grieve on the SNS deals with the desire for a sense of control over not only one's personal emotions but also the information that is shared about the deceased. Using the SNS gives agency to the poster in deciding who they communicate to, when they do it, and what information they share; although, once the information is posted to the SNS, the poster gives up control over it since it becomes part of the public virtual space (Moore et al., 2017). Despite this potential downside, once the information about the deceased is posted, the bereaved individuals can choose if they respond to people and can do it when they are comfortable or ready to address the SNS community (Moore et al., 2017). This control aspect of posting on the SNS is central to giving the grieving a sense of agency and power over their own coping process and their own relationship with the deceased. It is especially necessary for individuals whose primary purpose in posting is "news dissemination" of the death so that it can reach a wide range of people over different geographic areas (Rossetto et al., 2015, p. 979). News dissemination on the SNS helps the poster to avoid uncomfortable offline encounters in which he or she would tell individuals about the death face-to-face (Moore et al., 2017). Consequently, when the goal is to distribute information about the loss, the individual wants to be sure that accurate and pertinent details about the death are shared, allowing the bereaved to control the narrative as much as is possible.

Other motivations for grieving online as found in the Moore and colleagues (2017) study of social media mourning include the need to share information with "family or friends and (sometimes) beginning a dialog," wanting to talk about the "death with others mourning," desiring to engage with a "broader mourning community," and hoping to continue a "connection

to the deceased" (Moore et al., 2017, p. 1). Furthermore, Rossetto and colleagues (2015) found that a memorialization function, or preserving the memories and identity of the deceased online, was common among bereaved SNS users. Ultimately, the reasons why individuals decide to post about their grief online varies from person to person, but there are a specific set of ways in which mourning happens on the SNS.

Thus, according to the literature, the known motivations for which individuals post on social network sites about death are related to a sense of community, of sharing and control, and of memorializing and continuing connection with the deceased. This research attempts to corroborate the motivations found in previous research, as well as identify any additional reasons for which individuals might post online about the death of someone they knew. At the same time, this research hopes to discover the reasons for which non-posters decided *not* to express their grief online when they (1) had a Facebook account, Instagram account, or both, and (2) experienced the loss of a family member at that time. What might deter an individual from posting online about a death he or she has experienced? Are there any motivations that would outweigh such barriers? This study hopes to compare the motivations of posters to the deterrents of non-posters in an effort to better understand why an individual would post on the SNS about death.

Ways Mourning Happens on the SNS As the previous sections suggest, individuals use social network sites to mourn deaths for a variety of reasons, but how exactly does the individual accomplish this? Firstly, the SNS takes on different meanings for each person related to how he or she intends to use the site to manifest grief. One such meaning is narrative, in which the site is used to tell a personal experience with the deceased or with loss in general (Sofka, 1997). Others might use the SNS commemoratively, meaning that they will focus on memorializing the

deceased, perhaps overlapping with a narrative function by posting personal stories about the deceased (Sofka, 1997). However, there is an added ritualization component in a commemorative site, which might include "erecting" an online memorial for the deceased or performing some sort of remembrance ceremony through the Internet (Sofka, 1997). Finally, an expressive site will convey the bereaved's thoughts and emotions related to the death, with the focus more on the effect of the death on the mourner (Sofka, 1997). Thus, an individual may choose to concentrate on one of these three meanings for his or her expression of grief on the SNS, or he or she may decide to incorporate multiple meanings to better cope with the loss.

Beyond the way that the mourner frames how he or she intends to use the SNS, there is also a choice in the type of communication that the bereaved wishes to use. According to Moore and colleagues (2017), there are three types of communication that are common among the bereaved in their expressions on SNSs: one-way communication, two-way communication, and immortality communication. As suggested by its name, one-way communication deals with "broadcasting" that someone has died without planning to engage in conversation about it (Moore et al., 2017, p. 11). With this form of communication, there are the advantages of efficiency in spreading the message to many people at once and control over what is being said about the deceased (Moore et al., 2017). This might be a type of communication that mourners use soon after the death when they do not want to talk about it just yet, but they still feel the need to let others know what has happened. On the contrary, two-way communication has an aspect of "dialogue" that facilitates "sharing and support" (Moore et al., 2017, p. 14). It involves conversing online with others who are mourning the same death, or even communicating with the "global community" of mourners who aren't necessarily grieving the same loss but can still offer support (Moore et al., 2017, p. 17). Finally, immortality communication suggests some type

of contact with the deceased online through a continued digital relationship, despite the deceased not being able to respond (Moore et al., 2017). This type of communication has changed the way that death is viewed with the implication that the deceased are still "alive" somehow online (Moore et al., 2017). In some ways, "the digital medium offers an illusion of two-way communication" with the deceased because of a belief in his or her continued online presence (Church, 2013, p. 187). Thus, an individual may utilize one or more of these forms of communication in his or her expression of grief online, depending perhaps on the particular motivations or intentions of the poster.

Downsides to Grieving on the SNS Despite the advantages to and motivations for using the SNS as an outlet for grief, there are negative consequences, often unforeseen or the result of SNS capabilities. One such disadvantage, which counters the literature that praises the agency and control provided by the SNS for some users, is that each bereaved individual is not able to completely control the flow of information about the deceased (Moore et al., 2017). Despite efforts to control the narrative, it is impossible for an individual bereaved person to manage all of the information about the deceased that emerges on the SNS. On the one hand, this becomes a privacy issue for the deceased, since he or she is not able to protect against details of his or her life going public (Moore et al., 2017). At the same time, there is also a chance for misinformation or false statements about the deceased to circulate on the SNS, and it can be difficult to find and refute such information. Similarly, not only is it impossible to completely manage all of the details that emerge about the deceased, but the bereaved also cannot control who is allowed to mourn online (Moore et al., 2017). This becomes a question of who has the "right to remember," and suggests that all posters need to have known the deceased in a specific capacity in order to post about him or her (Moore et al., 2017, p. 16). Beyond this, there can even

be competition among those who were equally close to the deceased regarding "who loved the deceased more" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, Research question 2 section, para. 6). In this way, the act of posting becomes less about the deceased and more about the identity of the poster, as he or she tries to portray a certain level of grief on the SNS.

Furthermore, although the Internet can help to equalize the grieving potential of those who are not in the deceased's immediate family, it does not necessarily democratize the cause or method of death. Essentially, another negative component of grief on social media is the "marginalization of lesser deaths," meaning that if someone does not experience a "socially acceptable means of death," he or she is not likely to be mourned online (Moore et al., 2017, p. 18). Thus, not only does the identity of the bereaved play a role in the effectiveness and advantageousness of using the SNS to grieve, but the circumstances surrounding the death also contribute to the way the deceased is remembered, or not, online. For example, it is possible for someone who died of cancer or in an accident to be mourned online, but what if the person who died of cancer was a smoker and had lung cancer, or what if the accident was caused by the deceased drinking alcohol? These elements of the death may play a role in who is appropriately mourned online, thus marginalizing certain individuals who are not even alive.

Another potential downside to using the SNS to grieve relates to the Continuing Bond Theory mentioned in the section on models of grief. The Continuing Bond Theory, as suggested by its name, encourages the bereaved to maintain a relationship with the deceased despite his or her lack of physical presence in the world. The most glaring negative effect of this is "unintentionally prolonged grief" for the bereaved (Moore et al., 2017, p. 21). Because of continued communication with the deceased, generally through immortality communication on the SNS, the individual may hold "on to grief for longer than [is] necessary" (Moore et al., 2017,

p. 21). Rossetto and colleagues (2015) also found this to be true and concluded that these continued bonds "prolonged the emotional intensity of the loss and made it more difficult to move on" (p. 984). However, they did counter that "continued bonds with the deceased are only adaptive if the bereaved individual recognizes that bonds are internal not actual…and different from when the deceased was alive" (Rossetto et al., 2015, p. 976). This, however, is easier said than done, as the SNS provides a sense of reality through images and dated posts that the user can "relive" with the click of a button.

Finally, another maladaptive reaction to continuing bonds with the deceased involves confusion between a reality in which the deceased is gone and an online realm in which the dead still exist. This "confusion between the deceased person's death and the deceased person's continued presence" can curb progress that has been made in the grieving process (Rossetto et al., 2015, p. 983). Ultimately, the implication of the Continuing Bond Theory is that it could lead to denial and avoidance of the loss (Rossetto et al., 2015). Although there may be no one way to properly grieve, denying that the loss ever occurred does not allow the bereaved to cope at all since it rejects reality.

Therefore, another critical look at how using social media to mourn affects the grieving process is needed to understand whether such disadvantages deter grieving on the SNS or if such negative consequences do not outweigh the potential supportive benefits.

II. Methods

This research includes both a survey and an interview portion, intended to answer the following research questions:

1. Who uses social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, as an outlet for public mourning of a loss?

2. What motivations are there for using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, to share experiences of loss and mourning?

3. How does using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, affect the grieving process?

The survey portion focuses mainly on questions 1 and 2, while the interviews expand on question 2 and also address question 3.

