

Mourning 2.0: Experiences of Death, Bereavement and Memorialization on Facebook

by

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BA, Thompson Rivers University, 2011

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Sociology

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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The ways in which death, bereavement, and memorialization are expressed and experienced have begun to take on historically unique forms due largely to the widespread permeation of the Internet and social media within Western culture. Mourning and the memorialization of the deceased are increasingly being expressed in an online capacity through the mediums of social networking websites such as Facebook. This study endeavors to uncover the ways in which newly emergent, technologically mediated forms of bereavement and memorialization occur, how these online practices differentiate from conventional offline grieving procedures, and in what ways they impact the cultural visibility of death in society. A mixed-method research design incorporating both a content analysis of existing Facebook memorial pages as well as interviews with those who have engaged with them was conducted in order to elucidate the various ways in which the relatively new phenomena of online mourning and memorialization occur on Facebook.

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Acknowledgments

I am undoubtedly indebted to the eleven individuals who chose to participate in this research. Their openness, insights, honesty, and willingness to discuss deeply personal issues with me are of unquantifiable value for a project of this nature.

I wish to express my appreciation for my supervisor Dr. Steve Garlick for his consistent and clear guidance, feedback, and support during this project, and for my committee member, Dr. Sean Hier, for his unique perspectives and support. Working under the supervision and direction of such formidable minds has inspired me to produce work to the best of my ability. As a result, no proverbial corners have been cut.

A heartfelt and sincere thank you to Ruth Kampen for so eloquently and seamlessly transitioning between the roles of advisor, therapist, instructor, caretaker, or whatever else I happened to need.

I must also express a deep gratitude towards Mike for keeping me grounded and sane, and for serving as a constant reminder as to what is really important in this life. Rosebud.

And finally to Mark, Zack, and Sierra, I am what I am only because you are what you are.

Dedication

For Sierra

~

Surreal, ethereal, celestial.

And my Heart lit aflame like a Viking funeral.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It has been estimated that over 30 million accounts on Facebook belong to users who have died (Pennington 2013). Given a long enough timeline, it can be inferred that the amount of accounts on Facebook belonging to deceased users will one day surpass the amount of accounts belonging to those who are still alive. The question of death, then, is one that both Facebook (the company), and the over a billion people around the world who use the social networking website will one day have to confront.

In the ten years since its creation in 2004, Facebook has become a ubiquitous force in Western society, and the influence it has had on multiple facets of society have been well documented (see Caers et al. (2013) for a summary). However the lasting effects and implications of the social networking giant, due to its relative infancy, are still being determined. As such, this study is an attempt to further elucidate the effects of Facebook on society, specifically, the relationship between Facebook and death, and by extension, the relationship between Facebook and mourning, grief, memorialization, and bereavement.

The permeation of the Internet and social media within many aspects of North American culture have caused death, bereavement, and memorialization to be expressed in historically unique ways, as computer-centric individuals have started turning to the Internet and to social media to express their grief online and to engage in collective mourning with other users. Appearing as early as the late 1990s, websites devoted exclusively to the memorialization of the dead and the sharing of grief have today gained a certain degree of popularity (Chang and Sofka 2006) with Facebook currently serving

as the website which hosts the largest collection of death-related content, most often in the form of memorial pages and groups.

Facebook allows its users the ability to create pages and groups that are used for a variety of different purposes. Often, groups and pages are created and used to discuss common interests between their members or to aid in the organization of offline activities. Another common purpose for Facebook pages and groups is to create a space where a deceased individual may be mourned, remembered, and memorialized by a large number of diverse users. These groups and pages (hereby referred to as memorial pages) function as spaces where grief may be expressed by users openly and continually over an extended period of time through the posting of text, pictures, and other content. On Facebook memorial pages, the bereaved continue to write comments for years after the death of their friends, sharing memories, and personal updates, and connecting to the deceased in various ways (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). An example of a memorial page taken from Facebook can be found in the appendix of this study (page 128).

This study aims to examine the various ways in which Facebook is used as a tool for the bereaved to share and express grief and to memorialize the dead. While this study is interested in the phenomenon of online mourning in general, Facebook memorial pages are what will be specifically focused on in order to address this phenomenon. Given that they are widely used and easily accessible spaces where online mourning and memorialization occur, and given the widespread popularity of Facebook in general, it is believed that memorial pages will provide the most information about the emerging practice of online mourning. With this in mind, several research aims and questions will now be presented.

Research Questions and Aims

This study is primarily concerned with uncovering how Facebook is used as a tool and as a space for the bereaved to express grief, to memorialize the dead, and to actively participate and communicate with other mourners. Additionally, this study attempts to explain not only how online mourning and memorialization occurs, but also how expressing grief in this manner is fundamentally different from more conventional offline displays of mourning, such as funerals, while at the same time attempting to determine whether or not online mourning affects the bereaved in unique ways that may not necessarily occur in the offline world. To this end, there are four primary avenues of inquiry that guide this study, each comprised of several smaller, though intricately linked research questions:

1. Many facets of modern day society are now partially being experienced in an online capacity, and it has been suggested that the experiences of death, dying, and mourning are no exception (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill and Smith 2007). The emergence and popularity of memorial pages on Facebook supports this notion. As such, the first avenue of inquiry is committed to discovering how mourning on Facebook occurs, while also looking at who does and does not use Facebook to mourn, as well as any temporal trends that may exist. More simply stated: *How are memorial pages on Facebook used by the bereaved? Who does and does not contribute to them? Are there differences in the amount of usage across time or any other noteworthy temporal patterns?*
2. While online mourning is undoubtedly becoming increasingly popular, the social norms and rules which produce and maintain this phenomenon have yet to be

fully defined. There is, as of yet, no clear set of social norms and rules to follow with regard to how memorial pages should or should not be used. *What social norms and rules currently exist on Facebook memorial pages and how do users contribute to the creation and negotiation of these norms and rules? Does violation of current norms occur, and if so, does it result in any identifiable conflict?*

3. While a popular phenomenon, online mourning has not replaced more conventional offline mourning procedures such as funerals. However, the online nature of Facebook and memorial pages may potentially affect the bereaved in unique ways that may not necessarily be experienced in the offline world. *How does online mourning differ from offline mourning? Does online mourning provide any unique effects on the bereaved, whether positive or negative, that are not experienced in the same capacity through more conventional offline mourning practices?*
4. Ariès (1974), amongst others, has suggested that the decreasing visibility of death throughout the 20th century is one of the primary reasons why it has taken on a more ‘scary’ or intrusive role in contemporary society. Given the prominence of Facebook in the lives of many, and the fact that memorial pages exist openly and in plain sight on this domain, *does Facebook provide a significant increase in the visibility of and exposure to death, and if so, what are the potential implications of this?*

Methodology

Previous studies conducted on the subject of online mourning have, almost exclusively, made use of the content analysis method (see Brubaker and Hayes 2011, Carroll and Landry 2010, Chang and Sofka 2006). Like these studies, this research incorporates a content analysis of Facebook memorial pages with the intention of uncovering the various statistical, gendered, temporal, and usage trends that exist on these pages. However, where this study differs from the majority of similarly-focused studies is in its incorporation of face-to-face interviews with individuals who have had experience using Facebook memorial pages and expressing grief in an online capacity. Eleven interview participants, who provided access to Facebook memorial pages that they had interacted with in some capacity, were asked questions relating to their online mourning experiences, and their responses were combined with the trends and patterns uncovered by the content analysis as a means of deciphering recurrent themes and addressing the research questions that have been queried. This mixed-method approach has allowed the phenomenon of online mourning and memorialization to be examined in a thorough, multi-faceted way that has provided a deeper, more rounded understanding of this relatively young phenomenon. A detailed outline of the research methodology can be found in chapter three.

Summary of Chapters

This study is comprised of eight chapters in total. Following the introduction, chapter two outlines existing literature and research findings on a number of topics related to the aforementioned research questions, with a particular focus on the modern

conceptualizations of death in Western society and the emerging role that the Internet has played in the mourning, memorialization, and bereavement processes. Chapter three outlines in detail the methodology that was utilized during this study while also providing a description of the data that was collected. Chapters four, five, six, and seven each address one of the four research questions by presenting the data that has been collected while examining the recurrent themes that have emerged. Specifically, chapter four is concerned with the questions of who does and does not use Facebook memorial pages, how these pages are used, and when (temporal trends). Chapter five discusses the norms that exist on memorial pages as well as how these norms are created and negotiated by Facebook users. In chapter six, differences between online and offline mourning are highlighted as interview participants share their unique positive and negative experiences with online mourning, while chapter seven addresses the relationship between Facebook and the visibility of death. Chapter eight concludes the study with a summary of the research findings as well as a discussion of the study's potential limitations and some suggestions for future research. An appendix which includes supplementary information such as a list of cited sources and interview questions has also been included.

Potential Contributions of the Study

Facebook (the company) has taken various steps towards addressing the issue of death on their website, while Facebook users have contributed towards the creation and increasing popularity of the phenomenon of online mourning. Achieving a greater understanding of how online mourning on Facebook occurs, which is what this study endeavours to do, will provide those who engage in this behaviour with insights that may

allow for more efficient or effective use in the future. Additionally, by shedding light on some of the unique possibilities offered by online mourning, it may be possible to suggest whether expressing grief in this capacity is ultimately a healthy and beneficial step in the mourning process, or alternatively, if it serves to hinder or adversely impact the mourning process in any way.

More specifically, this study will argue that the phenomenon of online mourning has certain implications that relate to not only how Facebook is used by the bereaved, but to how the issues of death and dying may be on the cusp of transition due to the permeation of social media within Western culture. It will be suggested that the relationship between death and Facebook has the ability to affect, to varying degrees, both the mourning processes of bereaved individuals as well as their Facebook experience as a whole.

Ultimately, the major contribution of this study is to provide a better understanding of a phenomenon that, while gaining popularity, is still not fully understood by those who engage in it or by those who regulate it. If online mourning is to become a new cultural standard, as this study will suggest, it is important to begin to demystify the various factors that make up this generationally unique practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to fully comprehend the relationship between Facebook and death that will be examined in this study, it is important to first review the pertinent themes that comprise this relationship. This literature review chapter consists of seven sections: 1) A brief historical overview of how death has been conceptualized in Western society, 2) an overview of the grief, mourning and bereavement processes present in society, 3) a brief synopsis of how the memorialization of the dead has occurred throughout history, 4) a summary of how memorialization occurs on Facebook and the Internet, 5) an analysis of the emergent role that Facebook plays in the mourning process, 6) a discussion regarding Facebook and the visibility of death, and finally, 7) a summary of the salient literature themes.

The Changing Conceptualization of Death in Society

Several academics have made note of the various ways in which the conceptualization of death in Western society has changed throughout history. Ariès (1974) has suggested that in pre-18th century Europe, death was considered a “very simple thing” (7), and was something that was to be expected, anticipated and prepared for during one’s life. Ariès argues that in pre-modern European society, death was not perceived as a theatrical or grand occurrence and was not met with any great show of emotion by either the dying or the bereaved. Death was also a highly visible affair, as dying individuals often lived out their final days in their own bedrooms which were open

to both the family and the public, including children, who were “included and exposed to death, not kept away from it” (1974: 12).

However, starting sometime in the 18th century, Ariès explains how death began to take on a new form in society. The 18th century brought with it a growing concern for the newly recognized individuality of each person, and a relationship began to develop between death and the biography of each individual life. The result is what Ariès called a “new cult of tombs and cemeteries and the romantic, rhetorical treatment of death” (1974: 56), who also claims that death in this time had taken on a new meaning and became an exalted and dramatized event. Smith (2006) has echoed this notion, arguing that in the 18th and 19th century the location of the buried dead was moved from the local churchyard to the cemeteries often outside town boundaries, and as a result, the dead were, “no longer eternally present, but to be *remembered*” (231).

Into the 19th and 20th centuries, Ariès cites such events as the increasing de-Christianization of society, industrialization, and urbanization all as factors which ultimately caused, “a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings” related to death in society (1974: 85). According to Ariès, in modern Western society death is no longer familiar, instead it is frightful. Death is now seen as the tragic end of life, the stark end to an otherwise joyful existence, and has since been conceptualized as an event that is “shameful and forbidden” (1974: 85).

Ariès’s brief history of the changing nature of death in society has been supported by other academics, such as Hofmeier, who argues that “attitudes towards death and dying have changed within the space of a century” (1974: 13), believing that death has been made both a more private and a more commercial affair. Hofmeier (1974) cites the

changing location of death, from the home to the hospital, as one of the primary factors causing this shift.

The change of the spatial location of death in the 20th century has been conceptualized by Smith (2006) as a way for modern society to separate and sequester death from the collective visibility. Smith (2006) further suggests that since death has become largely sequestered, the contemporary experience of death has become increasingly institutionalized and mediated by various “attendants of contemporary death”, such as physicians, funeral directors and priests, whose purpose is to “occupy the front line of defence against our death anxieties” (229).

Similarly, Vernon (1970) has argued that as the location of death transitioned from the home to the hospital, and as death became increasingly invisible to society, firsthand observation of death became markedly more uncommon. Additionally, due to the large amount of medical advancements in the 20th century, people began to live longer lives, and as a result, many individuals, particularly children, have grown up without any direct exposure to death (Hofmeier 1974). The impact of the growth in medical technology is also mentioned by Cassell (1973) who cites it as one of the reasons why death has transitioned from being traditionally approached in a religious and philosophical way to a more secularized and scientific one.

Further adding to the decreasing visibility of death in contemporary society are the various strategies of avoidance many individuals practice. Parents, for example, frequently keep particular death-related information from their children, believing that they do so for “the good of the children” (Vernon 1970 119).

Ultimately, as a result of the changing societal attitudes towards death in modern Western societies, death has largely come to be perceived not as an event as banal as seasonal holidays (as Ariès suggests it used to be), but as the direct and tragic opposition of life, something shameful that should be hidden away from the visibility of our daily lives (Howarth 2007).

Grief, Mourning and Bereavement

“From a sociological perspective, one does not mourn, or mourn in any particular fashion, because of some biologically given mourning instinct or drive. The biological reaction may be very important and at times also very intense. The physical reaction, however, is triggered by the meaning the bereaved attributes to that to which he pays attention, rather than being triggered directly by some biological phenomenon” (Vernon 1970: 128).

Grieving has been described as both an emotional reaction to loss and an active process for dealing with loss (Attig 2004). Walter (1999) conceptualized grief as the emotions that accompany bereavement, and mourning as the set of behaviours that society expects following bereavement. Sigmund Freud stated that the purpose of grief was to return an individual to a stable state in which he or she can move forward with life and leave the deceased behind, and described grief as an ongoing process that involves working through the emotional stages of anger, guilt, depression, and sadness (Freud 1917). While often considered a deeply personal and individual experience, Vernon (1970) reminds us that death is very much a social process with many social dimensions, and as such, the behaviors involved in mourning are very much interactive in nature.

For adolescents the mourning and bereavement processes can be especially severe and more intense and chronic than anticipated by peers, parents, and teachers (Balk 2009). Balk, Zaengle and Corr (2011) found that many grieving adolescents reported a

drop in academic performance, difficulty concentrating and making decisions, sleep disturbances, difficulties eating, headaches, uncontrollable crying and strained relationships with peers.

Rakoff (1973) argues that because North America has largely become a 'death-denying' culture, the mores of American society fail to equip people to face death, whether it be their own or someone close to them, and as such, bereaved individuals often face confusion as to how to properly address the feelings that accompany grief.

Mandelbaum (1959) has similarly suggested that contemporary society has undergone a 'de-ritualization' of death-related behavior, and as a result, "persons bereaved by death sometimes find that they have no clear prescription as to what to do next" (214).

Carroll and Landry (2010) have noted that while historically (Victorian England is the example they provide) the mourning process was something that could last for months, even years, in contemporary Western society, lengthy periods of mourning are often discouraged and a return to 'normal' as soon as possible is the desired alternative. Hofmeier (1974) has echoed this notion, suggesting that, "in a functional society, signs of mourning, with their emotional charge, may disturb the orderly course of life and work" (18), as has Mandelbaum (1959), who claims that after the typical period of shock, disorganization, and grief, those in mourning often receive diminishing levels of support from 'professional' society.

Once the potent feelings of grief begin to subside, bereaved individuals often begin undertaking unique memorialization strategies with the intention of preserving the memory of the deceased in some way. This phenomenon of memorialization will now be addressed in more detail.

Memorialization of the Dead

“The dead live on not only in private memory and experience, but also in conversation among the living” (Walter 1999: 82).

Barden (1974) suggests that the dead still exist amongst the living, not in a supernatural sense, but in the various ways in which the deceased are memorialized and kept ‘alive’ by their friends and families. Gorer (1965) referred to this as the ‘mummification’ of the dead. Mummification in this sense refers not to the physical body, but to the social environments in which the dead individual lived, such as their bedroom. These actions are what Vernon (1970) believes to be an attempt made by the bereaved to establish communion with the dead.

One example of this is provided by Bennett and Bennett (2000) who conducted a study involving widows who had recently lost their husbands. The authors noted how the widows in their study held on to certain trinkets and possessions of their husbands in an attempt to keep their memory alive. Walter (1999) reached a similar conclusion, noting that bereaved widows and widowers oftentimes report “sensing the presence of the dead” while occupying the spaces in which their husbands once resided (57). Beloff (2007) has suggested that the collection of photographs is another way in which the dead are kept alive and memorialized amongst the living, as has Good (2012), who made note of the various ways in which photographs and scrapbooks served to memorialize the dead during the 20th century.

What these trends seem to suggest, according to McCarthy and Prokhonik (2013), is that the embodied relationship two individuals share does not necessarily disappear after one of the individuals dies, that is, the sensory connections of voice, touch and smell may persist and linger well after death has occurred. In the words of Walter (1999),

“while some do indeed leave the dead behind, many others maintain a bond with their dead indefinitely, even while forging new social ties. They do not let go and move on; they transform the relationship, keep hold and move on” (xiii).

Another noteworthy aspect of the memorialization procedure is that of post-mortem identity construction. Some have suggested that discussing and establishing a narrative and identity for the deceased can be an important step in the grieving process (Harvey, Carlson, Huff and Green 2001). Wakes, candle light vigils, obituaries, and other memory sharing practices are some ways in which post-mortem identities continue to be crafted and preserved as survivors formalize a life story for the dead (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). Over time the act of sharing stories and discussing who the deceased individual was acts as a way to memorialize that individual. In the words of Vernon (1970), “definitions of the dead remain alive, or functional, as long as the group keeps them alive by taking them into account” (213).

In some cases, incomplete or competing narratives of the deceased exist. While it is common practice for mourners to largely suspend criticism of the dead individual and overlook his or her possible misdoings, it is possible that what Martin (2010) called ‘post-mortem identity contests’ may occur. Martin’s 2010 study highlights several ways in which post-mortem identity-contests occur after the death of an individual. For example, one teenager who was murdered due to his gang affiliations may be depicted by the police or media as a troublemaker or delinquent, but may be remembered by his mother and peers as a loving son and friend. Martin (2010) notes that because the “management and reproduction of the deceased’s identity is a primary implement in the cultural tool kit for coping with grief” (27), these competing identity claims may have an

adverse effect on the grieving procedures of the bereaved who may wish to remember or construct the identity of the deceased in a way that is incongruent or at conflict with the constructions of others.

The newfound popularity and increased accessibility of the Internet in the late 20th and early 21st centuries had new implications for the ways in which the dead were remembered and memorialized. This new relationship between memorialization and the Internet will now be examined.

Memorialization and the Internet

Online memorialization websites and ‘virtual cemeteries’, began appearing as early as the late 1990s, several years before the inception of Facebook and other social networking sites (Chang and Sofka 2006). These initial sites were designed to memorialize the loved ones of the users, something that was achieved by the posting of text, photos, music and movies (Sofka 2009). Oftentimes computer-savvy users would create complex visual representations of the deceased’s life or personality through photograph albums or personalized videos, often set to the deceased’s favourite soundtrack (Maddrell 2012).

Additionally, around the same time that memorialization websites began growing in popularity, so too did other grief-support websites. Chapple and Ziebland (2011) conducted a study on various websites that offer support for individuals bereaved by suicide, concluding that, “the Internet is changing the experience of bereavement due to suicide, in various ways the most important use of the Internet is to find support from

others who have been bereaved in a similar way” (185). The memorialization of the deceased individual was one such in way in which the bereaved were able to find some degree of comfort with their situation.

These new methods of grieving and memorialization have more recently found popularity on mainstream social networking sites, evident by the fact that in 2005 Facebook instituted a rudimentary ‘memorializing’ procedure for the accounts of deceased users. During these initial stages, once the profile of a deceased user was granted memorial status (something that had to be requested by a friend or family member who has sufficient proof of death) the ability to log in to the account was disabled, and the deceased user’s page was preserved so that no new content could be added or deleted by anyone. In 2007 ‘memorializing’ was redefined by Facebook to denote a state where a deceased user’s account would remain in an active state that would allow new content to be added. This was done with the purpose of enabling loved ones to continue an online relationship with the deceased via regular posting and updating (McEwan and Scheaffer 2013).

Not unlike the various memorialization strategies that occur in the offline world, memorial pages on Facebook and around the rest of the Internet allow individuals to maintain a link to or even develop new relationships with loved ones post-mortem. As Walter (1999) reminds us, “if relationships are to continue after death, we might expect to find an ongoing conversation with the dead” (60), and many of these conversations are now being held in an online capacity on Facebook and elsewhere. Brubaker and Hayes (2011) have noted that continued social networking with the dead via Facebook allows

bereaved users to not only share their experiences with others who are in mourning, but to construct and archive the memory and identity of the deceased.

McEwan and Scheaffer (2013) concluded that a traditional obituary write-up is not a particularly good representation of the deceased, believing that the Facebook profile is closer to the 'real' person and is a much more rich and accurate account of a person's life. In their words, "a Facebook page comprises not only the content created or edited by the administrator but also the contribution of others to the profile, through the addition of comments, photos, videos, and like; this latter content also builds the online reputation and persona" (McEwan and Scheaffer 2013: 2).

Because of its open and accessible nature, Facebook allows users to partially aid in the construction of a deceased user's identity. Additionally, because the posts, photos, and all other content that a deceased user has uploaded remains intact and visible, their life and activities are archived to a level that may be historically unique. Walter (1999) suggests that photographs of the dead have a long history, asserting that in the 19th century, when few households owned a camera and snapshots could not be taken of family members in natural postures, "people turned after death to professional photographers to provide a memento" (63). Comparably, Rosen (2011) reminds us that for centuries the rich and powerful have documented their existence and their status through painted portraits, which served as a display of wealth and a bid for immortality. However Rosen (2011) suggests that today, "our self-portraits are democratic and digital" (173), meaning that any individual with a camera and Internet access maintains the ability to immortalize parts of his or her live via photographs and social media. Similarly, Good (2012) has argued that in the 21st century, individuals have begun transitioning away

from using physical scrapbooks and photo albums to archive their lives and towards online photo archives such as Facebook and Instagram. Braidotti (2013) has also touched on this notion, suggesting that in the modern era of digital technology we leave behind a ‘virtual corpse’, citing a “mutual dependence between the flesh and the machine”, which in turn “promotes dreams of immortality and control over life and death” (113).

Ultimately, one of the fundamental differences between online memorial pages and conventional offline mourning and memorialization procedures such as wakes, funerals and obituaries, seems to be the longevity and ongoing nature of the former. Even several years after a user’s death, online memorial pages still receive a significant, though certainly diminished, amount of traffic and new user-created content. The idea of online memorials as an ongoing and dynamic space has been suggested by Maddrell (2012), who notes that online memorial pages represent a space for continual action as well as reflection and remembrance, concluding that virtual memorials are a unique grieving tool because of their interactive and dynamic character which offers users the opportunity of communion between the living and the dead.

Facebook and the Mourning Process

Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) suggest that social media may potentially alter the dynamics of grieving procedures, particularly for younger individuals, by providing audiences with new ways to express their mourning and new ways to negotiate the meaning of the death of a loved one. While traditionally schools have employed such methods as group counselling seminars and one-on-one psychological sessions to aid in

the grieving process, teenagers, being well connected to their technological world in an instantaneous and far-reaching way, are increasingly, and often independently, turning to Facebook as a tool to express and share their grief (Sofka 2009). Given the widespread permeation of the Internet into the socio-economic and cultural lives of many, it is not surprising to find that the Internet has been adopted as a new site of grief and bereavement support (Maddrell 2012).

Some researchers have put forth the idea that online memorials and grieving procedures offer several unique benefits that are perhaps more difficult to find in the non-virtual world. McEwan and Scheaffer (2013), for example, note that Facebook offers its members a locale for bereaved users to access an online community for support, “to act out front-stage performances of mourning regardless of physical geography, and to negotiate the private backstage performance of grief through a continual online bond with the deceased” (9).

Other practical benefits exist as well, such as the accessibility that online memorials provide. In a time of high domestic mobility and international migration it is often the case that several individuals are physically unable to attend the funeral of a loved one. Facebook provides them with a voice and a means to connect with the family of the deceased and other grievers (Maddrell 2013). Social networking sites also allow friends and acquaintances of the deceased to avert some of the awkwardness that may arise when thinking of things to say to the family of the deceased, and offer a non-intrusive way to show support (Urista, Dong and Day 2009). In a 2011 study by Turkle, several teenagers were interviewed, and one recalled that upon hearing of the death of a

peer through an online instant message, she was relieved that she did not have to physically speak to anyone at the time.

However, others have been more pessimistic concerning the impacts of social media on the bereaved. Vicary and Fraley (2010) found that while online interactions following a tragedy may be beneficial early on, these online activities did not affect changes in wellbeing over time. Becker and Shmidt (2009) were concerned that engagement online could also constitute an avoidance of the full emotional impact of the death of someone of significance to one's life, arguing that mourners who over-rely on virtual communications and memorial sites may withdraw from direct face-to-face contact with people, ultimately having negative effects on their social interaction and ability to live with their grief.

Another potential drawback of online mourning is the prevalence of Internet 'trolls', that is, users who anonymously (though not always) post distasteful and controversial content within public grieving spaces with the intent of shocking and offending those who read it (Phillips 2011). 'Trolls', defined by Coleman (2012) as a class of Internet users "whose raison d'être is to engage in acts of merciless mockery/flaming or morally dicey pranking, often delivered in the most spectacular and often in the most ethically offensive terms possible" (101) have been known to target memorial pages and those in mourning. Troll attacks on memorial pages and social networking sites are difficult to prevent and can understandably be very hurtful for the bereaved to witness.

While there is literature that highlights both the beneficial and detrimental aspects of online mourning, ultimately the phenomenon is too young to draw any staunch conclusions regarding its efficacy on the grieving procedure.

Facebook and the Visibility of Death

Conventional offline mourning procedures such as funerals typically occur at a predetermined place and time. While usually open to the public, these procedures often occur outside the realm of public visibility, and exposure to death in this way is something that is prepared for by the bereaved beforehand (see Vale-Taylor 2009, Adamson and Holloway 2012, and Szmigin and Canning 2014) and mediated by what Smith (2006) referred to as ‘attendants of contemporary death’, such as funeral directors. Contrary to this, some have argued that exposure to death on Facebook may happen in a more unexpected and sporadic way. A recent study by Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013) expands on this idea, highlighting some of the various ways in which death has been increasingly injected into otherwise ‘normal’ Facebook use. Because Facebook is often socially situated in the daily lives of its users, exposure to death and mourning via updates on memorial pages and the status updates of other users have, for many, become increasingly common. Studies by Chapple and Ziebland (2011) and McEwan and Scheaffer 2013 have also documented this phenomenon in detail. A participant in the latter’s study remarked that unexpectedly receiving an alert, greeting or update from a deceased user’s profile or memorial page is startling, and akin to ‘seeing a ghost.’

The impact of the Internet on the visibility of death is made apparent by noting the changing ways in which the news of death is distributed in the 21st century. Until only recently obituaries remained one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper, now, however, social media users tend to rate Facebook and Twitter as the most important media for accessing and disseminating news and information relating to death (Stephens 2006). Put another way, young social media users today are more likely to hear about the death of a peer from the Internet than from a newspaper or televised news program (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Wollebaek 2013). A study conducted by Carroll and Landry (2010) echoes this, wherein they found that 85% of students reported that they would turn to Facebook as their first source for news in the event of the death of a peer.

While Ariès (1974) and other aforementioned theorists have posited that death has transitioned from being something that was largely visible in pre-modern societies to something that modern society has attempted to make hidden, Walter (1994) has suggested that as a result of contemporary Western's society emphasis on individuality, the public and private nature of death have started to become more conflated. Specifically, Walter (1994) argues that the grief and the private feelings that the bereaved experience are now encouraged to be expressed publically as an expression of individuality, that is, as a way of contributing to an individual's identity (the death of someone's parents, for example, is likely to have an impact on their identity). Walter's notion of a public/private overlap, while occurring before the creation of social media, may be readily applied to the ways in which mourning is expressed on Facebook, although it remains too early to tell whether the increased visibility of death experienced on Facebook will lead to any significant attitudinal shifts regarding death in society.

Summary

The aforementioned literature suggests several trends regarding the current state of and the interplay between death, memorialization and the Internet in contemporary Western society. First, during the 20th century the role of death in society has shifted from being considered a largely accepted and familiar part of life to occupying a more obscured and unutterable position today. Second, death and mourning must be considered *social* processes. “From the moment of conception”, suggests Vernon (1970), “the individual is engaged in the social process of dying” (3). Given social media’s ability to affect various other socially interactive processes (see Gonzales and Hancock 2011, Bryant and Marmo 2012, Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, Sauter 2013, and Goodings and Tucker 2013), the literature suggests that the process of death is not an exception. Third, traditional methods of memorializing the dead such as scrapbooks and the preservation of physical spaces and objects, while still occurring, are now additionally beginning to take place over online mediums such as Facebook through the creating and maintaining of memorial pages. Fourth, there is evidence to suggest that those who use Facebook to memorialize or mourn the loss of a loved one may have both positive and negative experiences (that may or may not have lasting implications) while doing so. And finally, Facebook and the Internet seem to increase the amount of exposure to death that users receive. That is, regular users of Facebook are most likely to read about the passing of a friend or peer on the website itself, rather than through conventional mediums such as obituaries. Additionally, regular users of Facebook may experience sporadic and unexpected reminders of death through status updates and otherwise normal Facebook use.

While a review of the literature suggests a rudimentary understanding of the emergent relationship between death and social media, several authors have identified gaps or a lack of research discussing the topic. Carroll and Landry noted, “research into online mourning practices and the rites and rituals of online memorializing is nascent”, and “little to no scholarly work on online bereavement exists” (2010: 343). Williams and Merton (2009) reached a similar conclusion. While new research has emerged during the five years since these studies, it remains a topic that is still academically underdeveloped, and therefore, this study is an attempt to begin filling in the empty spaces around this topic.

Chapter 3: Data and Methodology

In this chapter, the data gathering procedures and the methodological approach utilized during this study will be presented in detail. Certain statistical figures will also be presented. This study adopted a mixed-method approach based on both a quantitative content analysis of data collected from Facebook memorial pages as well as a qualitative analysis of several interviews that have been conducted with individuals who have had experience confronting and expressing grief in an online environment. This chapter is divided into five sections: 1) a detailed description of the interview process and methodology, 2) a detailed description of the content analysis process and methodology, 3) a discussion of this project's various ethical concerns, 4) a justification of the mixed-method approach that has been utilized, as well as a discussion regarding the limitations of this particular methodology, and finally, 5) a summary of the methodology.

Face-to-Face Interviews: Sampling, Data, and Methodology

The interview is a research-gathering approach that “seeks to create a listening space where meaning is constructed through an interchange of verbal viewpoints in the interest of scientific knowing” (Crabtree and Miller 1999: 89). Put another way, interviews use individuals as the point of departure for the research process and assume that “individuals have unique and important knowledge about the social world that is ascertainable through verbal communication” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 119). With these definitions in mind, interviews were conducted with the intention of constructing a

dialogue with participants that focused on the creative search for a mutual personal understanding of the research topic. It was believed that conducting interviews would allow access to certain information and insights that may not have been visible or accessible through a strictly quantitative analysis.

Sampling and Recruitment

This study is interested in researching the ways in which online mourning and memorialization occur, and as such, the primary criteria and essentially the only qualifying factors for potential interview participants was that they must have had or currently have an active Facebook account, and they must have engaged, either actively as a contributor, or passively as an observer, with memorial pages on Facebook at some point. In this regard, interview participants were purposively sampled, defined by Maxwell (1997) as a type of sampling in which, “particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (87), based on this limited criteria.

Recruitment for the interview participants in this study happened primarily on the University of Victoria (UVIC) campus. A recruitment ‘pitch’ for the research was delivered to eight different UVIC classes upon receiving approval from the various instructors of the classes. The research pitch included information regarding the nature and intentions of the study, as well as an explanation of what would be required from participants should they choose to become involved. With the intention of reaching a slightly more varied sample, the classes that participants were recruited from included a number of different disciplines including sociology, psychology, political science,

computer science, and biology. Upon completion of each pitch (which lasted roughly 90 seconds), my contact information was provided. During the following weeks I received emails from 15 students expressing interest in the project, 11 of which eventually resulted in a face-to-face interview.

Of the 11 individuals I interviewed, 7 identified as female, while 4 identified as male. While this sample is slightly skewed towards females, as will be shown, it does constitute an accurate representation of the usage rates of memorial pages between genders. The age range of the participants ranged from 20 to 27, with an average of 23. As aforementioned, all but one participant was recruited from the UVIC campus. The lone exception to this was referred to me from another interview participant in an act of ‘snowball sampling’, defined as a “technique for finding research subjects where one subject gives the researcher the name of another” (Cohen and Arieli 2011: 424).

Conducting the Interviews

Once participants had contacted me via email and expressed an interest in participating, a convenient meeting time was then agreed upon. All interviews took place in a privately booked room on the UVIC campus. Due to the personal and perhaps troubling nature of the questions being asked, a private space was deemed more appropriate than a public one. Upon our initial meetings, and prior to officially beginning the interviews, I attempted to engage the participants in pleasant conversation. ‘Soft’ conversational questions (ie. “How are classes going this semester?”, “What type of classes are you taking?”) were asked with the intention of putting the participants at ease, establishing a conversational rapport, and making them feel comfortable with me, with

the space, and with conversing. Due to my proximity in age and my status as a UVIC student, it is possible that I was able to achieve ‘insider status’ with the participants, defined by Hesse-Biber and Leavy as the, “traits, experiences or characteristics the researcher has in common with his or her participants that aid in overcoming difference in the interview process and building a stronger rapport”, which may have allowed for a richer and more productive interview experience (2006: 145). Establishing an appropriate level of comfort and rapport was deemed necessary due to the potentially troubling nature of some of the questions that I intended to ask. Because several of the questions deal with issues and subject matter that may have been very troubling for the participants, ensuring that they were at ease was crucial for maintaining the well-being of the participants, and by extension, allowing their responses to come in a way that was more ‘organic’ or ‘naturally’ than they may otherwise have been if they were feeling discomfort in any way.

After taking some time to build a rapport and establish comfort, I went on to explain the nature of the project and the research goals in more detail and encouraged participants to ask any questions they may have had about the project. Once we were ready to begin the interviews, the participant consent forms were then explained and signed (the ethical considerations of this research are further elaborated upon in a following section) and the interviews began.

All interviews were recorded using a handheld recording device that had its functionality rigorously tested beforehand. While a detailed list of interview questions (included in the appendix, page 126) was prepared and kept on hand, it was not adamantly adhered to, as I opted instead to keep the conversations as unstructured or

'loose' as possible. In this sense, the questions I prepared served more as a guideline than as a strict track for the conversation. As a result, the questions and direction of each interview, while containing large amounts of commonality and overlap, were all unique.

The interviews ranged in length from 18.25 minutes to 37.5 minutes with an average of 26 minutes. At the end of each interview, once the recording device had been turned off, there was a debriefing period wherein I was able to talk with the participants, 'off the record', about any other ideas and concepts that they wanted to discuss. I also took this time to express my gratitude to each participant for volunteering their time. I assured them that once the final project had been written that I would send each of them a copy.

Analyzing and Interpreting the Interview Data

Once an interview had been conducted the audio file was then transferred to my personal computer. Each interview was then textually transcribed from the audio file. Once all the interviews had been transcribed, they were then thematically coded. The coding was done without the aid qualitative coding software in an effort to remain as familiar with the data as possible. Each participant response that was determined to be thematically significant was placed under a certain category (ie. "Practicality of Memorial Pages", "Funeral Experiences"), otherwise it was ignored and not included.