Survey Methodology

The survey portion of my research was developed through a desire to understand the "who" and "what" of social media grieving by reaching out directly to social media users themselves. An online survey through Qualtrics was developed for two main reasons: first, it is the survey program offered for free through my undergraduate institution, and second, it would allow me to reach a broad audience through online sharing of the survey. Another added benefit of using Qualtrics is that it allows the user to filter successive questions based on a respondent's previous answers. Looking at both social media grievers and non-social media grievers, this functionality was useful in creating essentially two surveys based on answers to a specific question in the second part of the survey: "Have you ever used Facebook and/or Instagram to actively post about the death of a family member?"

The survey was composed of three sections – demographics, social media use, and the loss (Appendix A). According to Gray and colleagues (2007), it is appropriate to begin a survey with factual and demographic questions in order to develop a rapport between researcher and subject. This relationship between researcher and subject is especially important in research like this in which a sensitive topic, death of a family member, is addressed. Therefore, the purpose of

setting up the questions in this order was to establish a sense of comfort with the respondent, gradually increasing the personal and challenging nature of the questions.

The entire survey began with a consent document warning respondents of the potential for emotional harm in recalling a personal experience of death. A warning note was also included before the section on loss for posters to let the respondent know that questions about the loss itself would be asked in that section and to remind the respondent that he or she is allowed to skip any questions. While my survey questions were designed in a way to limit the personal harm inflicted on the respondent, I recognized the need to include this note because loss in any form is a challenging topic, especially when considering that of a family member. I wanted to ask questions that would elicit valuable information for my research, but not be selfish in asking overly personal and intrusive questions merely for the sake of sociological inquiry.

The first section, demography, dealt with personal traits, identities, and characteristics of the respondent. I asked for the respondent's age, race, and gender. I then included a series of questions to determine a respondent's self-reported levels of introversion and extraversion, according to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is a valid measure of personality type across "the four dichotomous dimensions" (Extraversion or Introversion, Sensing or Intuition, Thinking or Feeling, and Judging or Perceiving) according to item validity studies (Carlson, 1985; "The Myers & Briggs Foundation - Extraversion or Introversion," n.d.; Tzeng, Outcalt, Boyer, Ware, & Landis, 1984). Through these types of questions, I hoped to elicit character traits of the individual to then correlate to his or her use of Facebook and/or Instagram as a grieving tool. For example, are extraverted people more likely to post on Facebook and/or Instagram about the loss of a family member than their introverted counterparts? I wanted to be able to

compare these personality and social characteristics with how the respondent used or failed to use social media outlets when he or she experienced a loss.

The second section of the survey transitioned to social media use, specifically information about accounts and posting on Facebook and Instagram. Firstly, I wanted to know which participants have Instagram accounts only, which have Facebook accounts only, and which have accounts on both. Due to the prevalent nature of "fake" accounts (i.e. accounts on which individuals post funny or unfiltered content without worry of judgment because only close friends follow or have access to the account), I also asked how many accounts the individual has on each social media site and what kinds of accounts these are according to the respondent. From here, in order to transition into the portion of the survey about the loss itself, I included a brief explanation of what "actively posting" means, since I wanted individual responses from both those who had and those who had not actively posted on Facebook and/or Instagram about the loss of a family member. For my research, I was interested in expressions of grief as posted online that were directly connected and personal to the individual respondent and felt that actively posting about a loss most accurately represents that in these online forums.

From here, the survey split into two separate sections depending on the respondent's answer for the question about actively posting. If the person had used Facebook and/or Instagram to actively post about the loss of a family member, this respondent was brought to a new section of the survey dealing specifically with the loss that was posted about, the relationship of the respondent to the deceased, and the logistics of the social media post itself. For those who had not actively posted about a loss via Facebook and/or Instagram, the survey went on to ask them about why they chose not to do this, if they had ever thought about posting something of this nature, and if they have used social media in the past to grieve a different kind of loss.

For those who did not actively post, the survey ended with the last question meant for data gathering. For those who had actively posted about a loss, the survey ended with a voluntary submission of an email or telephone number and name for someone interested in being interviewed about the topic further. The hope was that through the survey, people would come to understand the research better and be able to gauge if an interview about the death of a family member would be something they could handle emotionally. To keep survey responses de-identified, within 72 hours of the completion of the survey, email addresses or other identifying information of respondents willing to participate in an interview were replaced with numerical indicators. The numerical indicator with the identifying information associated with it were stored in a separate file on my computer.

While surveys can be flawed in that they rely on the assumption that self-reports are accurate and complete, they also have many advantages. Because of the online nature of my own survey, the range of data and sample reached became more extensive than had I used a paper survey (Gray, Williamson, Karp, & Dalphin, 2007). The sample was also more likely to include those who grieve online due to the survey being sent out via SNSs and email. Additionally, the flexibility and adaptability of the survey method are what allowed me to formulate an online version that was tailored to a respondent's answers (Gray et al., 2007). Finally, using a survey allowed me the time and capacity to also perform interviews in order to improve the efficacy of my research (Gray et al., 2007).

Interview Methodology

The interviews were a qualitative endeavor to obtain more information from the respondent about the loss itself, the online post about the loss, and the results or consequences of posting (Appendix B). I was hoping to gauge how the individual's grieving process was affected

by posting about the death online for friends, family, and others to see. For this reason, I began the interviews focusing mostly on the loss itself and for the respondent to reiterate or add to what was said in his or her survey. My hope was that reviewing this information that was already stated in the survey would help to not only ground the interview in the specific loss but also develop a relationship between myself and those I interviewed so that they would feel comfortable talking about their grieving process with me (Gray et al., 2007). Then, I moved into questions about reactions to the post that was made – what the hopes were in posting, whether those hopes were met or not, and what the actual reaction was. In generating these questions, I thought that the comparison between expectation and reality would be an effective way of understanding how posting affected the grieving process before outright asking what the grieving process was like for the individual so that if they were unable to articulate such a response, I would be able to use this comparison to perhaps understand the post's effect on the grief of the respondent. I decided to finish the interview with a question about what other types of social media grieving or coping the person has used in the mourning process to understand on a more macro level how technology in general is influencing the traditional ways people mourn loss.

The main reason for only recruiting social media grievers for the interviews was because the interviews were established to answer research question three: "How does using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, affect the grieving process?" This is most effectively and adequately addressed through the testimony of those who have used social media to mourn a loss. Therefore, these were the only survey respondents recruited to participate in an interview.

Interviews were conducted via phone, videochat, and in-person, and the conversations were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The range of methods used to perform

interviews was based solely on convenience and comfort-level of the respondent. Respondents agreed to be recorded and to general participation in the study by signing an informed consent document and giving a copy back to me. Interviews lasted for a maximum of thirty minutes each.

As a research method, interviewing is limited in its generalizability and reliability (Gray et al., 2007). Interviews are done with a specific person at a specific time in his or her life. Because of this, generalizing the results of my interviews to all of those who have posted online about the loss of a family member would be a misrepresentation of reality. Additionally, because I interviewed these respondents only once and during different times in their grieving experiences, the reliability, or consistency over time, of these responses could be subject to scrutiny. However, the interview technique is greatly strengthened by its validity and the richness of its data (Gray et al., 2007). By asking respondents specifically about their experiences, I was able to address my third research question effectively without worrying that I was measuring something irrelevant. Furthermore, allowing respondents the choice and time to expand on their survey answers and describe their experiences created a depth in responses that would have been difficult to achieve using another method.

Sampling

My sample for this research was restricted (1) to those 18 years of age or older due to informed consent procedures, and (2) to those who have experienced the loss of a family member six or more months ago, as is recommended for psychological and emotional well-being by Beck and Konnert (2007) in their study of ethical issues and the opinions of bereaved adults (p. 789). To obtain survey respondents, online forums were used, including Facebook (my personal page and school group pages) and email (Appendix C). This online snowball sampling method was used because I felt it would be the best way to reach SNS users at the source and also because of

the online nature of the survey itself. The hope was that individuals would share and spread the survey, especially if they knew someone who they thought should take it. As mentioned previously, interviewees were obtained at the respondent's voluntary submission of an email or other contact information at the end of the survey. Again, the interview portion was only open to those who had actively posted about the loss of a family member via Facebook and/or Instagram.

III. Results

a. Who uses social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, as an outlet for public mourning of a loss?

The initial demographic and personality questions asked of survey respondents helped to understand who uses the SNS as a grieving outlet. Independent samples t-tests were performed to understand whether obtained values were statistically significant and how the sample was distributed among posters and non-posters along the various demographic dimensions. (See Table 1 for the complete statistical analysis comparing posters and non-posters). The youngest respondents, ages 18 to 24, were more likely to not post about the loss of a family member than they were to actively post. Additionally, among 35 to 44-year-olds, individuals were statistically more likely to post than to not post. Within the sample of survey respondents, 12.6 percent identified as non-white. Among them, there were no African or African American-identified respondents who actively posted on social media about the loss of a family member.

Interestingly, 88.5 percent of survey respondents identified as female, and they were statistically more likely to actively post than to not post about the loss of a family member. Of all respondents, individuals were more likely to have both Facebook and Instagram accounts rather than just one or the other. In terms of number of Friends or Followers on Facebook or Instagram, individuals with 300 or fewer Followers on Instagram were statistically more likely to

post about the loss of a family member, while those with 501 to 700 Followers were statistically less likely to post. On Facebook, the number of Friends an individual has does not relate statistically to whether or not that person will post about the loss of a family member.