To determine what responses were considered thematically significant and appropriate for inclusion and discussion in the analysis, I looked primarily for participant responses that appeared to address, support, or contradict the main themes that have been outlined in the literature review. This was done in an attempt to see whether or not the

responses of the participants in this study were congruent with the conclusions and theoretical assumptions presented by other researchers conducting thematically similar studies. Some thematic groups, then, were largely predetermined before the coding process even began as they were based primarily on the themes of other literature. Some examples include ‘the visibility of death on Facebook’, and ‘the positive and negative effects of Facebook use on the mourning process.’

Additionally, thematic groups were created to accommodate ideas and themes that emerged across multiple interviews. If several interview participants discussed or touched upon similar ideas, a thematic group was then created where similar recurring ideas could be coded under. These thematic groups were not necessarily based on the existing literature, but rather, they were justified by their commonality across several interviews. Some examples of thematic groups that were created due to their reoccurrence across multiple interviews include, ‘memorial pages used as organizational tools’, and ‘representations of the deceased.’

It is worth noting that there were several common themes that emerged in the interviews that are not discussed in the results chapters of this study. This is partially because several of the recurring themes did not aid in answering or addressing the research questions that had been laid out for this particular study. Additionally, due to the space and time limitations of this research, addressing every recurring theme that emerged remained largely impractical, and as such, only themes that served to address the research questions and theoretical scope of this research were included.

New thematic groups continued to emerge until the seventh (of eleven) interview transcript had been coded. After this point, no new thematic groups were created,

suggesting that a certain degree of thematic saturation may have been reached, at least with regard to the limited theoretical scope of this research. Once all the thematic groups had been created and the final interview transcript had been coded, I again went through each transcript, starting from the first one, to remove responses that were not considered thematically significant, and to recode any responses that were missed, or that now had a thematic group created to accommodate them.

Ultimately, the roughly 40000 words of interview transcripts was cut to about 12000 words worth of thematic data that was then used for the final project.

Content Analysis: Data, Sample, and Methodology

Due to its accessibility and vast amount of content, Facebook has recently become a popular and convenient space for researchers to conduct content analyses concerning a range of different topics (see Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao (2009), Egan and Moreno (2011), and Gannon, Becker and Moreno (2013)). Sjøvaag and Stavelin (2012) have pointed out the unique methodological considerations that must be acknowledged and maintained in order to ensure the reliability of the online content analysis method. Specifically, they support a triangulation approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative measures. With this in mind, a quantitative online content analysis of various Facebook memorial pages was conducted in order to supplement the data that was collected from the interview participants.

Sampling Techniques

Though entirely optional, interview participants were encouraged to provide links

via email to any Facebook memorial pages that they had interacted with at any point in time. The purpose of asking interview participants to provide links to memorial pages as opposed to seeking them out on my own was twofold. First, by examining pages that the interview participants had interacted with, it was believed that a closer connection between participant responses and the trends of the memorial pages could be examined. That is, when interview participants shared their experiences about memorial pages, I was interested in observing the same pages that they were referring to in order to clarify and distinguish any thematic links or consistencies that existed between the memorial pages and the participant responses. Second, in order to remain ethically sound, it was important that the memorial pages I was observing be provided to me by at least one member who had been using them (a more detailed discussion of this study's ethical considerations is found in a following section).

Sample Description

A total of 10 links to public Facebook memorial pages were provided to me by the participants (n=10). 3 of these pages were created for female users who had passed away, while 7 were created for male users. The age at which the subject of each page passed away was determined by noting the creation date of the page itself (which was most often a day or two after death) as well as the birth date of the deceased user (determined by other users posting on the deceased's birthday, or in some instances, by reading obituaries that had been posted). The age at which the subject of each page passed away ranged from 17 to 26 years old, with an average of 21. Each of the 10 pages documented the total amount of members who belong to the page. The number of

members in each group ranged from 98 to 781 with an average of 329.3. The lifespan of each page (how long it has been in existence for), was also determined by noting the page's creation date. This number ranged from 3 months to 70 months (5.8 years) with an average of 30.2 months. The aforementioned figures are represented by the following table:

Table 1: Memorial Page Descriptions

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Group Members	329.3	237.26	98	781
Age at Death	21	2.92	17	26
Months Active	30.2	27.61	3	70

Data Analysis

On memorial pages, like all Facebook pages, users have the option of posting or uploading a variety of different content including, but not limited to, text, photographs, hyperlinks to other websites, and videos. Once access was provided to memorial pages by interview participants, all user-posted content, from the earliest to the most recent, was documented and collected as data. Each individual piece of user-posted content was categorized by the time in which it was posted (conveniently, Facebook timestamps every piece of content posted) in relation to when the page was created. This was done to track temporal patterns of memorial page activity. The gender of every poster was also recorded in order to determine if there were any significant gender differences between the type and amount of content that gets posted. This was done by observing the profile

pictures of users and labelling them as either male or female based on their physical appearance (there are many inherent problems with this method of identification which are discussed in more detail on page 115). Additionally, all user-posted content was determined to fit into one of three following categories (examples of each can be found in the appendix):

1) Textual Comments

Textual comments, the most common form of user-posted content, refer to all posts that were exclusively text based. Textual comments ranged in length from extremely short (“miss you”), to much longer, multiple paragraph stories and narratives.

2) Photographs

Photographs were categorized not simply as any picture or image (see *Other*), but only as images that included the deceased in some capacity. Some examples include pictures of the deceased engaging in activities with friends and family, partaking in sports or other hobbies, and graduation photos. Some photographs also included textual messages with them. In the event that a piece of content was posted that included both a photograph of the deceased with textual content, it was categorized as a photograph.

3) Other

The ‘other’ category refers to all pieces of content that were not either textual comments or photographs. This included videos (most commonly music videos), links to other websites, and a wide variety of graphics including ‘e-cards’,

animated pictures, paintings, and other ‘word images’. Examples of the types of content categorized as ‘other’ can be found in the appendix (page 129).

After analyzing all 10 pages, a total of 2668 individual pieces of user-posted content had been documented. 1870 (70.01%) of the pieces of content were textual, 573 (21.48%) were photographs, and 225 (8.43%) belonged in the ‘other’ category. Across all three categories females posted markedly more content than males (74.18% of the total content was posted by females, while male-posted content accounted for 25.82% of the total). A more thorough breakdown of the posting statistics by category and gender is represented by the following tables:

Table 2: Textual Content

	Number of Posts	Percentage	Average Per Page
Male	506	27.06	50.6
Female	1364	72.94	136.4
Total	1870	100.00	187

Table 3: Photographs

	Number of Posts	Percentage	Average Per Page
Male	152	26.53	15.2
Female	421	73.47	42.1
Total	573	100.00	57.3

Table 4: Other

	Number of Posts	Percentage	Average Per Page
Male	31	13.78	3.1
Female	194	86.22	19.4
Total	225	100.00	22.5

Table 5: Total Content by Gender

	Total	Percentage	Average Per Page
Male	689	25.82	68.9
Female	1979	74.18	197.9
Total	2668	100.00	266.8

Table 6: Total Content

	Number of Posts	Percentage	Average Per Page
Textual Content	1870	70.01	187
Photographs	573	21.48	57.3
Other	225	8.43	22.5
Total	2668	100.00	266.8

Ethical Concerns

Ethical Concerns for the Interview Portion

Prior to conducting any original research involving human participants, ethical approval was required from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board. To obtain this approval, a standard ethics application was completed and submitted to the Ethics Board for their review. The primary ethical considerations of the interview portion of this study were deemed by the Ethics Board to be the following:

1) The informed consent of interview participants.

In order to secure informed consent all interview participants were required to read and sign a consent form that was supplied during the initial stages of the interview. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions about any of the content of the consent forms, and upon signing them, were provided with a copy for their own reference. The consent form contained information relating to the nature of the study, the participants rights, and methods of contact for both myself and the project supervisor. A copy of the consent form has been included in the appendix (page 130).

2) The confidentiality and anonymity of interview participants and interview data.

Participants were assured that all interview recordings and transcriptions would remain confidential. All interview data, including audio recordings, textual transcripts, and interviewee descriptions was stored on a password-protected USB drive that only I had access to. This data, as was explained to participants, will remain in confidential storage until five years after the conclusion of this study, at which time it will be terminated.

In order to guarantee participant anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this project. Additionally, any references made by participants to geographic locations or anything else that could potentially act as identifiable information has been either omitted or altered.

3) The emotional and practical well-being of interview participants.

Because the research topic and interview questions address issues that may potentially be troublesome and deeply personal, contact information for the University of Victoria's student counselling services was provided to the interview participants. While all participants were made privy to the nature of the questions that would be asked prior to their official involvement, they were reminded that they had the right to halt or leave the study at any time without penalty. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were reminded that if they felt uncomfortable at any moment with the questions or the subject matter, that they should not hesitate to share their concerns with me so that the interview could be halted or stopped altogether.

From a practical perspective, it was also possible that the time commitment for the interviews (approximately 30-45 minutes) may have been an inconvenience for the participants. In an attempt to alleviate this I remained as flexible as possible with the

scheduling of the interviews, and offered participants the opportunity to decide what time would be the most convenient for them to meet.

Ethical Concerns for the Content Analysis Portion

Unlike the face-to-face interviews, the content analysis portion of this study falls under the less straightforward and somewhat ethically muddled area of Internet research. Though public memorial pages on Facebook essentially exist within the public domain, and as such, are not *necessarily* subject to ethical approval, official approval from the Ethics Board was still received.

In order to maintain the ethical standards dictated by the Ethics Board, the only memorial pages that were analyzed were those that were publically accessible. Private memorial pages that would have required access to be granted by a moderator or page creator were not included. In addition to this, maintaining the anonymity of memorial page users was also an important ethical concern. The content analysis was primarily a quantitative account, interested in examining user rates and temporal trends, yet several examples of user content posted to memorial pages have also been included in the discussion. With this in mind, the memorial pages examined for the content analysis were analyzed in such a way that maintained the anonymity of the users who have posted content by employing pseudonyms, altering any identifiable data, and by ‘blacking out’ any photos of users that may be included.

The ethical considerations for the online content analysis portion of this study were primarily influenced by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), who have prepared a guide for ensuring that online research is completed in a way that is as

ethically sound as possible by emphasizing the importance of addressing and resolving ethical issues as they arise in each stage of the Internet research project (see Markham and Buchanan 2012). This guide notes that while individuals may operate in public spaces such as Facebook, they often do so with certain expectations of privacy, and as the guide suggests, users “may acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is - or ought to be - used by other parties” (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 11). Additionally, the AoIR guide reminds us that even ‘anonymised’ data may potentially contain enough personal information that can result in individuals being identifiable and because of this, caution was an ongoing concern during this study.

Justification of Methodology and Potential Limitations

Justification of the Mixed-Method Research Design

The decision to make use of a mixed-method approach was made with the intention of examining the phenomenon of online mourning from a variety of perspectives. While this study could have omitted either the qualitative interviews or the quantitative content analysis and still retained a certain degree of validity, the incorporation of both has allowed for a fuller, more rounded understanding of the research topic. In this regard, both the quantitative and qualitative portions of this study were of equal importance. On the one hand, content analysis has uncovered the statistical trends that occur on Facebook memorial pages and has allowed certain generalizations to

be made about the posting trends and longitudinal activity of their users. On the other hand, the interviews have elucidated many of the various meanings that users attach to these statistical trends have provided insights that would have remained invisible to a strictly quantitative approach. Put another way, the content analysis succeeded in sketching out a black and white picture of the phenomenon, while the interviews have allowed this picture to be filled in with colour.

The decision to conduct face-to-face interviews was partially reached after analyzing several similar studies and noticing that none of them had incorporated interviews as a data-gathering method. While a great deal of information can be collected through the analysis of memorial pages and the content that gets posted to them, conducting interviews with participants who have interacted with these new mediums of grief and incorporating their experiences and opinions is one way in which this study is methodologically unique from other similar studies that have addressed this topic. However, the methodology that has been employed during this research is not without flaws and shortcomings, some of which will now be elaborated upon in further detail.

Methodology Limitations

Though they were able to supply a large amount of relevant information, it may be argued that the eleven participants who were interviewed may not constitute an entirely representative sample of the larger population of interest (those who use Facebook to share/express/engage in grief, mourning and memorialization). The age range of the participants (20 to 27) effectively excludes the opinions and experiences of an older demographic, one that may have its own unique ideas about and experiences

with this phenomenon. Additionally, ten out of the eleven participants were current university students, and as such, it is possible that only a limited viewpoint (that of a young, university student) was being expressed.

The interview sample was also geographically biased, as all eleven participants were residents of Vancouver Island. While there may not be significant geographic differences in the ways in which Canadians experience grief and mourning on the Internet, it is important to acknowledge that this project is exclusively an account of Western (Canadian specifically) viewpoints. As Brubaker and Hayes (2011) remind us, our experiences of grief and practices around death are deeply cultural, and as such, it must be stressed that this study examines the relationship between death and Facebook in an exclusively Western context. Facebook, of course, is a global phenomenon not exclusive to the Western World, and as such, it follows that the different ways in which death is culturally represented throughout the globe may have an impact on how the ways in which Facebook is used to address it.

To summarize, while the information provided by the interview participants in this study has yielded a large amount of interesting and relevant data, drawing any larger generalizations based on this sample may potentially be problematic as it may not be entirely representative of the population of interest.

Similarly, the content analysis, while thorough, may not represent an entirely accurate depiction of the phenomenon being observed. First, only ten memorial pages were closely examined, and because of this somewhat limited number, it is perhaps fair to suggest that this sample may be too small to be considered entirely representative of the larger population. While averages for several of the variables examined were calculated,

there was a large degree of variation between pages, suggesting that some of the data may be skewed (for example, the number of members belonging to memorial pages ranged from as little as 98 to as many as 781). Additionally, there was a large variation between the pages with regard to how long they had been active, ranging from several months to several years.

Also worth mentioning is that, due to ethical constraints, the only pages that were examined were those that were publicly accessible. There also exists a large amount of private memorial pages that only certain moderators or page creators can grant Facebook users access to. These pages were not included in the study, and while it is difficult to say whether the content on private pages is significantly different from their publicly accessible counterparts, it is worth mentioning nonetheless.

Many of the aforementioned limitations may have been addressed by actively recruiting a larger number of more diverse interview participants, or by incorporating a larger amount of memorial pages in the content analysis, but due to the time and budget constraints of this research such methods remained largely impractical. Ultimately, while this methodology was largely successful in providing a rich and rounded insight into the phenomenon of online mourning, it, like any methodology, is not impervious to criticism.

Summary

The data for this study was collected by conducting both face-to-face semi-structured interviews as well as a content analysis of Facebook memorial page. This mixed-method approach was considered to be the most appropriate for examining the

research topic as it provided a multi-angle view into the intricacies of Facebook memorial pages.

This study has obtained official ethical approval and all ethical considerations and limitations have been respected throughout its duration.

By following the methodology that has been outlined in this chapter, a large amount of data was produced in the forms of interview transcripts and statistical figures depicting user activity on memorial pages. Since collecting this data, it has been coded, organized, and thematically separated. The main themes that emerged after analyzing the data will now be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Facebook Memorial Pages: Who Uses Them, How are they Used, and when are they Used?

The purpose of this chapter is to closely address the questions of who uses Facebook memorial pages, how these pages are used, and when they are used. These questions will be answered by combining the numerical data that was collected during the content analysis portion of the research and the answers that were provided by respondents during the interview portion of the research. This chapter is divided into three sections: 1) An examination of who does and does not contribute to memorial pages, 2) a discussion concerning the various ways in which memorial pages are used, and finally, 3) an overview of some of the temporal patterns observed on memorial pages.

Who Does and Does Not Post to Memorial Pages

Gender Differences

As mentioned in the previous chapter, females are responsible for 74.18% of all content posted to Facebook memorial pages, while males account for only 25.82% of the content. This discrepancy exists despite the fact that there is generally an even ratio of female to male users on Facebook. While much has been written about the presumed emotional differences between men and women and the ways in which emotions are expressed across gender (see Anderson and Leaper 1998, Shields 2013, Chaplin 2015), it is difficult to conclude whether or not the apparent willingness of females to post more than males is influenced by emotional differences. As Stroebe (1998) reminds us, there is

no scientific evidence to indicate gender differences in the occurrence of grief on the death of a loved one, that is, both men and women experience grief when a love one dies, however there may still be significant gendered differences with regard to the mourning process and the effects of grief. While Stroebe (1998) concluded that both males and females were vulnerable to ailments and illnesses following bereavement, though men were relatively more vulnerable to the health risks than women, this does not explain the differences in memorial page contribution between genders.

Kenney (2002) has noted that, perhaps due to contemporary notions of masculinity in society, men are generally far less likely than women to report, identify, or disclose their personal suffering following the death of a loved one. The “oft-noted emotional expressiveness of the female gender and the male under-reporting of victimization, all undercut by the differential challenge to traditional male gender identity inherent in the victim role” (245), may partially account for the stark difference in memorial page posting habits between men and women. That is, men may, for fear of portraying themselves as suffering or emotionally vulnerable and thereby threatening their notion of masculinity, refrain from openly posting on memorial pages, opting instead to manage their grief in more private capacities.

Because no specific gender-related questions were asked during the interviews, all conclusions about the different posting habits of men and women remain strictly speculative. Whatever the reason for this distinction may be, it should be acknowledged that based on the sample of this study there do seem to be fairly concrete differences between the memorial page posting habits of males and females.

Those Who ‘Lurk’ Without Posting

The fact that the Facebook memorial pages examined in this study had an average of 329.3 members, but only an average of 266.8 pieces of user-posted content, often including multiple posts from the same users, suggests that not every Facebook user who joins a memorial page is posting content. Both Titus and Reis have supported this idea:

L.M.: Right, so you were a part of the page?

Titus: Yeah.

L.M.: And did you contribute in any way?

Titus: Never.

L.M: Did you write anything on them [the pages]?

Reis: No, I would just go through the things and read them.

By observing the content of memorial pages while not contributing any of their own, Titus and Reis are engaging in the act of ‘lurking’, a concept commonly used to describe Internet users who observe online spaces such as message boards without ever actively participating. Because of the discrepancy between the average amount of memorial page members and the average amount of content posted, it may be safely assumed that lurking on memorial pages is a common occurrence.

Those Who Don’t Feel Comfortable Posting

But why is it that some Facebook users join a memorial page only to lurk and not to contribute? One reason for this may be that some users feel uncomfortable sharing

their feelings about someone who they did not know particularly well. This notion was expressed by several interview participants:

L.M.: And why did you feel the need to not post anything?

Rosa: For that one because I wasn't as close to the two girls that passed away.

L.M.: So you feel that in order to post one of these types of comments you feel that it's better to have some sort of...

Rosa: Personal relationship, yeah.

L.M.: So you personally wouldn't post content to someone's memorial page that you didn't feel that you knew particularly well?

Freya: No.

L.M.: And you were a part of that group as well, did you write anything?

Jihl: Um, I didn't personally. I didn't feel like I... I knew him, I knew him, but I didn't feel like I had the right level or status to really have a say in this page.

The idea of not having the appropriate relationship or, "level of status" as suggested by Jihl, to post to a memorial page may represent a population of self-aware Facebook users who know where their social boundaries are and who do not wish to cross them. This level of self-awareness seemed to be shared by all interview participants. However, several of them have suggested that other Facebook users of memorial pages do not necessarily have the same degree of awareness. Garnet provides an example of this idea:

L.M.: So you wouldn't post to somebody's page who you weren't particularly close with because you feel that wouldn't be your place?

Garnet: Yeah, I feel like I'd be overstepping boundaries.

L.M.: But you're suggesting that maybe some people don't have that same sort of ability to not overstep those boundaries?

Garnet: Yeah, or their perception of overstepping boundaries is different.

Those Who Have a Limited Relationship with the Deceased

Interestingly, while many of the interview participants expressed how they would not feel comfortable posting to the memorial page of someone that they did not know particularly well in fear of overstepping their social boundaries, content posted by those who seemingly had very little to the connection to the deceased seemed to be a common occurrence. Reis provides an example:

L.M: But shortly after it was made [the memorial page] had thousands of members?

Reis: Yeah, it was insane, people that didn't even know him.

Reading some of the comments left on memorial pages seems to support this notion of unfamiliarity between users and the deceased:

“RIP Barry i only meet u ones but i sure we would of been good friends”

“even though we didn't know each other very well i recognized you as a lovely, funny, joyful girl and you ALWAYS had a smile on your face!”

Some interview participants have remarked that such displays, while seemingly from a benevolent place, serve to devalue the memory of the deceased. While the benefits and detriments of memorial pages will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter,

Freya has expressed how the gestures made on memorial pages by those with a loose connection to the deceased made her feel:

Freya: I was on the memorial page for someone who I didn't really know that well, but I was just kind of reading the updates, I didn't feel like I knew her personally enough to post anything 'cuz I hadn't see her for years or anything, but what kind of rubbed me the wrong way was that some people, and I've seen this done multiple times, some people would post like, "oh I didn't know them very well but I'm really sorry for everyone's loss here" and stuff like that and for me that felt kind of like cheapening the person's death and I... in some ways I think that it kind of does make me think people are using it somewhat selfishly to mourn and like that sounds maybe a little bit harsh but I feel like some people do like when they have the opportunity to post on social media they do use that, they almost feel obliged to contribute or something along those lines, when I think that it's not really necessarily very helpful for anyone if they're just saying like, "I didn't know this person very well but they seemed great", it almost just cheapens their memory... so yeah, to me that has really annoyed me.

In Freya's example, she was herself was not particularly close with the deceased individual who the page had been set up for, however, other interview participants have commented on how the content posted by those with a loose connection to the deceased can elicit an adverse emotional reaction when the death is of someone very close to them. That is, some interview participants seemed to feel more invested than others in the relationship they had with the deceased, and as a result, comments by those who lack the same connection to the deceased may be seen as somewhat frivolous:

Celes: Yeah, it's a big deal, and thinking back a lot of the people probably weren't as impacted as a few of us were and people kind of graze these sites to like see comments and whatnot right? And it's kind of just knowing that people were just nonchalant on the site to just kind of like view the comments and gossip.

L.M.: You mentioned that you were looking at what other people had said, what was some of the stuff that you ran in to in terms of what other people were expressing and that sort of thing?

Jihl: I found, this happens with like anybody who passes away really, but I found there was a lot of people that I never encountered or heard of. Being his best

friend I knew a lot of the people right? There's a lot of people I hadn't encountered or heard of or anything, making really personal comments about their experience with him and how it was such a big thing in their lives and I thought that was kind of, to each their own, mourn however you need to mourn, but as somebody who was really close I found it interesting how people take it very personally to themselves even if it wasn't actually very personal to them at all.

L.M: You say that it bothered you that people who weren't necessarily as close to him were coming out and saying these sorts of things?

Reis: Yeah, it was weird, like a jealousy thing or something.

Because none of the interview participants posted content to memorial pages that had been created for deceased individuals who they were not particularly close with (and in fact, most seemed to think that this was a distasteful practice), it is difficult to suggest why individuals who lack a 'strong' connection to the deceased still regularly post on memorial pages, although this may be indicative of larger trends on Facebook. Bryant and Marmo (2012) note that because the average Facebook user often has hundreds of friends, and because maintaining strong connections with hundreds of people is understandably a very difficult thing to do, many interactions on Facebook, including those observed on memorial pages, are not based on particularly strong offline relationships. Regardless of the reason, individuals with weak or waned relationships to the deceased still make up part of the population of regular posters, and are thus worthy of mentioning. However, it must be acknowledged that inferring an individual's relationship with the deceased based strictly on the substance of the content that they post is largely improbable. It may well be the case that the individuals who seemingly have only a limited connection with the deceased may actually have had a much more elaborate relationship than what is depicted.

Summary

To summarize, and to partially answer the question of who does and does not post on Facebook memorial pages, the statistical evidence suggests that females post far more content to memorial pages than males do. There is no clear reason for this, though it may be attributed to notions of masculinity and femininity in society, specifically, the idea that females ought to be emotionally expressive while males ought to be more emotionally reserved. Additionally, based on the statistics, there is a certain portion of memorial page members who choose to ‘lurk’ and read the content of others instead of contributing any content of their own. And finally, many interview respondents have suggested that they would refrain from posting if they did not feel as if they were particularly close with the deceased, although this is something that many other users seem to do.

How Are Memorial Pages Used?

As a Method of Communicating with the Deceased and Other Mourners

Based on the sample of this study, it seems as if the most common way in which memorial pages are used is a method of sharing and expressing grief-related sentiments with other users. Memorial pages, as with most aspects of the social media experience, are inherently social spaces wherein one might expect to find a largely interactive or conversational atmosphere. While memorial page users certainly did engage with one another, most commonly in the form of ‘liking’ or commenting on the posts of others, a large amount of the content posted was not directed at other users, rather it was directed

to the deceased, as if they were being spoken to. Comments that were posted were most often written in the second-person form, aimed directly at the deceased. The following examples highlight this tendency, and show some of the emotional and confessional range of user posts:

“My dear friend... i miss you even more with each passing day... in every difficulty i face, your encouraging words still guide me... i am eternally grateful sharing your time with me... i shall NEVER forget you... rest in peace...”

“Missing you <3”

“Mitch, your smile and sense of humor will be remembered by all who ever knew you. You are loved by many and will always be in the hearts of those who cherish you.”

“Sittin on the bus gettin all teary just thinkn about u hurts, i hope wherever u are that your safe and happy beautiful.”

Writing statements directly to the deceased is not something that is unique to online environments. Maddrell (2013) reminds us that in the offline world it is not uncommon for mourners to write letters, memorials, and notes that are directed to the deceased. However, the public and visible nature of Facebook has caused some users to experience trepidation about posting content to memorial pages. Some interview participants explained that they did not feel comfortable posting their messages to the deceased on the visible space of the memorial page, opting instead to send their message directly to the inbox of the deceased. Messages sent to the inbox of a deceased Facebook user will, theoretically, never be opened or read (unless another user happens to have the deceased user’s account log-in information), and while interview participants were aware of this, many of them still expressed a desire to send these messages as they proved to be a good way of expressing certain feelings. Celes, Jihl, and Garnet shared their thoughts about sending private messages:

LM: What was the sort of mentality of doing that [sending private messages] knowing that nobody is going to see them?

Celes: I don't know, just kind of knowing that like, it was to him and it was kind of like the only platform left to communicate with this person even though they might not be there but I can still somehow send something to him.

Jihl: I think it was a lot more personal. Not addressing our friendship but more addressing a personal connection so not being like, "you were my best friend", but saying, "you *are* my best friend", and this is the final goodbye, I'm acknowledging your death but I don't want to say bye.

L.M.: So why the distinction, why would you bother sending them a private message that nobody is going to see as opposed to writing something publically?

Garnet: I don't know... I thought about it recently, I was thinking about why impulsively I would do these things, like send them messages even though I knew they would never see them, but I think it's just the whole concept of the Internet, and it's like... out there, so when you do send this you're putting it out there, it's not just in your head or written somewhere in a book, it's the whole concept of the Internet, do you know what I mean?

These responses seem to suggest a desire within the participants to, in Garnet's words, "put their feelings out there", in a way that is empirically archived, though not visible, particularly when they shared a very close or intimate relationship with the deceased. Celes later mentioned that by visibly posting onto the memorial page itself, there was a possibility that her message would be "lost in the flow" of all the other content that other users were posting. Sending private messages directly to the deceased user seemed to be a way to alleviate this concern and to maintain a more intimate, private bond with the deceased.

While a large portion of the content observed in this study did address the deceased directly, it should be noted that content directed to other users, while less common, was still an occurrence. In these instances, it was often the case that users were posting supportive messages that were directed to the family and friends of the deceased.

Posts like these often received ‘likes’ and comments from other users expressing similar sentiments. For example:

“I’m so sorry to hear about your loss. Duncan was an awesome guy, always a good time with him, and he will be missed greatly.”

“I can’t begin to imagine what this must be like for the Branford family, my thoughts go out to all of you.”

To summarize, the evidence suggests that the primary way in which the bereaved use memorial pages is as a method of communicating with the deceased, and to a lesser extent, other users, both openly and privately. However, memorial pages were also shown to have other practical uses as well, some of which will now be addressed.

As a Practical and Organizational Tool

Some users noted how memorial pages were not used exclusively as a place for sharing and expressing grief, but also as a space where practical arrangements could be made and efficiently organized. For example, funeral and memorial service details were often posted to memorial pages. Noah explained that because the details were posted on the memorial page, the offline funeral had a much higher turnout than it probably would have otherwise had:

Noah: Well, a lot more people showed up to the funeral because they found out about it through Facebook, that’s how I found out all the information, that’s how it was sent out, by Facebook, not by sending out funeral invitations.

L.M.: So you’re suggesting that without Facebook the funeral might not have been as well attended?

Noah: Yeah, definitely.

Aside from being a space where funeral details could be posted, memorial pages, like many other Facebook pages, also allowed users to efficiently organize their offline

activities. Some users would seek clarification about the time and location of offline activities (“Hi everyone, I was wondering if anyone knew what time the candle ceremony was tonight?”, posted one user), while others would make inferences about travel arrangements, weather conditions, and other organizational concerns as exemplified by the following posts:

“Can someone who is in Dollet give us out-of-towners a heads up on road conditions today and tomorrow?”

“Is anybody going to Cherry Hill for the service tomorrow from Esler? If so do they have room for me to car pool? Let me know, inbox or text me.”

“If anyone needs a ride into dollet tomorrow send a message to me or Matt.”

Other arrangements such as anniversary dinners and vigils and fundraising efforts were also organized through memorial pages. Rinoa provided an example of a ‘memorial’ page that had been created for an individual named Julia, who while still alive at the time of its creation, was terminally ill. While it would eventually come to serve as the memorial page after the Julia had passed away, it was used prior to that as a way of organizing Julia’s offline support network. As Rinoa explains:

Rinoa: It was made while Julia was still alive so anything from like, you know, helping with cleaning because it was in a residential setting or you know, shifts, who was going to, there was 4 hour shifts in terms of spending time with Julia and making sure her needs were being met so like kind of overall coordination of her palliative home care.

Additionally, there were some instances in which memorial pages were used as a way of keeping members updated on any news relating to the deceased. Some interview participants had experience with memorial pages that had been created for individuals who had been the victims of crime, specifically drunk driving and in one case, homicide.

In these instances, the memorial pages also served as a space where any legal news, including court dates and rulings, could be shared.

A main function of any Facebook group or page is the ability to efficiently coordinate users for both online and offline activities, and the sample examined in this study suggests that memorial pages are not an exception to this as many of their users seemed to take advantage of the organizational opportunities offered by Facebook.

As the Initial Method of Delivering the News of a Death

In a recent study similar to this one, Rossetto, Lannutti and Strauman (2014) concluded that Facebook was an especially useful tool in learning and sharing information about death because “Facebook made it possible to disseminate information to a large, geographically diverse group of people quickly and with minimal effort” (6). The interview participants in this study seemed to echo this notion, and many of them discussed how Facebook was oftentimes the first medium in which information about death was received:

Celes: Oh yeah, so like March of 2012 one of my best friends died and he was missing for a couple days and his brother like contacted me through text or whatever asking if I had seen him and I hadn’t really talked to him and then one morning I woke up and I was kind of concerned so I went on to his Facebook and I realized that he had passed away and they made like a memorial page for him.

LM: Okay, so your first hearing of the news was through Facebook?

Celes: Yes.

Noah: Well my best friend committed suicide when I turned 21, and I found out through a Facebook page I got added to, that’s how I found out about it.

L.M.: So you found out about his death through Facebook about a year after the fact?

Ward: Yeah, it was his birthday and I was going to post something on his wall saying, “happy birthday”, I clicked his profile and there was a whole bunch of memorial stuff and I’m like, “wait, what did I miss out on?”

Facebook’s ability to rapidly spread information to a vast audience is not a new discovery, though these examples suggest that death-related information is no exception. The speed in which memorial pages are often created following the death of an individual (sometimes less than 24 hours later) means that many people who aren’t directly connected to the deceased are likely to initially learn of the death through Facebook. However, without exception, all interview participants agreed that hearing of a friend or peer’s death through Facebook was less desirable than hearing about it through more traditional offline measures:

Freya: Definitely, if I found out about someone who I knew dying through Facebook that would be very upsetting to me.

Jihl: I think the more direct it is, the better. I think if I found out through Facebook or the news I’d be pissed, because that’s a big deal and why didn’t anybody tell me? I think finding out in person would have been better.

Rosa: Any kind of social media would be my last choice to hear about it [the death of a peer], I would much rather hear it over the phone or in person.

Zack: I think Facebook is maybe a little less personal and so if a friend has passed away I’d probably like a phone call at least.

The main consensus seemed to be, as Zack suggests, that hearing about the news of a friend or peer’s death through Facebook was less personal than hearing about it through more traditional means such as a phone call. This speaks to an interesting dilemma, namely the idea that while more and more people seem to be learning about the

deaths of people in their lives through Facebook, that this is actually the least desirable means of receiving this type of news. The interview participants seem to agree that news of someone's death ought to be shared in the offline world as opposed to the online world in order to maintain the "seriousness of the situation" to borrow a phrase from Freya. The consensus seems to be (and is one that is shared by the participants in Rossetto, Lannutti and Strauman's 2014 study) that learning of an individual's death through Facebook serves to depersonalize an event that should be given consideration beyond the oftentimes banal nature of Facebook. These results seem to contradict the opinions expressed by some of the participants in Turkle's 2011 study, who found comfort in the physical detachment that Facebook provided. As such, it would seem that depending on one's personality and their comfort in socially expressing emotion, learning about an individual's death through Facebook can be either a positive or a negative experience. This also has implications for Facebook's effect on the visibility of death in society, though this will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

It is evident from the pages examined and from the responses of the interview participants that one way in which Facebook and memorial pages are used is as a way of spreading death-related information in a fast and far-reaching way, though it should be noted that this was not always considered to be a beneficial occurrence as it seemed to partially devalue the news of an individual's death.

Summary

The data gathered in this study suggests that Facebook and Facebook memorial pages are primarily used in the following ways:

- 1) As a way of sharing and expressing grief through the posting of content. Much of this content was directly addressed to the deceased and written in the second-person form, though content directed at other users was also observed. Most content was posted on to the visible space of the memorial pages, though sometimes users opted instead to send direct and private messages to the inbox of the deceased in order to maintain a more intimate link.
- 2) As a way of efficiently organizing and coordinating offline activities. The time and location information of funerals, memorial services, vigils, and anniversary events was often posted to memorial pages. Users were also able to set up travelling plans and receive clarification from other users regarding the details of offline events relating to the deceased.
- 3) As a way of quickly spreading death-related news. Many interview participants explained that Facebook was often the place where they would first learn of the death of an individual, although this was not considered the most appealing method of learning this kind of information.

When Are They Used?

Immediately Following the Death of an Individual

From a statistical perspective, a considerable amount of the content posted to memorial pages is posted in the initial periods following the pages creation. As previously mentioned, the average amount of time that each memorial page had existed

for was 30.2 months (roughly two and a half years). However, 624 of the 2668 pieces of content that were examined were posted within one week of the memorial page's creation. Put another way, 23.39% of all content was posted within the first week of the average page's 130-week lifespan. This statistic, while substantial, is perhaps unsurprising as one might expect the reactions to a death to be the most prominent in the period immediately following the death, but it nevertheless represents an important temporal trend of memorial pages. McEwan and Scheaffer (2013) reached a similar conclusion, noting that Facebook activity is especially intense for the first few months after the death if the member was young and/or very active online and off-line.

On a longer timeline, the trend of users posting within the early stages of a memorial page's lifespan seems to hold. 2066 of the 2668 (77.44%) pieces of content were posted within the first half of the average lifespan of the memorial pages examined. These figures highlight the tendency for the memorial pages observed in this sample to experience a flurry of activity immediately following their creation, followed by a steady decrease of activity over time. Many of the interview participants gave answers that supported these temporal trends:

L.M.: And is there still people coming back to it and posting things?

Rosa: A couple, not very many.

L.M.: Do you ever check it now, do you ever go back to it?

Rosa: No, I haven't looked in years.

L.M.: Right, and it was about three years ago you said, do you go back there often to see what's going on, does it still get a lot of activity?

Zack: Hmm no it wouldn't get much activity anymore but there is two or three guys who occasionally post things.

L.M.: But it's pretty quiet now?

Zack: Yeah, absolutely. Definitely died down in popularity if you can say that.

Some users expressed feelings of guilt for not contributing to the page as frequently as they once had:

“Been to long since I posted, miss you man”

“I know i havent been posted in a long time but im still thinkin of you”

“Sorry I haven't been around lately. I hope it's a good day wherever you are.”

Particularly for pages that had been around for several years or more, content tended to be very sparse in the current stage of the page's lifespan. Often most posting would cease altogether, save for a few individuals with close connections to the deceased who would often act as the sole contributors. As Jihl and Noah explain:

L.M.: Is it still updated much today?