With regard to type of account, many respondents had a combination of accounts rather than just one. Thus, groups of accounts with a specific type and others (for example, any combination of Fake account) were established to understand their significance. Individuals who had a professional account on Instagram were less likely to post than they were to actively post about the loss of a family member. Contrastingly, those who had a public account on Instagram were statistically more likely to actively post about the loss of a family member. Although less statistically significant, the types of accounts on Facebook also proved to be related to willingness to post, as both those with fake accounts and those with public accounts were more likely to not post about the loss of a family member than they were to actively post.

After comparing posters versus non-posters across various dimensions, I analyzed social media use among active posters. (See Table 2 for these results and Table 3 for similar data for non-posters). Most, 77.8 percent, of survey respondents who did actively post about the loss of a family member only allowed Friends or Followers to see this post, in comparison to 20.4 percent of active posters who made their posts public for all to see. Additionally, for those who actively posted about the death of a family member, their own appraisal of the loss and relationship to the deceased was investigated to add to an understanding of who posts about such an experience on the SNS. The majority of respondents, 96.3 percent, were moderately close to closest with the family member who passed away. Along the expected to unexpected dimension, 51.9 percent of respondents said the death was mostly sudden and unexpected, and 48.2 percent of respondents viewed the death as mainly expected to have happened when it did. Furthermore, 66.7 percent of

respondents who posted about a loss also said that it was very traumatic or the most traumatic loss they had experienced. Related to the post, 90.7 percent of respondents posted five or fewer separate times, with only 9.3 percent of respondents having posted six or more separate times about the same family member. Finally, 59.6 percent of respondents answered "maybe" to the question of whether or not they would post about the loss of a family member in the future, while only 28.8 percent responded that they definitely would.

Coding of open-ended questions for posters was completed to understand the central elements of the loss, such as who passed away and when the respondent posted about the loss on the SNS. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for a distribution of when the individual posted and who he or she posted about on the SNS). Analyzing the relationship of the family member who passed away, the most respondents (17) posted about a mother or father, with grandparents also likely to be posted about. Some respondents posted about the loss of more than one family member, while others have only posted about one loss. Furthermore, 48 of these respondents, for both Facebook and Instagram, actively posted within a week after the death, which includes anywhere from one week after the death to within the hour after the family member passed away.

Finally, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed to see if certain qualities among the various demographic or personality dimensions, like gender, race, or level of extraversion, increase the likelihood of actively posting or not. (See Table 4 for a summary of the dimensions analyzed and their statistical outcomes). Between the youngest age group and all others, a regression analysis proved that younger people have 65% lower odds of posting about the loss of a family member than older people do. The odds of non-Whites posting or not posting in comparison to Whites was not statistically significant. A similar non-relationship was found between gender and likelihood of posting or not posting. Finally, a respondent's level of

extraversion did not increase or decrease the likelihood of posting about the loss of a family member on the SNS to any significant degree.

b. What motivations are there for using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, to share experiences of loss and mourning?

The survey allowed respondents who actively posted about the loss of a family member to choose from a set list of motivations for why they posted, with the option of adding additional motivations if necessary. Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents' choices, with individuals able to choose more than one motivation if multiple applied to them. Based on these responses, the majority of respondents posted to memorialize the death or to share memories of the family member, with 75 total selections of these motivations in the survey. Other highly-selected motivations included letting friends know and personal grieving purposes, with 57 total selections.

In contrast, non-posters responded in an open-ended format about why they decided not to post about the death of a family member (with the stipulation that they had a Facebook or Instagram account at the same time that they experienced the death of a family member). Responses were collected and coded for common themes, which were determined to be: personal/individual motivations; motivations related to others; motivations related to the deceased family member; and general inappropriateness of posting about death online (See Figure 4 for a distribution of respondent motivations for not posting among these four themes). Coding the individual responses indicated that the majority of respondents chose not to post for personal reasons as compared to the other three motivations. Personal or individual reasons included negative experiences in the past with the SNS and grief or personal beliefs that the experience of death is too private to share online. For example, one respondent wrote about grief

posting online, "I did not think it was necessary or helpful for my own grief." This respondent suggests personal opinions for why posting on social media about loss is not something he or she would do, specifically as it relates to helping the individual in his or her grieving process.

Another highly cited motivation, mentioned by 13 of the non-posting respondents, for not grieving on the SNS was how it would affect others or how Friends and Followers would react. This was especially true of individuals who thought that posting on social media about death would make them seem like attention-seekers and thus stigmatize them. To illustrate, one respondent, when asked why he or she did not post about the loss of a family member online, explained, "I felt like it would look like I was attention seeking by posting something a lot of people go through." The label of "attention-seeker" was one that many respondents sought to avoid by not posting about death online. Similarly, other respondents worried about how recipients of the information might feel, as death is a sad topic to post online. This is reflected in the response of one respondent who wrote, "I smile a lot and make people laugh, so I felt like a sadder post wasn't what I wanted people to see from me." This respondent had the reactions and responses of others in mind when choosing not to post about the loss of a family member online, especially because it would also contradict his or her identity as fun and happy. Posts related to death were seen by some respondents as too sad for other people in their online network.

c. How does using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, affect the grieving process?

Five survey respondents who had actively posted about the loss of a family member agreed to participate in interviews to further discuss the topic. These interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 34 years old. They were all female, with one identifying as Asian (Respondent 1) and the remaining four identifying as White (See Table 5 for more information about the

interviewees). Interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and then transcribed to code for common themes among responses, especially related to how posting affected the individual's grieving process. These themes included the positive elements of news dissemination, support systems, and identifying as bereaved, and the negative element of reactions or judgment from others.

News Dissemination A common theme among interviews was how the function of the SNS for news dissemination about the loss helped in the grieving process, especially in notifying others and feeling like one was doing something recipients of the information would appreciate. Being actively involved online paralleled a sense of being in control over one's grief related to the loss. In her interview, Respondent 2 mentioned how the news dissemination function helped in mourning the death of her uncle, especially in the ways that it allowed disenfranchised grievers to cope with the loss. When asked about how posting about the death online affected her, she also mentioned how it helped others:

> "I think it was a **nice opportunity for the other family members to mourn him**
> because they didn't get to have…a wake and funeral and that kind of stuff, it was
> much more intimate. So, it was nice for his cousins and his aunts and his uncles
> and those kind of family members to get to talk about him and have memories of
> him."

In this way, posting about the loss allowed the poster to feel good about the fact that these commonly disenfranchised grievers, those who were not allowed to mourn at the traditional wake and funeral, were able to express their grief with her.

Similarly, Respondent 3, who lost her dad when she was in high school, mentions the main motivation of needing to tell people what had happened as also affecting her grieving process. When asked why she posted online, she said:

> "**I wanted to let people know**. Everyone knew my dad really well, all of my friends loved him, he was the 'cool dad.' He had a lot of friends within my town too…so I wanted to be able to let people know as much as I could because I thought he deserved that."

In coming to terms with the loss, it was important to her to let others know what had happened in her life, especially so that others could grieve the loss with her.

In this way, the news dissemination motivation for using the SNS affected the grieving process of the individuals involved, since it not only created a sense of purpose for the poster, but it also gave the poster a group of individuals with which to share grief, connecting to the second theme of support systems.

Support Systems The idea of having a support system online was a significant benefit for many of the respondents as they coped with the loss of a loved one. Connected with the news dissemination function, it allowed all to have the information necessary to see what had happened and to form a community of grievers and supporters, specifically around the individual poster. For example, Respondent 2 claimed, "I think that [posting about the loss] helped in the sense of it was nice to know that everyone else cared. It was nice to know that there was that **support system** there in case I needed it." Hence, she sees the creation of a support system of people who care and are worried about her as a positive effect of using the SNS on the grieving process.

Similarly, Respondent 3 also sensed a support network through the SNS, stating, "It definitely was nice to get the support from my friends, it felt good that I had a **support system** in place." In this way, respondents felt that having a network of Friends and Followers who were reaching out and sending messages through the SNS positively affected the grieving process and made it a little easier to cope with the loss. Social connection, even if online, was important for these respondents.

Identifying as Bereaved Another motivation for posting about loss on the SNS, personal grieving, was also mentioned as a positive element of grieving on the SNS as it related to letting other people know about one's coping process. For some respondents, posting on the SNS about the loss as an outlet for personal grief also helped in that process since it allowed the poster to identify as a bereaved individual. Such an identity played a role in the real world for some, especially those who had to face friends and acquaintances but did not want to talk about the loss with them. Respondent 1, who was involved in the incident that took the life of her close friend, explained how posting on the SNS was crucial in this regard:

> "[Posting on Instagram] was definitely **more personal** because I didn't really talk about it, I wasn't necessarily trying to say anything but I think I was just trying to **send a message that something just huge had happened in my life** and not only was I grieving and going through a hard time, but there was also trauma involved and it was something I was a part of, so it was a life shaking event and I think doing [the posts] were kind of a subtle way to signal that something had happened."