Jihl: There's somebody who posts on it pretty frequently, but not other than that.

L.M.: And her page, it still gets traffic today?

Noah: Mostly just her sister. I'm good friends with her sister and she always puts like, “oh I miss you today”, or “I'm thinking about you”, or whatever.

Several pages observed in the content analysis tended to have at least one individual, not unlike the ones described by Jihl and Noah, who would post more frequently than others, even when all other posting had seemingly ended. One page, for example, that has existed for 38 months received only 4 updates in the last 6 months, all from the same individual. These individuals often shared very close connections to the deceased, oftentimes occupying the role of sibling or best friend. It is difficult to explain

why this occurs, but perhaps it is an attempt made by certain individuals to keep the memorial page, and by extension, the memory of the deceased alive.

Birthdays, Anniversaries, and Holidays

While the average temporal trend was for the amount of content posted to memorial pages to steadily decrease over time, certain ‘spikes’ of user activity were also observed. These spikes were frequently associated with specific dates including the birthday of the deceased, the anniversary of the deceased’s death, and other holidays such as Christmas. For the deceased individuals who had at least one birthday in the time that their memorial page was created, it was observed that 16.6% of their memorial page’s total content was posted on their birthday(s). Similarly, for individuals who had been deceased for at least one year, 14.68% of all their memorial page content was posted on the anniversary of their death. The following are some examples of the content posted on the birthdays and anniversaries of the deceased:

“Today is 5years since a truly wonderful amazing person left our presence. He was a genuine person in every single way.. Kev u may be gone but u were imprinted in our hearts n mind.. U are never forgotten. Each day u are thought about n missed dearly..”

“Hey D!! Can't believe it's been a year today since I saw that beautiful smile!!! I miss u sooo much and not a day goes by that I don't think about u!! Xoxo love u and keep it real!!!”

“Happy birthday honey. I will always keep our best memories. I know you would have thrown some amazing party today. Rest easy. Still can't believe you're gone. Love you always xxxx”

As previously mentioned, other holidays, specifically Christmas, provided small spikes in memorial page activity, although these spikes were considerably smaller than

those observed on birthdays and anniversaries of death. The following are some examples of comments posted to memorial pages on Christmas:

“Miss ya! Have a Merry Christmas ☺...wish u were here...”

“Hard to imagine Christmas without you there. Sure miss having you name there on the presents. Miss you man”

“merry christmas mitch. love&miss you bud”

Summary

The most apparent temporal posting trend of the memorial pages examined in this study was for the amount of content posted to be plentiful in the initial period immediately following the death of an individual, and to steadily decrease over time to a point where very little content is regularly posted. The exceptions to this were on important dates such as holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of a deceased individual’s death. These temporal trends seem to reflect the nature of grieving and bereavement in the offline world as well. Generally reactions to death are the strongest and most intense in the days immediately following, though these feelings tend to become more manageable over time as grief slowly turns into acceptance (Balk 2009). The diminishing levels of content posted to memorial pages over time may be representative of users coming to terms with the death in their life and moving into a state of acceptance where they do not feel the need to regularly visit or post to memorial pages. A numerical representation of the temporal posting trends to memorial pages is provided in the following table:

Table 7: Temporal Trends

Time	Percentage of Total Content Posted
Anniversary of Death	14.68 %
Birthday of the Deceased	16.16 %
Average Day	0.274 %
Within One Week of Page's Creation	23.39 %
Within the First Half of Page's Lifespan	77.44 %

Chapter 5: Rules, Norms, and Policy on Facebook Memorial Pages: Creation and Negotiation

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the social policies, norms, and rules that are found on Facebook memorial pages and to examine the ways in which these rules and norms are created and negotiated by their various users. It is important to note that the word 'rules' does not refer to any written set of guidelines that users must follow, but rather the implicit and unwritten standards that are generally understood by users and serve to guide some of their social behaviour (Burnett and Bonnici 2003). In the context of social media, Bryant and Marmo (2012) note that interaction rules also guide online social encounters on websites like Facebook by dictating tacit yet salient behavioural norms. Norms, then, are used in this study to refer to the various trends and collective social values found on memorial pages, while rules refer to the various ways in which norms are upheld and encouraged by their users. 'Policies' refer to the opportunities and limitations afforded to users by Facebook itself, the majority of which are stated and documented by the company which may be searched and read by any user.

Violation of memorial page norms can often be detrimental to the bereaved, though the effects of norm violation will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. The current chapter aims to explore what official Facebook policies exist, as well as uncovering what social norms and rules are in place on memorial pages and how these norms and rules are negotiated. It is divided into 4 sections: 1) an overview of the evolving rules and norms found on Facebook memorial pages, 2) a discussion on the ways in which age impacts memorial page use and norms, 3) an analysis of the differences in rules and the perceived appropriateness of public memorial pages when

compared to private ones, and finally, 4) a discussion of whether or not Facebook constitutes an appropriate space for grieving to take place.

The Evolving Rules and Norms of Facebook Memorial Pages

Freya: So I guess it's a slow process and it's one of the things we see with everything on the Internet and on social media, it's so new and it's so rapidly evolving that there are really no social codes around a lot of stuff and people don't really even consider that.

Freya's suggestion that there are "no social codes" to be found within certain aspects of social media, while a hyperbole, is perhaps not entirely incorrect, particularly with regard to memorial pages. Because memorial pages on Facebook are a relatively new phenomenon, the norms, rules and expectations of what the pages should or should not be are still in a state of negotiation between users.

Uncertain Protocol Following the Death of an Individual

However, before a memorial page is even created for a deceased individual, there are several different Facebook policies that users must be aware of in order to understand what options and possibilities are available to them. Essentially, Facebook policy allows its users three different avenues following the death of an individual. The first is to create a memorial page dedicated to the memory of the deceased user. These pages (which are the primary focus of this study) can be created by anybody at any time, are not subject to approval of any kind, and can be set to either public (visible to anyone with a Facebook account) or private (visible only to those who are granted access to the page by a

moderator). The second option (which may occur in tandem with the creation of a memorial page) is to submit a request for the deceased user's account to be put in 'memorial' status by Facebook. Pages in memorial status can have new content added to them by the friends of the deceased, but cannot be logged in to or altered in any way, meaning that no content can be edited or erased, and no new friends can be added. The third option (which again, may occur alongside the creation of a memorial page) is to submit a request for the deceased user's account to be permanently removed from Facebook. This can only be done by user's who have sufficient documentation of death, such as a death certificate, and who are the immediate family members of lawful representatives of the deceased.

Because many combinations of options exist, while an agreed upon social norm does not, the death of a user can often result in confusion and conflict amongst their Facebook connections with regard to how their memory is best preserved. It may, for example, be the wish of a deceased user's mother to erase her child's profile and online presence, while one of the child's friends may want to create a public memorial page. Jihl shared an example of how post-mortem confusion can sometimes occur:

L.M.: You mentioned there were several memorial pages made?

Jihl: Mhmm, just because people are really unorganized I guess so it's just like, everyone was like, "I'm gonna make the memorial page", so there was like six of them.

In this example, several memorial pages were created because other users were too "unorganized" to allow one primary page to flourish. Other interview participants have shared similar stories of several pages being created following the death of a friend:

Ward: I think there were about 3 pages made like the day he died and people were sort of on all of them and no one was really sure which one they were supposed to

use. I mean, eventually one of them kind of became like *the* page that would get used but at first it was a bit of a free-for-all.

The question of who (if anyone) should be given the option of deciding how the death of an individual should be dealt with on Facebook is one that, as of yet, remains unanswered. The current situation is, as Ward suggested, something of a “free-for-all.” However, it is worth noting while several options for expressing grief and memorializing the dead are available for bereaved individuals, all these options are mediated by and exist within the context of Facebook policy. Because of this, it is likely that Facebook policy and the options provided by Facebook have a hand in shaping the ways in which grief is expressed on their website. It would be interesting to see whether expressions of grief and memorialization differ across other websites that provide their users with different avenues of engagement.

Negotiating the Rules of Memorial Pages

Some of the memorial pages observed in this study contained content that attempted to clarify how the page should be used. Some examples:

“I found a pic of Oscar...does anyone know can we post 'em here?”

“Everyone please invite anyone you want to this page, and share the memories you have”

“Im working on a memorial video for Ruby. Would anyone mind if I posted it here when Im finished?”

“Please invite anyone you think should see this page, let’s keep Ruby’s memory alive!”

These examples highlight some of the ways in which the rules of memorial pages were negotiated and solidified by the various users. Because there exists no universal standard of what a memorial page is ‘supposed’ to be, the burden of deciding how these spaces should and should not be used falls on the users themselves. The various users who requested permission to post certain content or who encouraged others to invite members to join the page are engaged in the formation and negotiation of a particular memorial page’s set of rules and norms, whether they are actively aware of their participation or not. These comments are examples of visibly negotiated rules and norms, although other unspoken, tacit rules were also observed on memorial pages.

For example, profanity and cursing was generally very rare. Of the 2668 pieces of content examined, less than 30 of them contained vulgarities or curse words. There were no stated rules in place that restricted users from using any type of language they wanted to, yet nearly all of them made the decision to keep the content of their posts profanity-free. This was likely due to the fact that user’s wished to remain respectful of other user’s (many of whom were family members of the deceased) and the generally solemn nature of memorial pages. It is perhaps unsurprising that memorial pages did not contain large amounts of vulgar language, though this is a relevant example of the type of unwritten rule that exists on these pages.

Summary

Following the death of an individual there is sometimes confusion with regard to how the memorialization of the deceased should be undertaken, if at all. The memorial pages themselves can act as spaces where rules and norms can be negotiated by the

various users in both a spoken and an unspoken manner. Ultimately, it seems as if the social norms and rules of memorial pages, not unlike the rest of Facebook, are still being created and negotiated largely by the users themselves, and as such, no standardized set of rules and norms exists that will be equally applicable to every memorial page.

Age and Memorial Pages – Trends and Norms

The Age of the Deceased Individual

All 10 memorial pages examined in this study were created for deceased individuals who were relatively young (average age of 21, with a minimum of 17 and a maximum of 26). Though this is only a small sample, the fact that all 10 pages were set up for young individuals raises several important questions about the effects of age on the use, efficacy, and awareness of memorial pages. Are Facebook memorial pages used by, and created for, a predominantly young demographic, and does a user's age impact the way in which the page is used? Put another way, is the experience of creating and using memorial pages something that is largely restricted to and regulated by Facebook's younger users?

Several interview participants commented on the ways in which age can act as a factor that affects the way in which memorial pages are used. Freya explains how a memorial page created after the passing of her elderly grandmother did not have the same impact as other pages that had been set up for younger deceased individuals:

Freya: My grandmother actually passed away a few years ago as well and we did make a page for her um... but it wasn't really... it didn't work that well honestly.

L.M.: In what ways did it not work?

Freya: Uh I think it was just ‘cuz like the demographic was older so I mean she was like 85 um... I don’t even know if any of her friends had Facebook honestly, her friends were still alive, it was mostly just my family on the page and it was a private page it wasn’t open to the public and so I mean I think there’s a lot of photos posted on there, in some ways maybe it was nice for people who weren’t able to come to the service, but I don’t think it really did a lot for that many people.

Freya noticed that partially due to her grandmother’s age, and the fact that few of her friends had Facebook accounts, interaction with the memorial page that was created for her was primarily limited to her family. Titus recalled that following the death of his grandparents, a memorial page was not created at all:

Titus: I’ve had deaths in my family, not immediate, grandparents, things like that, where the medium was never used, Facebook was never used as a tool for grieving or as a memorial.

These experiences highlight one of the more prominent rules of memorial pages that has yet to be fully negotiated, specifically, the question of when it is and when it is not appropriate to create a memorial page following the death of an individual. Can we expect a memorial page to be created for *every* individual who passes away, or are there certain conditions, such as the age of the deceased, when the creation of a memorial page is not appropriate or necessary? The loose consensus of the interview participants seemed to be that memorial pages are more ‘successful’ (more members joining the pages and more content posted) when they have been created for younger individuals who had an active online presence on Facebook. Statistically, younger Facebook users tend to have significantly more online friends than older users, and as such, it could be expected that a memorial page created after the death of a younger user with many Facebook friends

would elicit more reaction and activity than a page set up for an elderly individual with fewer online friends.

Another potential reason why memorial pages created for young individuals tend to receive more attention may be the tragic connotations attached to those who die irregularly young. As Balk (2009) reminds us, youth and adolescence is typically a healthy period of life, and deaths during this time are not common. Subsequently, the reactions to these deaths are often particularly intense, and this may be represented by the large amount of activity that the memorial pages receive.

The Age of the Bereaved

It may be the case that for the younger individuals who have grown up with Facebook and online interaction as an important and often integral part of their lives, the social dynamics of grief and mourning are played out in an online manner which may be generationally unique. Jihl shared a story that highlights some of the ways in which the age of users affected the way in which they interacted with the memorial page:

Jihl: My best friend's dad passed away. Because he wasn't a kid it was a little different.

L.M.: In what way was it different?

Jihl: It was a different demographic and there was a lot less of my friends posting on it, but I found the way that the adults reacted to it was a lot different. So his family, like most middle-aged people are getting on Facebook right? So his family would post something heartfelt and meaningful that they actually believed when they said it and that was it. There was no follow-up or continual bringing it up. I think the adults kind of got it out and they've dealt with it before right? They realize that they need to get passed it. As teenagers I don't think we've had enough experience with it to be able to get over it quickly or move on quickly, so it was kind of a different situation... Because a lot of people interact with Facebook because they feel the need to be noticed, but an adult is kind of, has their own, they already feel noticed, they already feel worth enough because they

didn't grow up with the Internet, they didn't get that complex, so they don't need people to recognize what they've done, where teenagers are like, "I need you to recognize I'm still hurting."

Here Jihl is suggesting that there are differences in the ways in which teenagers and middle-aged individuals grieve, both online and offline. The combination of younger individuals inexperience with bereavement and their "need to be noticed", results in much of their mourning process being played out in the visible and interactive realm of Facebook. This idea of younger individuals 'need to be noticed' is supported by Gonazales and Hancock (2011), who argue that Facebook use, specifically the interaction with and attention received from other users, is correlated with the self-esteem levels of its younger users. This is contrasted with older populations, who are more likely to have experience with death and mourning, and, according to Jihl, do not feel the same need have their suffering recognized. It cannot be concluded whether this distinction is entirely accurate, though it would perhaps partially explain why memorial pages tend to be utilized to a greater degree with younger populations than with older ones.

However, there seems to be no agreed-upon norm or rule in place that limits the ways in which populations of varying ages interact on memorial pages. Some (McLaughlin and Vitak 2011 and Bryant and Marmo 2012) have pointed out that throughout Facebook, there are norms in place which dictate the ways in which older and younger users are expected to engage with each other (it is, for example, considered for many to be intrusive and a norm violation when parents constantly post to the walls of their children), yet none of these norms seemed to carry over to memorial pages. Users of all ages were found to contribute to these pages and to interact with each other, and while

the majority of the activity was often from younger users, there was no evidence to suggest that the presence and participation of older users was seen as a norm violation.

Summary

The data collected in this study suggests that age does play a role, albeit a minor one, in the ways in which memorial pages are interacted with. Specifically, pages that are created for deceased individuals who died young tend to receive considerably more attention (in the form of page members and the amount of content posted) than pages that are created for individuals who died at older ages. While the creation of a memorial page for a young individual seems to be something that should be expected, there does not seem to be a rule in place that suggests when a page should or should not be created for older individual. Some participant have shared that they did not find it necessary to create a page for older individuals who have died, and those that did noticed that they only received a marginal amount of attention compared to pages that have been created for young individuals. Additionally, while most content on memorial pages was posted by young users, people of all ages were also engaged, and as such, it may be inferred that there is no specific norm in place that restricts or dissuades people of any age from contributing to memorial pages.

Private versus Public Memorial Pages – Appropriateness and Effectiveness

One of the most important decisions a Facebook user must make when creating a memorial page is whether that page should be set to public or private accessibility. Public

pages are open, visible, searchable, and joinable by anyone with a Facebook account, where private pages are only accessible upon sending a request and receiving the approval of the page's moderator(s), oftentimes the user who created the page. While there is currently no rule or agreed upon standard in place to dictate which format should be adopted, interview participants were asked for their thoughts as to which format they believed to be more appropriate or effective, and the majority of them asserted that public memorial pages were favourable to private ones. Several interview participants shared their reasons as to why they believed this to be the case:

L.M.: So in your experience do you think it's better to have these pages public or do you think it's better to have them sort of private and limited to certain social networks?

Freya: I do think that it's good to have them open to the public, definitely. I think that um... people, I mean everyone deals with loss and mourning in different ways but to some people it does seem to be very... it does seem to give them a lot of relief to post a status update or to post in one of those groups and, you know, express their feelings about it, so yeah, I think it's definitely really good that it's something the Internet has allowed us to do.

L.M.: These pages, do you think they're better off public and being open to everyone or do you think it's better if they're private and limited to a certain social group?

Rosa: Mhmm, I think that public is fine because I feel like if you had a private group those people should only be the people who would actually meet in person and kind of talk about those things, so that, like I think if you had a personal closed network it should only involve people who would actually get together and have those conversations in person so you don't really need that because they would already be doing that in person.

L.M.: Well just in your opinion do you think that one format is better than the other? Do you think that these pages that are on Facebook should be public and open to everyone, or do you think that-

Noah: No, I think they should be public and open to everyone, it's not like something you want to hide, and it's not privileged information, it's information

about someone dying. I feel that should be public knowledge, I mean maybe if it's like an important person, maybe you want certain people to find out first before you let the world know, so you can plan stuff, you want to tell their parents in person before they find out through Facebook or whatever.

The ideas expressed in these examples seem to suggest that having a private memorial page is somewhat redundant. Redundant because, according to Rosa, those who would be given access to the private memorial page would already be meeting in person, and because, as Noah claims, information about death and the ability to express grief is not something that is "privileged." Freya's suggestion that, "everyone deals with loss and mourning in different ways", is perhaps another way of suggesting that while public memorial pages may offer varying levels of usefulness to different individuals, those that do benefit from them are enough to justify their existence. However, it is worth noting that one of the unique benefits of private memorial pages is that they effectively defend against potential 'troll' attacks, as only users who have been granted approval by a page moderator will be able to post and interact with other users.

While most interview participants agreed that public memorial pages were more appropriate than private ones, Rinoa argued that expressing grief on a public page may also be problematic:

Rinoa: I don't want to have my true grieving process to be a public thing because it's like, grieving is not simple, it's kind of messy right? There's nasty aspects, there's beautiful aspects, it's raw and it's real and that doesn't translate well onto a public Facebook post, people go through all sorts of different stages when they're grieving and I think maybe talking about it now, I feel like Facebook, these pages, only kind of grasp one part of it or some parts of it but they don't get the full dimension of it.

Summary

While most interview participants seemed to favour the public format, this sample is far too small to draw any conclusive generalizations. Potentially there may exist some conflict between users as to how a memorial page should be maintained and who should be given access to it (one user may want a memorial page to be public, while another may want it to be private, for example), though none of this conflict was directly observable, and thus, no inferences should be made with regard to norm violations.

Ultimately there is no right or wrong answer as to whether or not memorial pages should be public or private, and for that reason, the public/private decision remains one that, as of yet, is without an established set of social guidelines. There are no identifiable social norms or rules in place to suggest that one format is more appropriate than the other, and as such, it is a decision that must be made on a case-by-case basis by the users who create the pages.

Expressions of Grief and Mourning on Facebook: Appropriate, or a Violation of Norms?

Facebook's decision to allow various memorialization procedures for its users suggests that the company is aware that bereavement is taking place on their website and that they have taken steps to more effectively facilitate this behaviour. However, is Facebook the most appropriate location for grief and memorialization to occur? Do Facebook users feel as if the inclusion of memorial pages and memorialized accounts is a

violation of what the Facebook experience ought to be? Interview participants were asked for their opinions on whether or not mourning and memorialization behaviours should be included and openly accepted on Facebook, or if this violated the norms of the Facebook experience. Garnet suggested that because of Facebook's ubiquity in modern society and its ability to rapidly spread news and information that it should be inclusive of bereavement activity:

L.M.: So do you think that Facebook is the best place for these things to be happening, or do you think these pages are better off being set up somewhere else on the Internet?

Garnet: No, I think Facebook is a good place for them to be because it is so widely used, everyone has Facebook, and I do have a lot of friends who read news and stuff on Facebook and get all their information from Facebook just because they're always on it, so I guess it's a good tool to use and if it's already there why not utilize it?

Noah expressed a similar opinion, claiming that because Facebook has become, for many of its users, a primary news source that death-related news should not be exempt from inclusion on the website:

L.M.: So do you think that Facebook is the right place for these things or do you think they should be put somewhere else on the Internet?

Noah: I think Facebook is just as good as any, better than an obituary in a newspaper, if Facebook is our new form of news, it's the same thing as an obituary I guess, like an obituary in a newspaper, it's the same, just a different medium, so I don't see it as any different. I think that's the step that we've taken, more people go on Facebook for the news, I never see people walking around campus with a newspaper, they got their cell phones.

The idea of Facebook as a means of spreading and disseminating news of all kind is relatively new, though has been well documented (see Hille and Bakker 2013, for example). This represents a slight shift from Facebook's original intention of facilitating

communication and social connections between users. The notion, hinted at by both Garnet and Noah, that Facebook has become a primary source news, and thus should support the inclusion of death-related news and bereavement activities was a common one amongst interview participants. Jihl agreed that Facebook should be a site for bereavement activity because, as she reminds us, a main function of social media is to document the lives of its users:

L.M.: Well I want to ask you know whether or not you think that Facebook is the right place for this stuff to be happening. Should it be limited to Facebook, should it be somewhere else on the Internet?

Jihl: I don't think, I mean we can't take it out of social media completely because the whole point is to document our everyday lives and that's a part of our lives.

Jihl's point is an important one. If, as she suggests, the nature of social media is to document our daily lives, then perhaps it follows that the end of life should also be afforded the same level of documentation.

Zack adopted a more fatalistic outlook, suggesting that because mourning and memorialization activities have already found their way onto Facebook that it would be difficult to remove them:

L.M.: Do you think that Facebook is the right platform or the right place for this kind of thing, or do you think that it should be quarantined somewhere else on the Internet or should it be on the Internet at all?

Zack: Well it's already there, so I don't know if it can go away, who knows, it's the new age.

Zack's outlook reminds us that it is the users who ultimately decide what norms are in place and how social media is used. User activity largely dictates what policy Facebook adopts, and user feedback and criticisms have been effective in changing

Facebook policy in the past (Wilson, Gosling and Graham 2012). Because of this, the fact that mourning and memorialization are commonly occurring on Facebook, coupled with the fact that Facebook has responded to this activity and implemented different memorialization opportunities, suggests that the majority of users have decided that this is something that does indeed have a place on the website.

Summary

This segment was concerned with discovering whether or not bereavement and memorialization activities on Facebook constituted a norm violation of the overall Facebook experience. Most interview participants were in agreement that, while not without flaws, Facebook remains an appropriate space for these activities to occur. Because Facebook has evolved into becoming a main source of news for many of its users, many participants suggested that death-related news and activity should not be an exception. Additionally, because part of the nature of social media is to document the lives of its users, participants suggested that death, being an integral part of life, should also be afforded the same level of documentation. And finally, the fact that these activities are already occurring on Facebook is evidence to suggest that users are largely comfortable with their presence, as it is ultimately the users who play a vital role in determining what social networking websites like Facebook should and should not include.

Chapter 6: Differences Between Online and Offline Mourning: Unique Positive and Negative Aspects

In this chapter interview participants share some of the ways in which using and interacting with Facebook memorial pages has both helped and hindered their mourning processes. While the majority of the content observed during the content analysis portion of this study tended to be supportive, positive, and largely successful in creating a communal space wherein grief could be openly expressed and discussed, many interview participants suggested that there exist other latent effects of memorial pages that may not be as beneficial. The purpose of this chapter is not to argue for or against the existence, use, or effectiveness of memorial pages, but rather to highlight some of their unique aspects, whether positive or negative, that may not necessarily be found in the offline world. After examining some of these aspects, more general differences between online and offline mourning will be discussed. This chapter is divided into four sections: 1) an overview of the perceived beneficial aspects of memorial pages, 2) an overview of the perceived detrimental aspects of memorial pages, 3) a discussion of the various differences between online and offline mourning, and lastly, 4) a summary of the findings.

The Unique Beneficial Aspects of Memorial Pages

Evidence of Appreciation for Memorial Pages

“What an honor it is for our family to see your thoughts and memories today. His memory page is something we can treasure forever, today tomorrow or in 10 years from now. So thank you for posting it here on his memory page as we can open it up and smile and see how he's touched not only our lives but yours as well. We miss you so much our sweet Jason.”

This post, written by the mother of a deceased child on his memorial page roughly one year after it had been created, is one example how memorial pages and the content that they generate have a lasting, positive effect on the bereaved. Because Facebook pages document and store all content posted to them since the day of their creation, they can be revisited “today, tomorrow or in 10 years from now”, as this user suggests. Having this well-archived, empirically observable reminder available at all times, allows the bereaved to return to a place where grief has been quarantined and expressed by others whenever they feel it necessary to do so. Fowler (2005) reminds us that the revisiting of certain spaces, objects and circumstances related to a death allows for the creation and facilitation of a ‘collective memory’ within the mourner. This collective memory can potentially aid in the mourning process by allowing certain moments and states of mind to be revisited when feelings of grief arise.

Other instances of users expressing appreciation for the creation and continual use of memorial pages were also observed. Some examples:

“Thank you sarah for the page we miss him more and more every min”

“Thank you for creating this space for us.... So many of us were blessed to meet and experience Josef’s exuberant, joyful, loving nature while he participated with these past several months. He will be sadly missed as he has touched our lives & hearts in many special ways. Thank you again for the opportunity to share and support through this page.”

These examples, often coming from family members of the deceased, evidently suggest that memorial pages are acknowledged and appreciated by those who are in mourning. Some potential reasons as to why these pages are appreciated by their users will now be addressed.

A Space to Discuss and Share Grief with Other Users

In the offline world, discussing feelings of grief with other mourners has been shown to be an effective step in the bereavement process (Neimeyer and Currier 2009 and Moules et al 2007), and it would seem as if these tendencies carry over onto the online space of Facebook as well. Several interview participants noted that the ability to discuss their feelings openly with other users was a valuable and helpful option:

LM: If you can remember back to the time you were posting this, did you find it to be helpful?

Celes: Yeah, I felt it was therapeutic, yeah, especially because I had a few of us on Facebook that were kind of like really supportive of each other although we weren't like friends in real life really, we were like acquaintances through my friend so we kind of like supported each other.

LM: And that was beneficial for you?

Celes: That was beneficial for me.

Jihl: It was kind of a weird sensation because you're so sad that somebody is gone, but you kind of want to see how sad everybody else is at the same time so you keep checking on it 'cuz it's like, "we can be sad together."

For Celes and Jihl, it was "therapeutic" to be able to discuss their feelings with other users who were likely experiencing similar sensations. The memorial pages observed in this study all had atmospheres that could be described as supportive, open, or

non-judgemental, and were very much in line with the ideas posited by Celes and Jihl. The ability for a group of people to “be sad together”, as Jihl noted, is not something that is unique to memorial pages, although unlike offline practices such as funerals or wakes, memorial pages exist indefinitely and are accessible at any moment, allowing users to reach out to a support network that they may not necessarily have in the offline world any time the need to do so arises. The ease and continuous accessibility of memorial pages seems to make them a unique and convenient tool for those in mourning that feel the need to have their feelings be shared, heard, or responded to.

Identity Construction

It has been suggested that, in the offline world, discussing and establishing a narrative and identity for the deceased can be an important step in the grieving process (Harvey, Carlson, Huff and Green 2001). Discussing the traits of deceased individuals allows those in mourning to recognize what they have lost and to create lasting memories of the deceased individual’s virtuous qualities (Finlay and Krueger 2011). The practice of identity construction was also observed on memorial pages, with, inferentially, the same positive effect. Users often posted content that highlighted the positive and attractive qualities of the deceased such as their sense of humour, charisma, kindness, generosity, and physical attractiveness. Some examples:

“Johnny man you were the funniest kid I ever met, you were loved by everyone and still will always be loved”

“all who met this amazing charismatic young man were truly touched by an angel. he was the biggest kid n ball of energy i have ever met. i Will never forget how he could make everyone laugh in the toughest moments”

“Today a truly wonderful amazing person left our presence. He was a genuine person in every single way.”

“Ruby was such a beautiful person inside and out and one of the kindest people I ever met”

Comments like these allow the deceased to be depicted and remembered in an appealing way. Dwelling on the appealing qualities of the deceased and engaging in identity construction, particularly in the time immediately following death, is not something that is unique to online memorial pages, although memorial pages do allow for a certain degree of identity *mis*construction to occur, though this will be elaborated upon further in a different segment of this chapter.

Discovering the Deceased

Several interview participants commented on how memorial pages allowed them to see certain aspects and characteristics of the deceased that they were not necessarily aware of while they were alive, particularly when they had only a limited relationship with the deceased. For some participants it was exciting and refreshing to find out more about the deceased. Rinoa explains how after the death of her middle-aged friend, she was able to gain insight from the posts of other users as to who her friend was during different stages of her life:

Rinoa: I met Julia 3 or 4 years ago, so I didn't know her and other aspects of her, so to have a chance to kind of see photos of her throughout her whole life was really interesting because if you meet someone in a certain place, you haven't seen their former self, so it kind of shows the bigger picture. It's also interesting to have met people both mostly in person but later online who have known her throughout different phases of her life as well, you know her university friends and so on, and so I thought that was really interesting so it did I guess create community around what was happening.

Similarly, Freya explained how when a friend from her youth who she had not kept in close contact with passed away, the memorial page allowed her to find out who her old friend had become before she died:

Freya: It was nice for me to be able to read the comments, ‘cuz like I hadn’t... it was kind of nice to read what other people had said about her like, “oh wow, since I last saw her this is what she’s been up to”, like I didn’t know, there’s so many more dimensions that I didn’t know about her that I got to find out through Facebook which was definitely very cool.

Garnet noted that the comments and experiences of other users on the memorial page allowed the deceased to be represented in a more “whole” way:

Garnet: It was just to see the people in a more... whole perspective rather than just the way you saw them and see how they impacted other people as well.

Ultimately, these responses seem to suggest that any deceased individual is comprised of numerous aspects, and many people, specifically those who were not particularly close with the deceased, are not privy to all of these aspects. By sharing their experiences and memories on memorial pages, users are able to paint a picture of a deceased individual’s life that is potentially more all-encompassing and ‘complete’ than it would be otherwise. Being able to witness and take part in the creation of this picture was considered by the interview participants to be a beneficial and meaningful experience.

The Unique Negative Aspects of Memorial Pages

Distasteful or Slanderous Content on Memorial Pages

As mentioned earlier, the safety and anonymity afforded by the Internet has given rise to a group of Internet users commonly referred to as ‘trolls’, that is, users who attempt to hijack online discussions and spaces by posting harassing and inflammatory content with the intention of provoking emotional responses from other users (MacKinnon and Zuckerman 2012). While no obvious signs of trolls or trolling were observed on the pages examined in this study, troll activity on other Facebook memorial pages has occurred in the past, most commonly on the pages of deceased individuals of some notoriety, such as politicians or celebrities, or fairly recently, following the suicide of British Columbia teenager Amanda Todd, when many trolls and harassers took to the various memorial pages that were created for her. It is undoubtedly hurtful for a bereaved individual to witness troll attacks on memorial pages, and while none of these attacks were observed during this study, several interview participants have had experience with users posting distasteful and sometimes slanderous content to memorial pages. Freya shared an example of a politician who had passed away:

Freya: There’s an instance I can think of where there was like a very negative... it was a politician who had died, kind of a friend of a friend, so a friend told me about this post, it was basically like, “this politician killed lives through his policies, I’m glad he’s dead he was a horrible black mark on humanity”, or something like that.

In this example, a user who disagreed with the deceased politician’s policies continued to express his disagreement on the politician’s memorial page. For those mourning this individual, to see him being represented and remembered as, “a horrible black mark on humanity”, is likely to be hurtful. In a different example, Jihl explained how following the accidental death of her friend, one user began posting distasteful content to the memorial page:

Jihl: I found that because it was so public, so anybody could say anything, and we did run into a couple situations where there people, it started on Facebook on memorial pages, where they'd be like, "oh, he deserved it." or, "I bet it was planned, I bet he planned it." There was a lot of controversy that came from it because it was so open, and it caused a lot of discomfort for us personally, it's like, "you don't actually know anything about it and it's kind of rude of you to be saying these things", but at the same time, looking at a family's perspective, if you were a parent and you saw that somebody said like, "oh your kid deserved to die", like that's really hard to read right? So there was a lot of controversy and argument over a lot of the stuff that was being said.

Jihl's point that the parent of a deceased child would likely not want to read such comments is an apt one, and it serves to highlight the unique manner in which memorial pages and other online spaces act as areas that are not prone to the same degree of censorship of the offline world. Zack explained that people are generally more prone to say hurtful things about the dead from the safety of a computer screen as opposed to in offline environments.

Zack: It's crazy but I guess that's the fascinating thing about the Internet is we're not doing this [a face-to-face conversation], there's a screen here and nobody gives a shit, I mean you could put a fake name, you could be a whole different person on the Internet and just say whatever you want, but in the real world nobody would ever say that sort of thing at a funeral I don't think, maybe the Westboro Baptist church...

L.M.: (laughs) they might. So you're suggesting that you're not going to find people at a funeral saying this kind of stuff where they can be identified or called out?

Zack: No, it takes way too much balls, nobody has that kind of gall.

As Zack suggests, the amount of "gall" required to speak harshly of a dead individual in person is apparently far more than what is required to engage in the same behaviour from the often anonymous comfort of the Internet. As such, it seems as if online spaces such as memorial pages are more prone to receiving disparaging or

otherwise distasteful remarks about the dead than offline spaces such as funerals, however, it should be noted that these types of remarks are most commonly observed when the deceased individual is of particular notoriety, and no examples were observed on any of the ten memorial pages examined in this study.

However, the ability to speak of the deceased's less desirable qualities from a more anonymous or 'safe' place may not necessarily be an entirely negative occurrence. It may be the case, particularly following the death of notorious individuals such as politicians, that Facebook allows for a more democratic discussion about the implications of the deceased individual's policies by providing an equal voice to all of its users, thereby allowing its users the ability to question the policies of the deceased or to hold them more accountable for the decisions they have made in life.

Inaccurate Identity Construction and Representations of the Deceased

As noted in the prior segment of this chapter, the ability for memorial pages users to witness and take part in the identity construction of the deceased was shown to be a beneficial step in the grieving process. However, some interview participants have suggested that sometimes deceased individuals are remembered and memorialized in a way that is not necessarily an accurate depiction of who they were while they were alive. Martin (2010) has noted that in the offline world, several, and sometimes competing, narratives of the deceased may exist. Some interview participants explained how seeing deceased individual's being represented in a way that they felt was not accurate or genuine affected their grieving procedure. Titus recalled that following the death of an individual who had bullied him in high school, he was remembered and depicted not as a bully, but with his more admirable traits in mind:

Titus: He wasn't the kindest person, but the way he was highlighted it was all obviously all his positive features so that was probably my first experience with one and I thought it kind of strange, the whole thing was kind of weird.

L.M.: So the way they were talking about this individual, you felt as if it wasn't an accurate depiction of who he actually was?

Titus: No, not at the time.

Reis shared a story of her deceased friend who did not identify as religious while he was alive, though others attempted to remember him through the lens of religion following his death:

Reis: The reason that he was distant [from his family] was because she was really religious, so she was blaming a lot of things on the Godly side of him dying, she said that because he was into drugs that's why he killed himself, and so it was just a really tough service, it wasn't closure like how a funeral should be.

L.M: Because the people that were representing him weren't necessarily representing who he actually was?

Reis: True, and that's how it was on Facebook, it was the same people that didn't know him but were saying that they did I guess, so we had to sit there and listen to people talk a bunch of crap.

Reis was upset that her best friend, a person that she felt she knew extremely well, was being remember in a way that was not representative of who he was. This made it particularly hard for her to read what was being said about him on his memorial page because she felt as if most of what was being written was, in her words, "a bunch of crap." This had an adverse effect on her grieving procedure. Several comments on other memorial pages adopted a religious tone as well, whether or not the deceased individual was religious during their lifetime. Some examples (examples of religious graphics can be found in the appendix):

“I pray that our Creator God will give you peace today.”

“May God's Peace Love & Light be with all during our time of loss. I hope everyone has good healing.”