She used the SNS as a way to show that something had happened in her life, even though it was not something she necessarily wanted to talk about outside of the online realm. This helped her to grieve in her own time while also letting others know of her bereaved identity.

In a similar vein, Respondent 4 mentioned a two-fold effect of posting about the loss on social media, which in turn helped her to grieve. On the one hand, she explained, "[Posting on social media] was more so that **when I went to school the next day I didn't get a bunch of questions about it**." Additionally, she stated later on in the interview, "Posting on social media is also a **way for my friends and family to see how I'm doing over time** and how that healing process goes." In this way, the utilization of the SNS for posting about the loss sent a message to others: for friends and classmates, she was sharing her status as bereaved, and for her close friends and family, she was showing and still continues to demonstrate how she is grieving over time. Thus, the motivation of posting on the SNS for personal grief was also used to facilitate the grieving process in that the poster could identify as bereaved and use that status to avoid talking about the loss when necessary or to explain how one is doing without calling or talking in-person to those who care.

Reactions and Judgment from Others While all of the respondents touted the benefits of using social network sites to post about loss, there were some downsides in the grieving process related to what others might think or did say to the poster. Sometimes this meant the ways in which individuals reacted to posts or updates that the grieving individual used as part of the coping process. For example, Respondent 1 explained a scenario she encountered when she changed her profile picture to one of her and her deceased friend:

"I had a limited selection of pictures and the one I picked was pretty low-quality

and your profile picture will show up when you're messaging somebody…it just

shows the tiny little circle, and it's just a weird snippet of a photograph that you

can't really tell what it is unless you open it. So, I feel like just a couple of

times…somebody I did know or a new friend on Facebook would be like, 'What

the fuck is your profile picture?'…**It would be kind of awkward and I wouldn't**

really feel good about it."

Rather than the picture being something she could post online as a sign of her grief, this

respondent encountered questioning and unwanted attention for her method of expressing her

bereaved identity online. This hindered her grieving process in that it not only reminded her of

the loss, but almost forced her to explain herself and justify her actions during the grieving

process.

Another way that the reactions of others hurt the grieving process was in the actions of

people who had seen the post as a result of knowing the news. This was especially true for

Respondent 3, who recalled being texted many times after she initially posted when she was not

yet ready to talk about the loss, and then being contacted by those she had not talked to or

interacted with significantly before they learned of her father's death. When asked about how

posting online affected her grieving process, she explained:

"What did sort of bother me was what felt like **false support** from people I didn't

even know, and they seemed like they were doing it as 'Oh, I'm doing it too, I'm

a good person.' It seemed like they were **doing it more for them than for me**."

This respondent offers a predicament of being glad that she has support from friends and family,

but also feeling like some support is insincere and not necessarily wanted. Other respondents

also explained how such attention can become difficult when others are able to move on with

their lives and stop checking in, while the bereaved individual's life is forever changed. Thus, the

reactions and judgments of others played a role in making posting on the SNS somewhat harmful to the grieving process.

IV. Discussion

Within the sample of 104 survey respondents, 58 actively posted about the loss of a family member on Facebook and/or Instagram, while 45 did not (with one missing response). A majority of these respondents, 87.5 percent, was White and similarly, 88.5 percent of the sample was female. A key quantitative finding as a result of the binary logistic regression analysis is that younger people (ages 18-24 years) have 65 percent lower odds of posting than older people do. Among those who did post, motivations for why an individual posted include motives like memorializing the death and sharing memories of the deceased. Additionally, factors related to online mourning that positively affected the grieving process include identifying as bereaved, news dissemination functionality, and having a support system. On the other hand, reactions and judgments from others proved not only to be a strong deterrent for those who did not actively post about the loss of a family member, but also resulted in a negative impact on the poster's grieving process.

Therefore, the results of this study are consistent with the ambiguous findings of other researchers who suggest that the SNS is not an entirely helpful and positive location for the expression of grief, nor is it a completely unhelpful or negative location (Rossetto et al., 2015). Although there were not many demographic or personality factors that predicted likelihood of posting about the loss of a family member, those who did post showed varying outcomes especially in relation to the effect posting had on their grieving processes. This helps support the notion of the SNS as a public location with influences that are highly specific to each individual user.

Interpersonal Versus Personal Focus

When looking specifically at research questions two and three, an interesting dichotomy was found between the foci of respondents who had and had not actively posted. Some posters and non-posters took an interpersonal focus, which tended to center on the reactions and judgments of others or the effect that posting would have on others. When focusing on the interpersonal in this way, social media grieving took on a negative or detrimental meaning. On the other hand, active posters who tended to express their motivations or how social media posting influenced their grieving process in a more personal way viewed the intersection of grief and the SNS in a highly positive and beneficial manner.

Some respondents were able to express both personal and interpersonal experiences that highlight the ambiguity of grief in the online realm. For example, interviewee 3 expressed her own ambivalent feelings about the SNS for grief when she explained how posting helped her to feel like she had a personal support system, but at the same time she felt frustrated with those who seemed to reach out to her for selfish purposes rather than to genuinely give condolences. Therefore, on the one hand she had a positive view of the SNS as it related to her own personal feelings of being supported, but at the same time she saw the disadvantages that arose when interpersonal interactions appeared insincere.

Returning to the literature, Boerner and Wortman (2011) discuss the importance of others on the grieving process and suggest that the best way to support a griever is to allow him or her to vent while showing concern. However, in the online realm, as suggested by interviewee 3, it is difficult to distinguish genuine support from individuals reaching out in order to further bolster their own online identity. Even though the SNS makes it easier for individuals to connect with not only close friends, but also acquaintances and weak ties, this does not mean that those

connections are always beneficial. Thus, in order to eliminate some of the detrimental effects on grievers regarding posting online about death, there needs to be some introspection on the part of the reactor or observer of the post before he or she takes action in response to the grief post. Outside of the SNS realm, one should consider how close one is with the individual who lost a loved one, whether such an individual seems ready to speak about the loss, and what one should do or say in regard to the post, if anything. Such considerations put pressure on the Friends and Followers to be active participants in the grieving process as supporters and comforters, but not beyond the bounds of their in-person relationship with the poster. For example, if the poster and the reactor are close friends in real-life, it is seen as genuine and perhaps necessary to reach out outside of the SNS to show concern. Weak or latent ties should not perform such actions, keeping their responses strictly to the SNS, perhaps acknowledging the post with a like or short comment. Anything further may seem insincere or selfish.

The dichotomous distinction between the personal and the interpersonal on the SNS contributes to the ambiguity that grieving on the SNS elicits. This research suggests that the role of the observer or reactor to grief posts on the SNS is essential to the experience of the online mourner. The SNS as a dynamic space in which the user does not just passively view content, but actively participates in its creation contributes to the need observers may feel to respond to the grief post (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). Before they do this, however, Friends and Followers should reflect on real-life ties with the poster in order to inform their actions and make the best decision with regard to how to respond. At the same time, online grievers should anticipate responses and not be surprised by reactions from weak or latent ties, since death is an experience that warrants a particular response both in the online realm and in the real world.

The SNS as a Distinct Forum

As discussed previously, Moore and colleagues (2017) concluded that "traditional forms of grieving are simply being transformed into methods able to be performed online" (p. 21). However, the results here suggest that this is not the case. Charles Cooley's theory of the looking-glass self is enacted by users on the SNS, which makes grieving online a different experience from traditional mourning rituals. According to Cooley, the three elements of the looking-glass self include: imagining what another person sees in us; imagining how the other person judges that perception; and the feeling that this imagined judgment elicits in us, along with any related actions taken as a result (Scheff, 2006). Essentially, imagining how others perceive the self and judge that self influences how the individual reacts or adjusts to that imagined judgment. On the SNS, there is more time and greater freedom to craft an identity based on how others will perceive it since one can sit behind a computer screen, edit photographs, craft content, and perform other actions before releasing them for all on the SNS to see. On the other hand, in-person interactions are more spontaneous and instantaneous, leading to limitations on an individual's ability to enact a certain self that has been carefully developed and altered, as is possible on the SNS. Additionally, online interactions, although they could be between two individual profiles, are publicized on the SNS for all in the network to see. Even in private messaging applications online, it is important to remember that someone or some company controls that program, thereby making even private online encounters more public than users realize. On the other hand, interactions in real life are better able to be kept private, since there need not be any mediators or go-betweens in such interactions.

The implications for this with regard to grieving on the SNS concern how posters craft their content related to death and also how observers design their responses to address such news. The

notion of "intersubjectivity," or "living in the minds of others" plays a role on the SNS (Scheff, 2006, p. 40). Although the poster may claim to have posted not for the sake of others but for some personal purpose, the nature of the SNS profile as public to specified others makes it difficult to imagine not thinking of what one wants to say in advance with the knowledge that it will be seen and read by others. Or, if this is not the case, there is at least the assumption by the poster that people will see and perhaps react to the post, which implies some sort of anticipation of response by the poster in order to bolster the "face" that the poster has claimed by expressing grief online. "Face" is a term used by Erving Goffman in representing the value someone claims "by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 2000, p. 96). For the poster, the "face" taken is that of a bereaved individual, claimed through the "line" of the grief post. Comments and reactions on the SNS to the post help the individual to sustain face, establish better face, or fail to maintain face, which leads to corresponding feelings of content, elation, or disappointment (Goffman, 2000). In this way, the bereaved identity the poster actively takes on through posting about death on the SNS relies on the responses and reactions of others to bolster such an identity. In real-life, this identity need not be achieved by such a highly crafted and thought-out expression.