Posts that may have been inaccurate depictions of the deceased drew no criticism from other users on the memorial pages. This fact potentially suggests that other users were not put off by their inclusion, although Reis's examples suggests that users may in actuality take issue with certain things that are posted to memorial pages without ever vocalizing or making their concerns known. Because of this, it is difficult to infer how many users are adversely affected by witnessing representations of the deceased that they believe to be inaccurate, though this is a largely hidden population that is worthy of mentioning and one example of how memorial pages are not entirely beneficial for every user that interacts with them. It must also be noted that inaccurate or incomplete representations of the deceased are not likely occurrences that are exclusive to Facebook memorial pages. At funerals, for example, it is proper custom to speak well of the deceased, while ignoring their less-admirable qualities. Whether or not this has the same impacts on mourners in the offline world is a question that remains to be answered.

“Mourning Grandstanding”: Implications of Disingenuous Expressions of Grief

The sentiments shared on memorial pages, the vast majority of them being positive and supportive, do not give any outwardly apparent reasons to suggest that they are anything but sincere expressions of grief by the users who have posted them. However, several interview participants have opined that some of the content posted to memorial pages may have been posted as a means of assuring inclusion within a

particular group, in this case, mourners. This raises an interesting question; does the public and visible nature of memorial pages cause users to express grief in a way that is more exaggerated than it would have otherwise been in an offline setting? It may seem inappropriate to suggest that displays of grief on memorial pages are anything but genuine, though several interview participants have made the case to suggest otherwise, and as a result, this is a notion that deserves to be addressed.

The ability to feel included on social networking sites has been noted as a source of gratification for many users (Quan-Haase and Young 2010). Perhaps not unlike the offline world, Facebook users find a certain degree of comfort in feeling as if they are a part of a community, particularly when they are able to contribute to that community by having their online voices heard and acknowledged (van Dijck 2012). Several interview participants have argued that these desires to belong are also apparent on memorial pages:

L.M.: Are you suggesting that some of these comments struck you as disingenuous?

Garnet: I think they're genuine in a sense, but I also think they're... I don't know how to put it, but like, the more people see other people grieving the more they want to be a part of it.

L.M.: So you spent a bit of time reading what other people had said, what was the kind of the overall gist of that, what was the sort of main sentiments?

Noah: Um, I got the feeling that most people feel obligated to do it, it wasn't like, just because I was so close to this person, I kind of knew who knew her but didn't *really* know her and just felt obligated to say something. It's the same with 'happy birthdays', you get like a hundred people saying, "happy birthday" to you, but you have like ten close friends, you get the notification, you gotta write something.

Here Garnet and Noah are suggesting that some users contribute to memorial pages due to a desire to "be a part of it" (Garnet), or simply out of a perceived obligation

to do so (Noah). This is not to say that those who contribute are not sincere about their grief, but the public and visible nature of Facebook does potentially determine the way in which these contributions are formulated. Reis and Rosa both explained how this particular way of expressing grief may be influenced by the presence and contributions of other users:

Rosa: I think that some people use, like someone's death and social media as a way to kind of make themselves involved in something, like I almost think it's a popularity contest of how many people you know that have passed away, so I think it's easy to just you know, put a comment, or put a status that says, "rest in peace", to the person, but it's a lot harder to actually attend a funeral.

Reis: I don't like the fact that it's so publicized now, that death is made this kind of game... I guess people get really excited about, it's the talk of that week or whatever, and they can say all this stuff online but no one would even talk to me in person, like I had people posting on my wall saying, "oh you two were such good friends, you're in my prayers", but then in person they wouldn't even look at me because they were afraid maybe to hurt my feelings.

Both Reis and Rosa explained that Facebook user activity following the death of an individual can be made into a "popularity contest" or a "game", wherein death is used as tool by various users to compete for the attention of others. They both also implied that it easier and more convenient to post grief-related content to Facebook than it would be to partake in offline activities such as a funeral or a face-to-face discussion. Rinoa also touched on this idea, suggesting that some users partook in what she called mourning "grandstanding":

Rinoa: It was just interesting because I felt as though there was like... a lot of it was sort of people's mourning but because it was in a public setting it seemed as though people were... there was like mourning grandstanding and sort of like almost like one-upmanship in terms of how well they knew and connected with Julia [the deceased] and you know, obviously it wasn't overt, but it felt like there was undertones of it and Facebook creates this setting where if you have a comment and like you know, people have the opportunity to like it and whatnot so it kind of creates this... you get instant validation for what you say and I think

that... it's hard to say with any sort of precision or accuracy whether or not that was part of the intent of those who posted on it but, certainly getting kind of attention felt like that was an aspect of that Facebook page.

The aforementioned interviewee responses seem to paint a picture of memorial page contribution as a form of social contest, wherein users attempt to highlight the ways in which their relationship with the deceased (and the grief that they are experiencing) was more close, important, or intimate than other users. Some interview participants expressed how these apparent social contests negatively affected their own mourning process, particularly when they shared a close relationship with the deceased. Jihl felt that her sentiments were being buried under numerous other contributions from users that she felt did not share the same level of relationship with the deceased:

Jihl: I found it really disconnecting.

L.M.: In what way?

Jihl: I felt really disconnected by it because there was so many people speaking on it I feel like you kind of don't have, you feel like you don't have any voice because there's too many voices, and the people who you really want to talk to about it usually aren't participating either so you feel overwhelmed by it because there's so much you want from the situation that you're not getting and you're getting so much that you didn't want from the situation.

It is difficult to say whether the disconnection that Jihl felt is experienced by other users who observe and interact with memorial pages. Undoubtedly every individual has their own unique relationship with the deceased, and while some may be closer or more intimate than others, there is no way to conclude with any degree of certainty that contributions to memorial pages are anything but sincere. However, many interview participants did argue both directly and indirectly that some user's voices were perhaps less genuine than others, but because Facebook allows every user's voice to be heard to

an equal magnitude, there is no apparent way of deciphering the relationship between users and the deceased or the authenticity of their contributions to memorial pages.

“A False Support Network”: Memorial Page Content as a Display for Other Users

Celes: I mean in some ways I guess it’s good because you feel as though there’s a support network...but it’s kind of like a false support network.

LM: How do you mean a false support network?

Celes: I don’t know, personally I think it’s probably more important to have like people around you physically who you can talk to and you don’t I guess it’s like edited when it’s online right? Like you think of what you’re going to say and you type it out and whatnot.

Celes raises an important point concerning one of the fundamental differences between offline and online expressions of grief (and any other social interaction for that matter), specifically the fact that content posted to Facebook, unlike social interactions in the offline world, is often privy to an editing process by the individual posting the content. Facebook users have the options to proofread, edit, and alter all the content that they post and may take as long as they desire to post their content. These are options that are generally not available to individuals in the offline world. But does the ability to edit and carefully consider each post before it is made affect the displays of grief found on memorial pages? Zack suggests that it does, arguing that users are able to edit whatever they post in order to ensure that “everybody else will like it.” In his words:

Zack: Maybe they [memorial page] are a little less personal, ‘cuz you’re not in there with people grieving together, you’re just on a computer screen, you could feel totally different, you could just put down something and edit it, edit it, edit it, until it’s not really what you want to say but you know everybody else will like it.

The end result of this editing process, according to Zack, is that users are no longer expressing what they truly feel, rather they are self-censoring and expressing sentiments that they know other users will appreciate. Again, there is no way to empirically test whether or not the content posted to memorial pages has been edited to a point where it no longer accurately reflects how an individual is truly feeling, although other interview participants did touch on this notion as well. Rosa argued that due to the editing process and the visible nature of memorial pages, the grief that gets expressed ends up being “superficial”:

L.M.: So what do you think then, is it possible to express a sincere sentiment online?

Rosa: I think it is, I think it is, I just don't think that it really shows like the true grief that someone goes through. I think it's a little bit of a superficial kind of, I mean, I would never write like a raw emotional feeling that I was having about grieving my friend whereas I would like say that to a friend or say that to someone in person.

Here Rosa is claiming that she would never post any “raw emotional feelings” to a memorial page, restricting herself to only posting something “superficial”, or nothing at all. Perhaps this is because Rosa is uniquely self-aware enough to avoid hypocritically posting the same type of content that she deemed to be superficial, however, she was not alone in her belief that content posted to memorial pages is perhaps more about social interactions and less about the mourning process itself. Reis and Zack argued in support of this perspective:

L.M: Are you suggesting these people were not genuine in what they were saying?

Reis: I think that they could be genuine, but I think they were doing it for the attention.

L.M.: But you posted content as well, why is that?

Reis: I posted a picture, but I kind of wish I didn't now because now I don't care what other people think about if we were friends or not, people who were close to him knew that I was really close with him, but I posted because I felt like people needed to know that I was friends with him.

L.M.: So is that why you didn't feel the need to post anything yourself?

Zack: I mean my perspective is that it's more for the people who are reading it than the guy who's died.

L.M.: How do you mean?

Zack: Well, I don't believe the person who's died is going to read the nice messages you've written, it's more to let people know that are still alive what they meant. I just take them as it's you posting something to let other people know what you thought about this person right? It's not um... for me I don't need other people to know what I think all the time.

The ability for memorial page users to edit their content prior to posting has been expressed by several interview participants as a potentially negative thing as it seemingly influences users to post more for the approval of others as opposed to genuinely expressing the grief that they are feeling. However, it should also be noted that the ability to edit content from the privacy of one's computer may also potentially be a positive option as it grants users who may have trouble expressing grief in person the comfort of expressing grief in a manner that is perhaps 'safer' or less urgent than it would be in a face-to-face setting. That is, individuals who feel uncomfortable saying things to other bereaved individuals in person may find it easier to do so using social media such as Facebook (Turkle 2011).

Other Perceived Differences Between Online and Offline Mourning

As discussed, there are several arguments to be made for both the beneficial and the detrimental impacts of online mourning procedures that may potentially be unique from more conventional offline procedures. In order to further uncover the ways in which online mourning is perhaps different from offline mourning, interview participants were also asked to compare their online mourning experiences with their offline experiences, not necessarily as a way of seeing which method they were more comfortable with, but as a way of highlighting the various differences between them.

Several interview participants noted that those who attended the funeral of a deceased individual were more likely to have had a closer connection to the deceased. In this regard, offline mourning practices were perceived as a type of social filter, whereby only those who had a strong urge to mourn the deceased attended, while those with a more distant relationship with the deceased limited themselves to posting on the memorial pages without taking part in offline group mourning activities. Ward suggested that the effort required to physically attend a funeral was one way of determining who “honestly cared” about the deceased, while Jihl noted that those at the funeral tended to be closer to the deceased than those who participated on the memorial page:

L.M.: Was your experience with the memorial page any different than the funeral setting or something in the real world?

Ward: It's less formal and there's less emotions, so I don't actually know if all the people on the pages are serious or not, but for the people that did take the effort to attend the actual funeral itself, you have to take time out of your day and it's a big effort and it shows that you honestly care, but with a page you can quickly post anything.

L.M.: Was the overall mentality and sentiment [at the funeral] any different than it was online or was it sort of the same?

Jihl: It was sort of the same, though there was a lot less people at the funeral that didn't know him very well. There were more people who were closer with him at the funeral than who participated actively on the page.

The perspectives shared here are perhaps not surprising, although it should also be noted that for some physically attending a funeral may be problematic (due to scheduling or geographic complications for example), even if they had a genuine desire to do so. Still, the general consensus amongst interview participants seemed to be that offline spaces such as funeral were more 'serious' spaces than their online counterparts, which were perceived to be a more 'casual' way of expressing grief. This was something of a contentious issue for some interviewees, who believed that if an individual were to express a seemingly heartfelt and sincere display of grief on a memorial page, they should also have more of an obligation to attend the funeral as well. Rosa and Garnet argued this perspective:

L.M.: And the atmosphere [at the funeral], was it different there than it was online?

Rosa: Definitely. I think the people that, a couple people messaged me on Facebook to say sorry about it and I feel like if you message me on Facebook you should've been at the funeral and there was kind of like a, if you acknowledge her death on Facebook on Instagram or something, I feel like you should've been at the actual funeral and that wasn't the case, I think a lot of people made a note of it on social media and then didn't attend the funeral.

L.M.: And did you find the dynamic [at the funeral] was any different than it was online?

Garnet: Well online I found that people would post things and say things, but at the funeral those same people weren't there. I don't know, it took me a while to make that distinction, like a lot of people I found [on the memorial page] were like, "oh we were best friends", but they didn't really know the person, so maybe

that's their own coping mechanism or an attention thing or something, but at the funerals it was more real, you can tell what people are going through.

Ultimately it seems as if a fundamental difference between online and offline mourning practices is the more 'serious' nature of the latter. Memorial pages are easily accessed and contributed to, but to attend a physical space for a funeral takes considerably more effort, and as such, it follows that those who do show up to the funeral of a deceased individual tend to be those who are closer or otherwise more committed to grieving the deceased in a more conventional and perhaps more meaningful environment.

Summary

The data gathered in this study suggests that memorial pages and online mourning in general offer several advantages and disadvantages that are unique from more conventional offline mourning procedures.

Memorial pages have been shown to be an advantageous addition to the grieving process as they constitute a space wherein discussions of grief may occur at any time. The ability to discuss grief with other bereaved individuals has long been suggested as an important step in the mourning process, and Facebook memorial pages allow these discussions to happen at any time and from any location. Additionally, memorial pages allow users to witness and partake in the identity construction of deceased individuals by establishing narratives about their lives and personalities. These discussions concerning the virtuous traits of deceased individuals allow those in mourning to recognize what they have lost and to create lasting, well-archived memories of the deceased. Another unique benefit offered by memorial pages is their ability to create more complete, rounded

narratives of a deceased individual's life. By sharing their photographs, stories, and memories, users are able to paint a picture of a deceased individual's life that may potentially allow those in mourning to see traits and sides of the deceased that they may not have been familiar with otherwise.

However, memorial pages have also been shown to potentially have unique detrimental implications for the mourning process as well. The option of relative anonymity and the disconnectedness that the Internet affords have paved the way for various forms of 'trolling' to occur. Some users have used the Internet and memorial pages as a platform to slander and speak ill of the deceased in a visible and hurtful manner. These distasteful posts are undoubtedly difficult for the bereaved to read.

While memorial pages do allow users to engage in post-mortem identity construction, there is also the possibility that the identities that are being constructed are not accurate representations of who the deceased were in life. Those who had particularly close relationships with the deceased have noted that these inaccurate representations can adversely impact their mourning process.

Next, it has been suggested that the content and activity found on memorial pages is perhaps not as genuine as it would initially seem. Several interview participants have suggested that some user's engagement with visible displays of mourning is something of a social game or competition, and serves to detract from those who are more authentic in their feelings.

Finally, another fundamental difference between online and offline mourning is that online mourning seems to attract those who are more 'casual' in their bereavement, while

conventional offline mourning procedures tend to attract those who shared a closer relationship with the deceased.

Chapter 7: Facebook and the Visibility of Death

This final and comparatively short discussion chapter is primarily concerned with addressing the relationship between the visibility of death and Facebook, and more specifically, the question of whether increased exposure to death and death-related content via Facebook has any apparent implications for the mourning processes of the bereaved and for the way death is conceptualized by society as a whole. Though slightly more inferential than the previous discussion chapters, this chapter will also include responses from interview participants who have been exposed to death and reminders of death during their time on Facebook. This chapter is divided into the following three sections: 1) an analysis of the various ways in which death has been made increasingly visible on Facebook, followed by, 2) a discussion concerning the ways in which this increased visibility has impacted the mourning processes and the Facebook experiences of the bereaved, and finally, 3) a brief summary of the findings.

The Visibility of Death on Facebook: Constant Reminders

As previously noted, the cultural tendency in modern Western society is to portray death as an unwelcome topic that is best kept out of the public discourse and made as invisible as possible (Lundgren and Houseman 2010). Still, there are occasionally instances when exceptions can be made to this social rule. There are, for example, certain locations and circumstances when discussions of death and dying are not ignored, but are encouraged, such as funeral parlours and memorial services.

Additionally, an important step in the mourning process is for the bereaved to discuss their feelings of grief with others. However, aside from these and other similar conditions, death has for the most part been made a topic that is exempt from the discussions and the visibility of day-to-day life.

Like the offline world, discussions of death and mourning on Facebook are often allocated to particular spaces, most apparently, memorial pages. Memorial pages, as we have seen, constitute unique sections within Facebook wherein discussions of death and bereavement may be openly held in a space where these topics have been deemed acceptable. However, as many interview participants have noticed, visible reminders of death can be a relatively common occurrence, even during ‘casual’ Facebook that occurs outside memorial pages. The most recurrent instance of this was in the form of notifications. Facebook users receive a ‘notification’ whenever activity occurs that is somehow related to them (if someone ‘likes’ a user’s status, or comments on one of their posts, for example). Users also receive notifications whenever there is activity on a group or page that they belong to, including memorial pages. This means that whenever anyone posts to a memorial page, everyone who belongs to that page will be notified of the post. Zack and Rinoa shared how they experienced this:

Zack: Yeah, absolutely it pops up on the newsfeed just like anything else, ‘cuz I did join the group.

L.M.: Right. So you get notifications whenever something happens?

Zack: Mhmm

L.M.: Do you still go back to the page from time to time? How often do you return to it?

Rinoa: Well I get notified when, like, there's a notification that comes up when someone posts something, so it kind of depends.

Given the average amount of content on memorial pages (266.8 unique pieces according to this study's 10 page sample), it can be inferred that notifications from memorial pages are a relatively common occurrence. In addition to this, Facebook users also mentioned that reminders of death were provided by other users via the Facebook newsfeed:

L.M.: So when you're on these pages how much time would you say that you spent on them? Did you go through reading what everybody said or did you...

Zack: Well personally I never went on this most recent page, but it pops up on my newsfeed when you're scrolling through so I see things.

L.M.: So you were checking it out and seeing what other people were writing?

Zack: Well it's all over my newsfeed, so yeah.

L.M.: So when this page does get updated or when someone does post content to it, do you get a notification or do you see it on your newsfeed?

Noah: I see it on the newsfeed, 'cuz usually it's one of my friends referring to her.

L.M.: So you'll just be on Facebook casually and you'll come across this kind of thing?

Noah: Mhmm.

As these responses suggest, reminders of the dead and discussions of death are not entirely quarantined to memorial pages, but rather, they have permeated the more general Facebook experience as well. Most interview participants admitted to checking Facebook multiple times a day, but very rarely with the intention of exposing themselves to death-related posts, particularly when they were not actively involved in the mourning

process. While Facebook does allow users the option of turning off the notifications from certain people/pages, only two interview participants utilized this option in order to stop receiving death-related notifications.