On the one hand, traditional rituals like funerals or wakes, as well as obituaries that inform the public of the death, also rely on intersubjectivity and reflecting on the self. For grievers, this means wearing black as an indicator grief, crying, or expressing some form of sorrow. For observers, this means reaching out and showing up to the death rituals as a sign of remorse and respect. However, what the SNS has that real-life ritual does not is an unlimited sense of time and space, especially for those not within the family or close group of friends that traditional rituals are meant for. This means greater freedom and more time for disenfranchised grievers and

others to express and react to bereavement online. Unfortunately, this often lends itself to intense identity performance in an effort to portray a certain idealized self online, one who is deeply distraught as a griever or one who is overly supportive as a reactor, all under the watchful surveillance of the online Friend or Follower network. Thus, when Goffman theorized about self-presentation and maintaining "face," he could not have anticipated the level of control and idealization that interactions on the SNS achieve due to their limitless spatial and temporal nature.

Furthermore, Moore and colleagues (2017) discuss the sense of agency and control that the SNS brings to the poster, but there is also a sense of increased awareness and surveillance that comes with posting on the SNS. The SNS is not only about the person who posts, but about those who react, comment, like, and share. This emphasizes the performative nature of the SNS as a result of the expectations of the looking-glass self. The product of intersubjectivity on the SNS is constant alterations and additions to the profile and subsequently the performed online identity. This performance is surveyed and policed by others on the site, as suggested by Foucault (Cover, 2016). The individual profile is at once surrounded and built up by those in one's network, with interaction being a key form of identity formation. In this way, grieving on the SNS becomes a highly publicized and scrutinized act, more so than in real-life. Unlike with calls on the telephone or in-person interactions, avoidance is much more challenging on the SNS once the information about the death is disseminated. Thus, while the individual may perceive themselves as having more agency and control by posting on the SNS, this also comes with an increased sense of surveillance and monitoring by others. Unlike when a loved one's obituary is in the newspaper, there is a higher expectation of awareness and knowledge about the death when it is posted online. This perceived knowledge thereby impacts the poster, who anticipates that others

will react, as well as the observer, who must determine the best way to react, if at all. These actions all contribute to an online identity formation that is more performance than it is spontaneous interaction, like in real-life.

Socialization into the Online: A Product of Age?

When trying to understand who uses social network sites to post about the loss of a family member, a key finding was that those who were most likely to post tended to be older individuals (over 25 years old) who have few Friends and/or Followers. Although the reason for this cannot be exactly deduced from the survey and interview responses, hypotheses can be made but would require further research for verification.

One potential explanation stems from boyd and Ellison's (2007) analysis of the differences between "Friends," those in one's online network, and "friends," those in real-life. One can speculate that perhaps those with fewer Friends in the online realm actually show greater parallels between their online network and their real-life network. Thus, the distinction between "Friends" and "friends" has little value for these individuals. In this way, sharing something in the online realm is not strikingly different from sharing it in-person, although the mode of communication may be different. Perhaps the individual feels more comfortable sharing such personal information due to the fact that the network he or she is communicating with includes a similar or exact match to his or her real-life friends.

Additionally, another possible explanation stems from generational uses of the personal online space. A 2010 study by the Pew Research Center explained how blogging rates since the rise of social media have dropped among youth and young adults but have risen among older adults (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). This makes one wonder whether SNSs, as they have become more popular and mainstream, have been interpreted as parallel to blogs for

older users. They may see the SNS as a blog, inviting their closest friends and family to view it through "Friending" them. This could explain more personal posts, which are comfortably shared among the close friends and community that make up the blogging network (Guberti, 2013). Therefore, perhaps the older generation of SNS users cannot distinguish between social network site and blog, thus distorting the two and leading to more personal posts on the SNS.

Finally, a last potential reason for these individuals being the most likely to post has to do with the fact that the rules of social interaction are learned through socialization. The "Millennial Generation" or "Generation Y" grew up with the computer and were socialized along with it, which would include those 25 years or younger (Bolton et al., 2013). On the other hand, older generations did not have this opportunity and so were socialized into the online sphere at a later age. This may contribute to divergent understandings of how social media should be used and what content is appropriate to post. While this study did not focus on what individual respondents *thought* about posts related to death on social media, this result suggests that such research might be beneficial in understanding why there is increased likelihood of posting about loss among certain age groups. How the individuals grew up and what technology was available to them at that time might have something to do with how they use technology now or how they believe technology should be used.

Ultimately, while the current study does not have sufficient data to come to a conclusion regarding why older individuals with fewer Friends and/or Followers are more likely to post about the loss of a family member, further research could be done to test any of the above hypotheses or to examine social media use among different age groups to better understand this finding.

Limitations

   While this study was effective in understanding who uses social media to grieve a loss and how such utilization influences the grieving process, there are limitations that interfere with the generalizability of these results. First, although the snowball sampling method was convenient at reaching SNS users at the source, the sample was not random and thus may not be representative of the population of Instagram and/or Facebook users who experienced the loss of a family member six or more months ago. This makes generalizing the results to a greater proportion of SNS users challenging. Additionally, the diversity of the sample was limited, especially with regard to gender and race. The majority of survey respondents and all interviewees were female, although this supports the literature that there are more female Facebook users, especially those 18 to 29 years old (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). There were relatively few non-White respondents, which is not supported by studies on the racial demography of social media ("Social Media Fact Sheet," 2018).

   Beyond sample and methodology limitations, there were also limitations due to unanticipated pertinent information that was not asked for in the survey or the interviews. For example, something that was not addressed in this study was how often individuals use their SNS profiles in general and not just for the purpose of posting about the loss of a family member (Rossetto et al., 2015). If someone is overall less likely to post on the SNS, this could impact his or her likelihood of posting about the loss of a family member. Additionally, this study did not ask respondents how many deaths they have experienced, since this might be a significant factor for the finding that older individuals were more likely to post than their younger counterparts – perhaps older SNS users have simply experienced more deaths in their lifetimes. Related to the deaths, it is still unknown whether some characteristic of the loss, like its suddenness or

unexpectedness, influence the likelihood of posting since such questions were not asked of non-posters. However, non-posters' responses to why they did not post about a loss seem to suggest that the characteristics of the death itself were not a major reason for their decision. Similarly, the survey did not ask non-posters how choosing not to post about the loss online affected their grieving processes, if at all, so it is difficult to assess whether posting or not posting provides the best outcomes for bereavement. Finally, the survey did not ask respondents about the make-up of their online Friend and Follower lists, meaning how well they know such individuals and who they allow in their networks (i.e. close friends, family members, friends-of-friends, etc.). This could have been useful in determining how comfortable the individual is on his or her SNS profile and perhaps how much identity performance that individual does online, assuming that those who have similar online and real-life networks do not have to alter their online selves greatly since everyone also knows them in real-life.

Implications

As mentioned earlier in the "Discussion" section, one direction for future research includes trying to understand why older individuals, especially those with fewer Friends or Followers, are more likely to post on social media about loss than their younger counterparts. Perhaps this would mean examining how different age groups use the SNS, but it could also include looking at how the makeup of Friend or Follower lists impacts what an individual posts. Additionally, to continue looking at the experience of non-posters, future research could explore how the grieving experiences of posters and non-posters are the same or different to determine whether the act of posting about death online significantly impacts the grieving process to the extent of creating a unique bereavement experience.

The implications of this research for grievers is that while posting on the SNS about death experiences can have beneficial outcomes, the reactions, judgments, or personal feelings one gets as a result of the post vary based on individual experience. While there is no way to predict how satisfied one will be after posting about loss online, this research suggests that it is up to the SNS users to know themselves enough to make a decision about whether they want to express grief online. Although the results of this study demonstrate that posting about loss online produces ambiguous outcomes for grievers, this does not mean that each individual experience in this regard is also that way. The expression of grief online may be influenced by other factors not examined here.

In addition, the research presented here also provides insight into how observers or reactors to online posts about death should respond to such expressions. Just because an individual is part of the online griever's Friend or Follower network does not mean that individual should respond to the post like a real-life friend would. It is up to the observer to follow the norms of response associated with his or her real-life relation to the poster. Perhaps SNS companies can facilitate this by polling their users about how they would want individuals to reach out if they posted about loss online or what would be most beneficial for them as grievers. The results of the poll could be disseminated as a report on the SNS and provide data categorized based on closeness of the observer to the bereaved. Such information might not only help the Friend or Follower craft an appropriate response, but it might also eliminate some of the detrimental effects for grievers associated with responses from others to their post. Until such online etiquette is more clearly understood and followed, the experiences of the bereaved online may continue to be problematic.

Furthermore, this research supports a more individualized theory of grief, which is perhaps best exemplified in the existing literature in the Stress and Coping Approach. The process of bereavement cannot be universalized, as evidenced by the various opinions and loss experiences of those in this study. Thus, what the Stress and Coping Approach does well in this regard is recognizing that an individual's appraisal of the loss and how significant or traumatic it was will influence his or her bereavement (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). Perhaps what is also suggested through this study is that an individual's acknowledgment of the advantages or disadvantages of posting online about death may influence the grieving process, as evidenced by the first conclusion of this paper that explains how the foci of individuals who do or do not post about loss impacts their views on SNS grief posting as positive or negative. Similarly, the symbolic interaction theory of grief may provide insight into the experience of grieving online in its recognition that other people influence the coping abilities of those in mourning (Rosenblatt, 2003). More could be addressed in that theory to understand whether such an interpersonal influence is beneficial or detrimental, and if this changes based on the circumstance. Finally, this study serves to further dismantle the coping myths addressed by Wortman and Boerner (2011) since it shows that the experience of grief is not universal and cannot be reduced down to key elements. How an individual progresses through grief is not a result of a fixed category of acceptable or anticipated behaviors. If anything, this study confirms that grief, whether online or offline, is complex and not able to be rigidly defined.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Demographic and SNS User Variables.

		Total Sample N = 104	Actively Posted N = 58	Didn't Actively Post N = 45	Test Statistic For Posting Comparisons
		Mean (*SD*) or Proportion	Mean (*SD*) or Proportion	Mean (*SD*) or Proportion	
Demographics					
Age of Respondent					
	18-24	64.4 --	53.4 --	77.8 --	***
	25-34	3.8 --	5.2 --	2.2 --	
	35-44	7.7 --	12.0 --	2.2 --	***
	45-54	11.5 --	13.8 --	8.9 --	
	55 or older	12.5 --	15.5 --	8.9 --	*
Race of Respondent					
	White/Caucasian	87.5 --	89.7 --	84.4 --	
	African/African American	1.0 --	0 --	2.2 --	*
	Hispanic	2.9 --	1.7 --	4.4 --	
	Asian	4.8 --	5.2 --	4.4 --	
	American Indian	1.0 --	1.7 --	0 --	
	Not Listed	2.9 --	1.7 --	4.4 --	
Gender of Respondent	(% female)	88.5 --	93.1 --	84.4 --	**

Accounts on Social Network Sites

Facebook Only	24.0	20.7	28.9	
	--	--	--	
Instagram Only	1.0	1.7	0	
	--	--	--	
Both Facebook and Instagram	75.0	77.6	71.1	
	--	--	--	

75% of sample N has an Instagram Account

Instagram (78/104)

Number of Accounts on Instagram

1 account	63.3	69.6	53.1	
	--	--	--	
2 accounts	24.1	19.6	31.3	
	--	--	--	
3 or more accounts	12.7	10.9	15.6	
	--	--	--	

Kind of Accounts on Instagram

Any combination with Fake account	26.6	23.9	31.3	
	--	--	--	
Any combination with Private account	79.7	76.1	84.4	
	--	--	--	
Any combination with Professional account	6.3	2.2	12.5	***
	--	--	--	
Any combination with Public account	20.3	26.1	12.5	**
	--	--	--	

Number of Followers on Instagram

100 or less	20.3	26.1	12.5	**
	--	--	--	
101-300	17.7	21.7	12.5	*
	--	--	--	
301-500	22.8	21.7	21.9	
	--	--	--	
501-700	11.4	6.5	18.8	**
	--	--	--	
701 or more	27.8	23.9	34.4	
	--	--	--	

99% of sample N has a Facebook Account
Facebook (103/104)
Number of Accounts on Facebook

1 account	95.2	94.7	95.6	
	--	--	--	
2 accounts	4.9	5.3	4.4	
	--	--	--	

Kind of Accounts on Facebook

Any combination with Fake account	1.0	0	2.2	*
	--	--	--	
Any combination with Private account	92.2	89.5	91.5	*
	--	--	--	
Any combination with Professional account	3.9	3.5	4.4	
	--	--	--	
Any combination with Public account	9.7	12.3	6.7	
	--	--	--	

Number of Friends on Facebook

100 or less	8.7	7.0	11.1	
	--	--	--	
101-300	21.4	24.6	17.8	
	--	--	--	
301-500	18.4	17.5	20.0	
	--	--	--	
501-700	10.7	10.5	11.1	
	--	--	--	
701 or more	40.8	40.4	40.0	
	--	--	--	

Notes: Means (and standard deviations) are presented for continuous measures; proportions are shown for categorical measures. Chi-square tests (for categorical measures) and *t*-tests (for continuous measures) were conducted to assess statistically significant differences, where * $p <$ .05, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Characteristics of Posts and Loss for Those Who Actively Posted About the Loss of a Family Member, 2018 (N = 54).

	Proportion
Loss Appraisal	
Closeness	
Closest to family member	31.5 --
Very close to family member	46.3 --
Moderately close to family member	18.5 --
Fairly close to family member	0 --
Not close at all to family member	3.7 --
Suddenness/Unexpectedness of death	
Extremely sudden and unexpected	31.5 --
Fairly sudden and unexpected	13.0 --
Not sudden but also not expected	7.4 --
Fairly expected to have happened when it did	38.9 --
Entirely expected to have happened when it did	9.3 --
Level of trauma	
Most traumatic loss I have experienced	38.9 --
Very traumatic	27.8 --
Moderately traumatic	18.5 --
A little traumatic	13.0 --
Least traumatic loss I have experienced	1.9 --
About the Post	

Number of times posted

Only once	42.6 --
2-5 separate times	48.1 --
6-10 separate times	5.6 --
11-20 separate times	3.7 --

Who could see what was posted

Friends/Followers only	77.8 --
Anyone (the post was public)	20.4 --
Members of a certain group	1.9 --

Would you post in the future?

Definitely yes	28.8 --
Maybe	59.6 --
Definitely not	9.6 --
Other	1.9 --

Table 3. Views of Those Who Did Not Actively Posted About the Loss of a Family Member,

2018 (N = 45)

	Proportion
Thoughts About Posting	
Ever Thought About Actively Posting	
Yes	51.1
	--
No	48.9
	--
Would Ever Actively Post	
Yes	31.1
	--
No	60.0
	--
Other[a]	8.9
	--
Had Instagram or Facebook at same time as experienced loss	
Had Facebook	31.1
	--
Had Instagram	2.2
	--
Did not have Facebook	2.2
	--
Did not have Instagram	0
	--
Had Instagram and Facebook	42.2
	--
Had Facebook but not Instagram	11.1
	--
Did not have Facebook or Instagram	11.1
	--
Posted About Another Loss	
Yes	11.4
	--
No	88.6
	--

Note. [a] Includes: "Probably not, I feel like social media is just a person trying to bring attention

to themselves and death of family is a private, sad thing." | "unsure, maybe to honor a memorial"

| "Depends on the situation" | "Maybe, I'm not sure. It would depend on how close I was with the family member who passed away."

Table 4. Binary Logistic Regression, Odds of Actively Posting on SNS about the Loss of a Family Member versus Not Actively Posting about the Loss of a Family Member (N = 103)

	Odds Ratio (95% C.I.)
Level of extraversion (1 *most introverted* through 5 *most extraverted*)	1.65 (.843-3.25)
Age (0 *ages 25 and older* and 1 *ages 18-24*)	0.35* (0.14-0.86)
Gender (0 *male* and 1 *female*)	2.27 (0.14-0.86)
Race (0 *non-White* and 1 *White*)	1.39 (0.39-4.97)

*$p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Table 5. Interviewee Traits.

Respondent	Age	Race	Gender	Actively Posted On	Method of Interview	Deceased's Relationship
1	18-24	Asian	Female	Instagram	FaceTime	Close friend
2	24-34	White	Female	Instagram & Facebook	Phone Call	Uncle
3	18-24	White	Female	Instagram & Facebook	In-Person	Father
4	18-24	White	Female	Instagram & Facebook	Phone Call	Father
5	18-24	White	Female	Instagram & Facebook	In-Person	Father
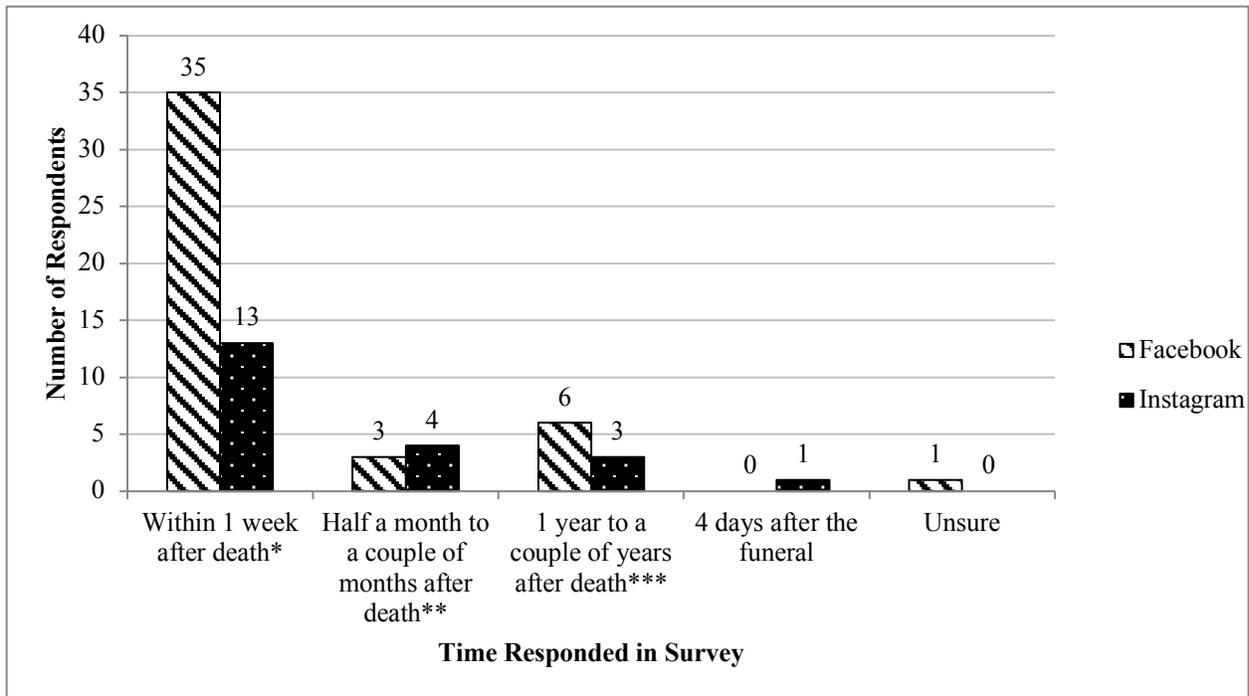
Figure 1. When did the active poster post about the loss on the SNS?

*includes responses of: same day, 1 day, 2 days, 2-3 days, 4 days, a few days to a week, and 1 week

**includes responses of: 3 weeks, half a month, 1 month, 6 months, and a couple months

****includes responses of: 1 year, a couple of years, and 10 years*
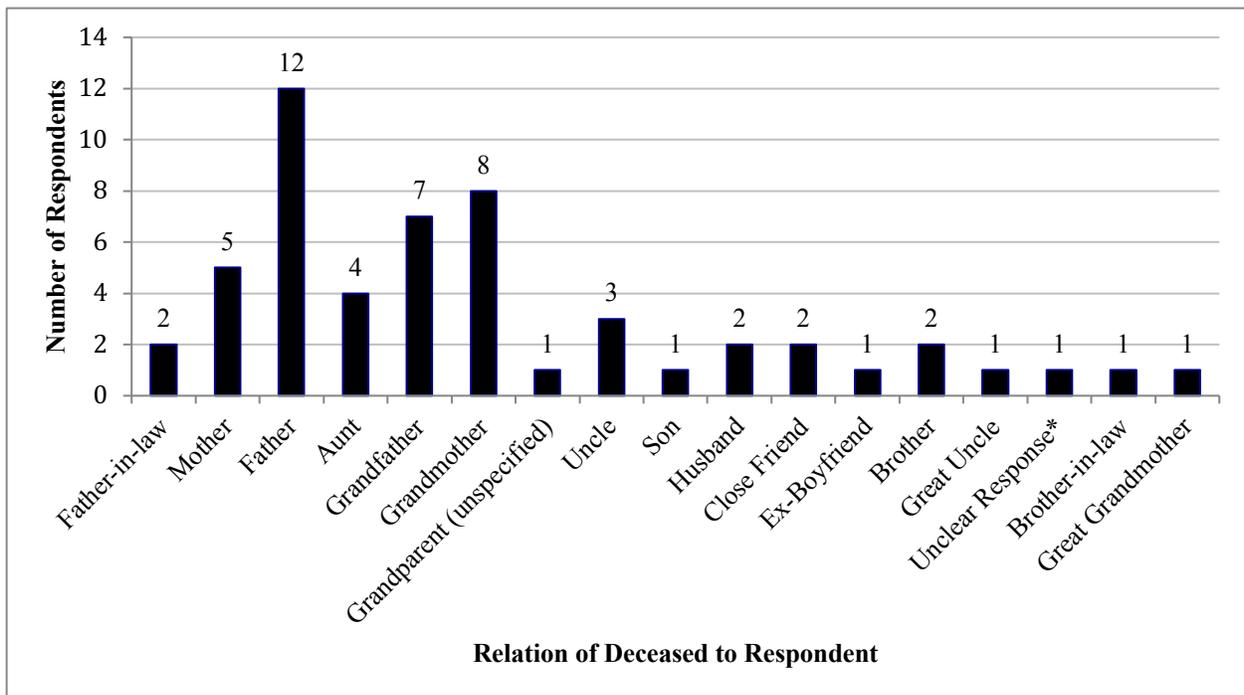
Figure 2. How was the deceased related to the active poster?

*The unclear response was "2"
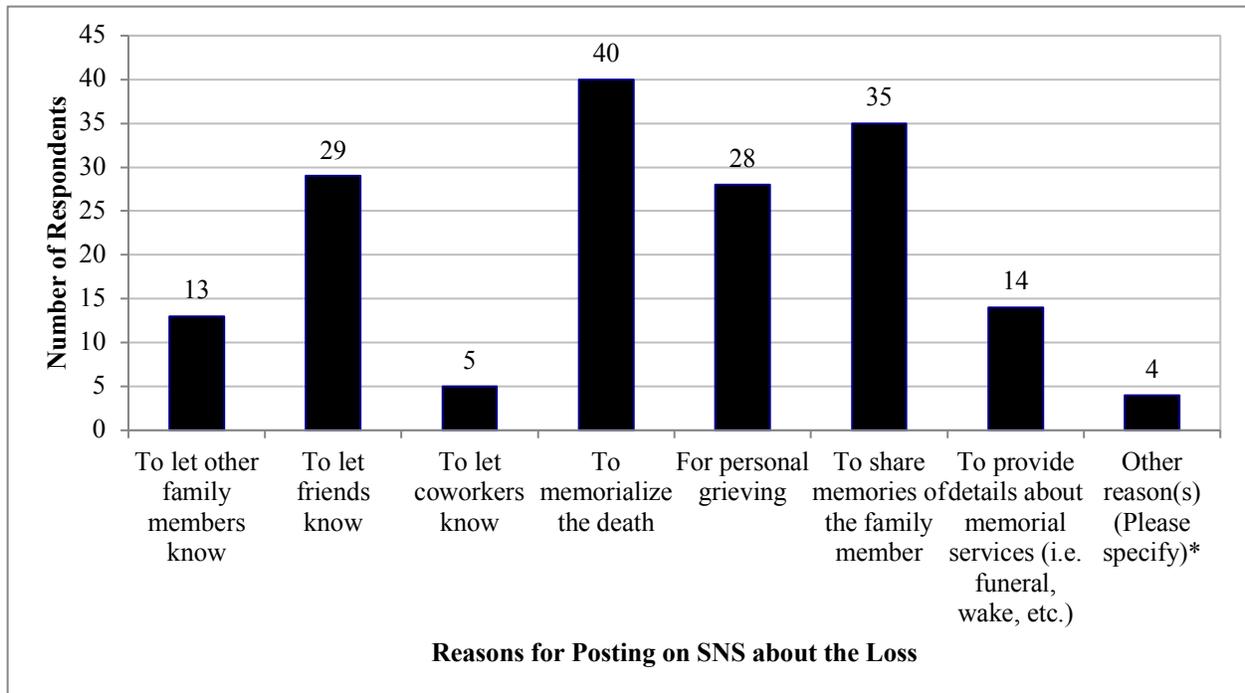
Figure 3. Active poster motivations for posting about the death on the SNS (Select all that apply).

*Other Reason(s) include: "To see which friends I could rely on, and to write a proper memorializing message" | "It was part of a post about a fundraiser" | "A form of closure because I was unable to attend any of the services or be with my family members" | "Celebrate his birthday"
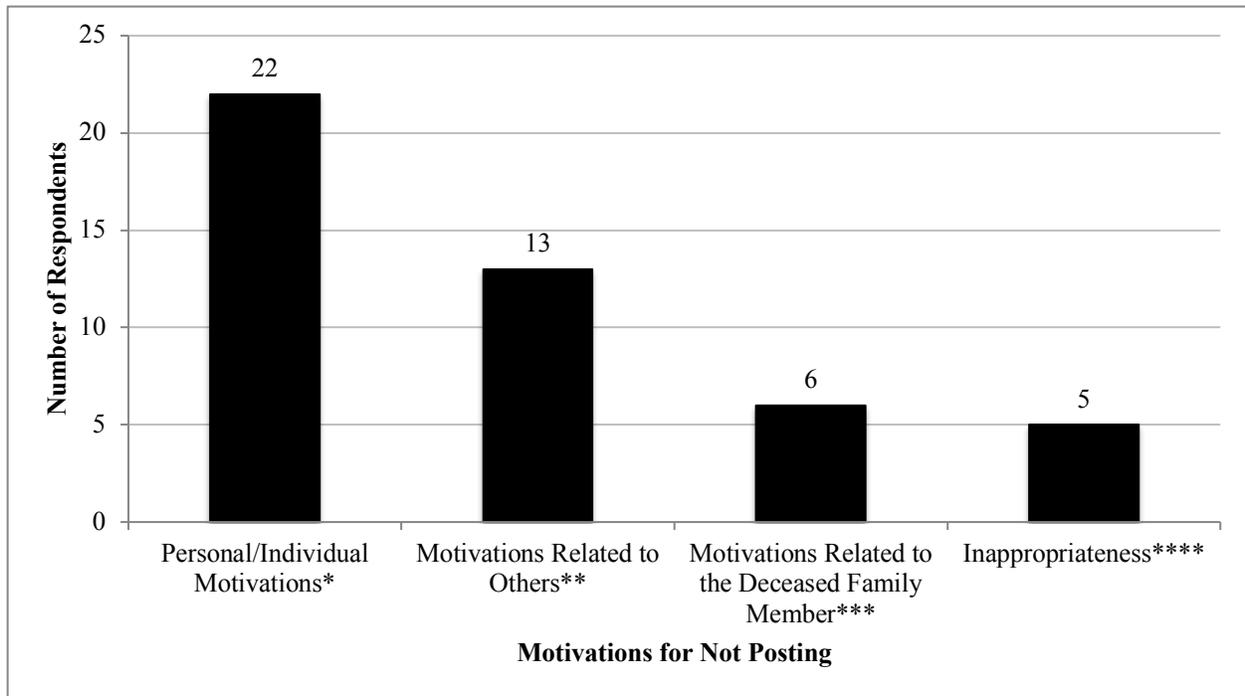
Figure 4. Why non-posters decided not to post on the SNS about the death they experienced.

*Examples: "It never occurred to me. I grieved with my family and that was sufficient enough. I don't like sharing my sadness if I don't have to" | "I would never because I had a bad experience. I leanred [sic] of the death of my grandmother through social media becuase [sic] one of my cousins instnalty [sic] posted, before my mother had a chance to tell me and my siblings."

**Examples: "Too sad for other people" | "Didn't want to be an attention seeker"

***Examples: "the deceased can't read the narrative there for them" | "The family member was not one whom I was close with."

****Examples: "It's odd to me that you would post something so traumatic and personal the same place others are posting about the loss of a pet, joyful news or politics." | "I wanted people to know that my grandpa had died but thought that social media was an inappropriate way to spread this information"

Appendix A

Survey Questions

Part I – Demography/Personality

1. How old are you?
18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55 or older

2. What is your race?
White/Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Not listed (specify)

3. What is your gender?
Male, Female, MTF, FTM, Gender Non-conforming, Not listed (specify)

Please state to what extent you agree or disagree with the following questions.

4. I feel comfortable being alone and like things I can do on my own
Choices: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

5. I am seen as a "people person"
Choices: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

6. I feel comfortable in groups and like working in them
Choices: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

7. I am seen as "reflective" or "reserved"
Choices: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

8. I have a wide range of friends and know many people.
Choices: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

9. I prefer to know just a few people well
Choices: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

Part II – Social Media Use

1. On which of the following social media forums do you have an account?
Choices: Facebook, Instagram

*Questions 1a-1c displayed only to those who answered that they have an Instagram account on #1:
1a. How many accounts do you have on Instagram?
Choices: 1, 2, 3 or more

1b. What kind of account(s) do you have on Instagram?
Choices: Fake account (i.e. "Finstagram"), private account (Followers only), professional account, public account (anyone has access to what you post)

1c. Approximately how many Followers do you have on Instagram?
Choices: 100 or less, 101-300, 301-500, 501-700, 701 or more

Questions 1d-1f displayed only to those who answered that they have a Facebook account on #1:
1d. How many accounts do you have on Facebook?
Choices: 1, 2, 3 or more

1e. What kind of account(s) do you have on Facebook?
Choices: Fake account, private account (Followers only), professional account, public account (anyone has access to what you post)

1f. Approximately how many Friends do you have on Facebook?
Choices: 100 or less, 101-300, 301-500, 501-700, 701 or more

For this section, the following definition of "actively posting" is used:
"Actively posting" mean deliberately and intentionally using one's own social media account to post a status update, post a picture, or write something that is then available to Friends, Followers, or the public to view or read. It DOES NOT INCLUDE sharing someone else's post, "liking" or "favoriting" someone else's post, or commenting on someone else's post.

2. Have you ever used Facebook and/or Instagram to ACTIVELY POST about the death of a family member? (Please choose all that apply)
Choices: Yes, I actively posted on Facebook; Yes, I actively posted on Instagram; No, I have never actively posted about the death of a family member

3. From which account did you post about the death? (Please select all that apply)
Choices: "Fake" account, Private account, Professional account, Public account

Part III (a) – The Loss (Yes for Part II Question 5)

This section will ask about the death that you experienced. Remember that you may skip any question. For individuals who have posted about multiple family members' deaths, I ask that you focus on one in particular.

1. How was the deceased family member you posted about related to you?
Open answer

2. How close would you say you were to this family member?
Scaled answer choice: I was closest to this family member, I was very close to this family member, This family member and I were moderately close, This family member and I were fairly close, I was not close at all to this family member

3. Was the death sudden (i.e. happened quickly and unexpectedly) or expected (i.e. it was known the person would die soon)?
Scaled answer choice: The death was extremely sudden and unexpected, The death was fairly sudden and unexpected, The death was not sudden but also not expected, The death was fairly expected to have happened when it did, The death was entirely expected to have happen when it did

4. If you can, please indicate how traumatic this loss was to you personally:
Scaled answer choice: The most traumatic loss I have experienced, Very traumatic, Moderately traumatic, A little traumatic, The least traumatic loss I have experienced

5. How often do you or did you post about this loss
Choices: Only once, 2 to 5 separate times, 6 to 10 separate times, 11 to 20 separate times, 21 or more separate times

6. Who could see what you posted?
Choices: Friends Only, Anyone (the post was public), Members of a certain group (Please specify), other (Please specify)

7. Approximately how long after the death occurred did you post about it on social media? (Please specify for both Facebook and Instagram if you posted on both)
Open answer

8. Why did you post on social media about this death? (Please select all that apply)
To let other family members know, To let friends know, To let coworkers know, To memorialize the death, For personal grieving, To share memories of the family member, To provide details about memorial services (i.e. funeral, wake, etc.), Other reason(s) (Please Specify)

9. If a family member dies in the future, do you think you will post about it?
Choices: Definitely Yes, Maybe, Definitely Not, Other (please specify)

10. Would you be interested in participating in a 30 minute interview about this topic? If yes, please leave your NAME and EMAIL ADDRESS (or other contact information) for me to contact you.
If no, please skip this page to reach the end of the survey.
Open answer

Part III (b) – The Loss (No to Part II Question 5)

1. Have you ever thought about using Facebook and/or Instagram to actively post about the loss of a family member?
Choices: Yes, No, Other (specify)

2. Do you think you would ever use Facebook and/or Instagram to actively post about the loss of a family member?

Choices: Yes, No, Other (specify)

3. Have you experienced the loss of a family member at the same time that you had an account on Facebook and/or Instagram? (Please choose all that apply)
Choices: Yes, I had an account on Facebook; Yes, I had an account on Instagram; No, I did not have an account on Facebook; No, I did not have an account on Instagram; Other (Please specify)

*Question 3a displayed only to those who answered "Yes" (in some form) to #3:
3a. Why did you decide not to use social media to actively post about the loss of a family member?
Open answer

5. Have you ever used Facebook and/or Instagram to actively post about another sort of loss?
Choices: Yes (Please specify what kind of loss), No, Other (Please specify)

Appendix B

Interview Questions (Loose Outline)

1. Would you please describe for me the loss you mentioned in your survey responses – how was the family member related to you, what was your relationship to this person like, how long ago did this person die, and any other relevant information?

2. Why did you decide to post on Facebook/Instagram about this death?

3. Did you have any expectations when you posted about the loss online?

4. What was the reaction to your post like – positive/negative, expected/unexpected?

5. How did posting about the loss influence your grieving process/ability to cope with the loss?

6. Have you used social media in any way other than actively posting to grieve the loss of this family member?
   ● For example, sharing/liking/passively using social media in response to this loss, memorializing this family member's social media pages, joining a grief group via Facebook/following a grief group page on Instagram, taking up the social media account(s) of the deceased, etc.

Appendix C

The message sent to obtain survey respondents via Facebook and Instagram was as follows (with the absence of the link to the survey):

> Hello everyone! Please consider taking this survey for my undergraduate thesis! I am investigating how individuals use social media as a grieving tool, specifically to mourn the loss of a family member. If you are interested in taking a survey about this topic, please follow the link below! (note: you must be at least 18 years old and have experienced the loss of a family member 6+ months ago). And please share this post with your Facebook/Instagram friends! Thank you!

The message via email to obtain respondents was as follows (with the absence of the link to the survey):

> Dear X,
>
> I am writing to you because I thought you might be interested in taking this survey for my undergraduate thesis project. I am researching how individuals use social media as a grieving tool, specifically to mourn the death of a family member. If you are at least 18 years old, have experienced the loss of a family member 6+ months ago, and have an account on Facebook and/or Instagram, you are eligible to participate! Please consider following the link below to take my survey and/or forwarding this email to family, friends, or coworkers to help me in this endeavor. Thank you for your time.
>
> Sincerely,
> Juliana

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