To summarize, through fairly constant notifications and its newsfeed feature, Facebook has been shown to disseminate death-related content to its users, even at times when they are not particularly interested in seeing this content. Some of the potential impacts of the visibility of death on Facebook will now be examined.

The Visibility of Death on Facebook: Impacts on the Bereaved

Affecting the Mourning Experience

Reminders of and exposure to death have been shown to be a relatively common occurrence during casual Facebook use, but how do these reminders affect the mourning process? On the one hand, it has been suggested that reminders of death and mortality potentially encourage people to be kinder and more benevolent to others. In the words of Jonas et al. (2002), reminders of mortality “should intensify the desire to express culturally prescribed prosocial attitudes and engage in culturally prescribed prosocial behaviours” (1342). But on the other hand, being constantly reminded of death while one is engaged in the various stages of the mourning process may have detrimental consequences as well. Most interview participants tended to focus on the more negative aspects of the increased visibility of death that Facebook provides. Rosa explained how

receiving a notification concerning the deceased was an unsettling and “very weird” experience:

Rosa: If someone comments on her wall it pops up on mine, that’s weird, ‘cuz you see, it looks like they’ve been active on Facebook but obviously they haven’t.
L.M.: Is that unsettling?

Rosa: Very, you get a notification and it has their picture, their profile picture, and it says their name, or whatever, commented on their wall, it’s very weird.

To clarify, in Rosa’s example other users were posting to the memorial page as well as to the profile of a deceased user. When this happens, the activity shows up on Rosa’s newsfeed, as well as in the form of a notification. This sometimes creates the illusion of a deceased user being active on Facebook, and is understandably a “very weird”, perhaps unsettling experience. Similarly, participants in a 2013 study by McEwan and Scheaffer remarked that witnessing Facebook activity that is seemingly coming from a deceased user is akin to ‘seeing a ghost’.

Garnet remarked that although she would receive many notifications concerning a deceased individual, she would never click on them to see what they contained, as she felt as though the constant reminder was detrimental for her grieving process:

L.M.: So that’s a decision you’ve made, to not follow through on those notifications. Why is that?

Garnet: I’ve wanted to but I don’t see how that would help me. I guess I don’t want to be reminded of how I felt then or my emotions at that point.

While the confrontation of death and feelings of grief is undoubtedly an important step in the mourning process (McIvor 2012 and Cornell 2014), some interview participants have argued that overexposure to death through the consistent reminders found on Facebook can actually affect the grieving process in an adverse way. Jihl

provided details as to how reminders of death on Facebook impacted her mourning process:

L.M.: So when people do still post to this page, does it give you a notification?

Jihl: Not personally, I turned off my notifications for that.

L.M.: Why?

Jihl: I think 'cuz, like I said, we wanted to keep it around to help ourselves, but there's a point where you need to stop. Stop having it around all the time, and I think that having those constant notifications really affects people being able to mourn. For people who weren't very close with him, I guess it doesn't hurt as much so the constant reminder wouldn't be so crappy, but for us it's kind of a shitty reminder to have all the time right? So you get past it and you think about it on your own, but you don't need everybody else's opinion on it all the time.

L.M.: So was it getting to a point where these things were popping up during normal everyday...

Jihl: Yeah, it would kind of ruin your day a little bit, depending on the day right? Maybe there's a day where it's just like "I'm not having a good day", and then it pops up and it's like, "now I'm really not having a good day", right?

Generally, Facebook is a place where members are able to find gratification and enjoyment through the use of the website (Quan-Haase and Young 2010). Yet for those in mourning Facebook use, as Jihl noted, can potentially bring discomforting feelings through the consistent reminders of death that it provides. There is little scholarly work to suggest whether or not consistent reminders of death, particularly on the Internet, aid or detract from the mourning process (although Widera-Wysoczańska (1999) has argued that increased levels of exposure may lead to increased levels of loneliness), and as such, no definitive conclusions should be made with regard to the relationship between the visibility of death on Facebook and the mourning process. However, based on the responses of this study's limited sample, it seems as if consistent reminders of death,

particularly when one is not expecting or looking for these reminders, are not especially beneficial for the bereaved.

Affecting the Facebook Experience

As noted, Facebook is generally regarded as a ‘positive’ space that is regularly used by its members as a means of communication, self-expression, and fostering and maintaining friendships and social connections (see Bucher 2012 and Sauter 2014). However, for several interview participants, their Facebook experience was so adversely impacted by visual reminders of death that it ultimately affected how they interacted with the site, with some even limiting or ceasing their use altogether. Some users, such as Reis, found the consistency and content of death-related posts so frustrating that she decided to stay off the site entirely for a short period of time:

L.M: So you made the conscious decision to stay off of Facebook because of this?

Reis: Yeah, to see people posting stuff would make me so mad like, “you don’t even know him”, so I thought I should just stay off the Internet for a while.

L.M: Do you remember how long of a period that was?

Reis: Probably two weeks.

For Reis, it was easier to avoid going on Facebook at all than it would have been to endure the consistent stream of death-related reminders that she was receiving. Reis returned to using Facebook two weeks later, but another user, Celes, deactivated her Facebook account entirely following the death of her friend, and has yet to return nearly two years later, believing that the experience has “changed Facebook” for her:

Celes: I don’t know, sometime I wonder if that’s the reason I’m not on Facebook now, just because it was so traumatic, like maybe...

LM: So was it traumatic in the sense that for days or weeks or months after the fact, logging in you would...

Celes: I would obsessively refresh the [memorial] page all the time.

LM: So you couldn't just casually use Facebook without returning to this page?

Celes: Yeah, I mean it came to a point where I could like a few months later or whatever but, I don't know, it still feels kind of like it changed Facebook for me, and I don't think about it now like I'm... it doesn't like actively upset me now but I just maybe sometimes wonder if that was one of the leading things that could have, I don't know, why I don't care for Facebook.

For Celes, the casual experience of Facebook had been altered to become something that was emotionally draining and, in her perspective, not healthy for her own mourning process, and as such, she made the decision to stop using the website altogether. The Facebook experience for other interview participants was also affected. Zack, for example, did not find the same need to avoid using Facebook, but noted that reminders of death sometimes cause his "casual" use to become more "reflective":

L.M.: So when somebody does post something to the page you'll get a notification of it?

Zack: Yeah.

L.M.: Do you think that affects the way that you're using Facebook?

Zack: Definitely, I feel, I kind of become a little bit more reflective I would say, than usual. Usually when I'm on Facebook it's really casual, sometimes quick, but yeah, I definitely become more reflective.

It must be stressed that the unique personal examples provided by interview participants are not necessarily generalizable to the Facebook using population as a whole. It is difficult to claim with any degree of certainty whether or not the average user's Facebook experience is changed, for better or worse, due to the inclusion of visible

reminders of death, though the responses of several interview participants in this study suggest that this is certainly something that can occur.

Summary

On Facebook, memorial pages constitute acceptable spaces where the bereaved can discuss their grief with other mourners in an open way. Memorial pages, then, may be compared to certain offline spaces such as funerals, where discussions of death and dying have been deemed appropriate by an otherwise largely death-denying society. However, death-related content has been shown to occur beyond memorial pages as well, and in fact, has permeated Facebook as a whole. Visible reminders of death on Facebook occur in the forms of updates, notifications, and content posted by other memorial page members and other mourners. Facebook users who belong to memorial pages and who have friends that are posting death-related content, will be exposed to this content fairly consistently during their Facebook use, even when they are not actively seeking it. It is difficult to say whether the visibility of death on Facebook is greater than it is in the offline world, though the participants interviewed in this study have argued that this is a possibility. As a result, the current cultural depiction of death as something that is largely invisible may be on the cusp of changing due to Facebook's current, and likely future popularity.

Exposure to death and reminders of death via Facebook has been shown to affect both the mourning experience and the Facebook experience of users. Those in mourning found that being exposed to constant reminders of death on Facebook generally had an adverse effect on their mourning process, possibility due to the sheer volume of death-

related notifications received. Other participants noted that the Facebook experience in general had been altered due to visible reminders of death. Some found that the otherwise casual nature of Facebook become more somber and emotionally exhausting, while others stopped using the website altogether.

Ultimately it seems as though the visible reminders of death that can be found on Facebook, whether or not they occur more or less than in the offline world, do have an effect on both the mourning experience and the Facebook experience in general. However, it may be argued that increased exposure to reminders of death via Facebook use may result in more blasé attitudes towards death due to overexposure, or at the very least, a more sharp distinction between online expressions of death and offline ones.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this final concluding chapter, the research questions posited in the first chapter will be re-introduced and briefly addressed. Following this cursory summary of the findings, several of this study's methodological limitations will be presented, as well as some potential directions and suggestions for future research. The chapter ends with some concluding thoughts.

Addressing the Research Questions

In the introductory chapter, four guiding research questions were presented, and while they have been addressed in detail in the four discussion chapters, these research questions, along with some potential answers to them, will now be briefly re-introduced:

- 1) *How are memorial pages on Facebook used by the bereaved? Who does and does not contribute to them? Are there differences in the amount of usage across time?*

The data gathered in this study suggests that Facebook memorial pages are most commonly used in three different ways. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is as a means of sharing and expressing grief with other mourners. The content posted by memorial page users often addressed the deceased directly, though communications between users was also observed. Second, memorial pages are used as an organizational tool. The pages provided users with the ability to efficiently and effectively organize offline activities such as funerals and memorial services, and also allowed users the ability to ask questions and seek clarification regarding these offline activities. Finally,

Facebook and memorial pages were shown to be used as a means of quickly spreading death-related news to their users.

The question of who does and who does not use/contribute to memorial pages was partially answered. In terms of gender, the data suggests that females tend to post far more content to memorial pages than males (74.18% of all content was posted by females). However, the reasons for this difference are unclear. Additionally, it was shown that not all members of a memorial page contribute content to the page, choosing instead to 'lurk'. This may be because, as some interview participants have suggested, that some users feel uncomfortable posting to a memorial page when they did not have a particularly close relationship with the deceased. However, many of the comments observed indicate that even those with limited relationships with the deceased occasionally contribute to these pages.

The question of when memorial pages are used can be answered quite simply by observing the posting rates across a period of time. It was found that the majority of activity on memorial pages occurs in the immediate days following the creation of the page, and then steadily decreased over time with occasional activity spikes on important dates such as Christmas, the birthday of the deceased, and the anniversary of their death.

2) *What norms and social customs currently exist on Facebook memorial pages and how do users contribute to the creation and negotiation of these norms and customs?*

Freya: I feel like there isn't really social etiquette around the formation of these pages, and there's... it's very hard to really fix that because I mean

it's such a new phenomenon that there are just no social norms, there's no, there aren't really any unspoken or spoken rules.

Freya's comments effectively depict the current lack of agree-upon norms and customs on Facebook memorial pages. The data collected in this study suggests that with no clear set of social guidelines to follow, the creation and maintenance of memorial pages is something that is largely left to individual users to navigate as they deem appropriate. This can sometimes lead to problems, such as numerous memorial pages been created for the same deceased individual. The norms on the memorial pages themselves were observed to be created and negotiated by the users. Both visible norms, such as what should be posted to memorial pages, and invisible norms, such as a lack of cursing or vulgarity within posts, were observed during this study.

While there is no agreement as to whether memorial pages that are created should be made public or private, the majority of interview participants suggested that public memorial pages were generally more effective and appropriate.

There was no evidence to suggest that memorial pages had norms in place that restricted users from different ages to post, although it was noted that memorial pages created for individuals who died young tended to receive far more activity than pages that were created for older deceased individuals.

- 3) *How does online mourning differ from offline mourning? Are there unique impacts of online mourning on the bereaved, whether positive or negative, which are not experienced in the same capacity through offline mourning?*

Online mourning via Facebook was shown to have several unique impacts, both positive and negative, on the bereaved.

Memorial pages and mourning on Facebook was shown to be positive in that it provided the bereaved with a space, which could be accessed at any time, from essentially any location, where grief could be discussed openly with other users. This was, for many users, a very beneficial option. Additionally, the memorialization opportunities afforded by Facebook allowed users to engage in and witness the identity construction of the deceased. This allowed users to remember the deceased in an appealing way, and also allowed those who did not know the deceased intimately the ability to learn more about the personality and history of the deceased.

Alternatively, several negative impacts of memorial pages were also observed. First, because there are essentially no ways to prevent who is allowed to post content to public memorial pages, some individuals used these spaces to slander or speak of the dead in a distasteful way, though this generally only occurs when the deceased individual was a person of particular notoriety such as a politician. Second, while contributing to the identity construction of the deceased could potentially be a positive step in the grieving process, it was noted that the identities that are constructed are oftentimes inaccurate representations of the deceased. Witnessing these inaccurate depictions was particularly difficult for bereaved individuals who felt as if they shared a close relationship with the deceased. Finally, it was implied by some that the content and activity found on memorial pages is perhaps not as genuine as it would initially seem. Several interview participants have suggested that some user's engagement with visible displays of mourning is

something of a social game or competition, and serves to detract from those who are more authentic in their feelings.

- 4) *Does Facebook provide a significant increase in the visibility of and exposure to death, and if so, what are the potential implications of this?*

Facebook has been shown to provide visible reminders of death to its users, even when they are not seeking or expecting these reminders. Many interview participants found this to be an intrusive, and commented on how it adversely affected not only their mourning process, but their Facebook experience as a whole, causing some users to cease using the website altogether. Assuming that Facebook retains its current popularity, it may be inferred that continual exposure to death via the website may result in a change in the cultural depiction of death, specifically, a transition from death as something that is largely hidden from public visibility to something that is far more recurrent in our daily lives.

Research Limitations

While this study was partially successful in addressing the research questions that have been posited, there are several methodological limitations and weaknesses that are worthy of mentioning:

- 1) The sample sizes of this study (10 memorial pages and 11 interview participants) are particularly small. While these samples did allow certain patterns, themes, and trends to be identified, stating any larger conclusions with any degree of certainty is problematic, as the data created by these small

samples may not necessarily be generalizable to the larger population of interest.

- 2) Brubaker and Hayes (2011) remind us that our experiences of grief and practices around death are deeply cultural. In this study, all of the memorial pages and the vast majority of the content posted to them were in English, and served to represent Western attitudes towards death. Facebook is a global phenomenon, though practices and customs relating to death and dying vary across cultures and societies. As such, it must be stressed that this research depicts a Western view of the relationship between Facebook and death, and does not portray how this relationship potentially differs across cultures.
- 3) The 11 interview participants in this study had very little variation in age (with a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 27) and as a result, the experiences of older individuals have essentially been omitted. It must then be acknowledged that the responses of the interview participants represent a very limited age demographic that may not necessarily be representative of all Facebook users.
- 4) Every piece of content posted to the memorial pages observed in this study had the gender of the poster documented in order to compare posting habits between males and females. The gender of a poster was determined strictly by assessing their Facebook profile picture. This is problematic for a variety of reasons. First, it is possible that the gender that was determined from a user's profile picture may be incorrect based solely on an error of judgement. Secondly, this method essentially ignores those who do not identify with the

traditional male/female dichotomy present in society. Third, it ignores those who mentally identify as a gender that is incongruent with their physical gender. Gender was not a primary focus of this study, and as such, many of these issues were neglected, but future researchers who wish to examine the relationship between posting habits and gender are strongly encouraged to keep these issues in mind.

- 5) Due to ethical constraints, the only Facebook memorial pages observed in this study were those that were publicly accessible. There also exists a large number of private memorial pages, and though it is difficult to say whether or not the content on these pages is significantly different from their publicly accessible counterparts, it must be stressed that this study depicts only the information from public memorial pages.

Suggestions for Future Research and Unanswered Questions

Because the phenomena of online mourning and memorialization are still in their emerging stages, future research on these topic will undoubtedly be required in order to further understand how online mourning/memorialization takes place and to what effect.

Listed here are some suggestions for future research on this topic:

- 1) As previously mentioned, the samples in this study (10 memorial pages and 11 interview participants) are rather small. As such, future research should attempt to incorporate larger samples in order to produce results that are more likely to be generalizable to the population of interest.

- 2) While it was concluded that Facebook does provide its users with visible reminders of death, it remains undetermined as to whether or not Facebook use actually lead to an increase in the visibility of death in the lives of its users. Is modern society becoming more accepting of, or more willing to openly discuss death, and if so, is the increased popularity of Facebook a potential reason for this? Future research concerning the visibility and the role of death in society would benefit from examining the impacts of Facebook, and the Internet in general, more closely.
- 3) The results of this study suggest a rather stark difference in the posting habits of men and women on memorial pages. This gendered difference was not a particular focus of this study, and as such, was not discussed in great detail, but future researchers are encouraged to examine and uncover the potential reasons for the differences in posting habits between men and women.
- 4) This study has been focused primarily on the dead and the bereaved, but not necessarily on the *dying*. Suggestions have been made as to how Facebook is used to mourn and memorialize the deceased, but not as to how those who are dying potentially use Facebook and the Internet during the dying process. Can Facebook be used by the dying as a means of reaching out, achieving closure, or leaving messages to those that they will be leaving behind? Future researchers are encouraged to explore the effects of the Internet on the dying.

Concluding Thoughts

Facebook and other social media platforms have allowed many aspects of the social world and the social experience to be translated to online environments, a trend that is likely to continue into the future. Death, dying, mourning, and grief, being “elemental parts of life and living” (Smith 2007: 227) are not, and should not, be exempt from inclusion within the realm of social media. As Vernon (1970) reminds us, dying is a social process with many social dimensions, and as such, should be regarded as an indispensable facet of the social media experience despite Western society’s tendency to portray death as an invasive, intrusive, or otherwise ugly part of life.

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Appendix A: Interview Inventory

Facebook Usage and Habits

How long have you had Facebook?

How often do you check Facebook?

How much time do you spend on Facebook/social media in a day?

What are your primary reasons for using Facebook?

How selective are you with the content that you do or do not post on Facebook?

Exposure to Facebook Memorial Pages

What have been your personal experiences with Facebook memorial pages?

Have you ever contributed content to these pages or have you just observed?

What sort of content have you/would you post?

Have the pages you've interacted with belonged to people you know or were they the pages of celebrities/public figures?

Have you posted content to a memorial page of someone you didn't know?

What do you think of content that other people post?

Have you seen anything posted on a memorial page that you found tasteless or has offended you?

Facebook and the Mourning Process

Do you remember how you heard about the passing (friends, news, Facebook)?

How has interacting with these pages affected the mourning process for you?

What other offline mourning activities did you participate in? (Go to the funeral, etc.)

Are you ever exposed to death or the mourning of others during casual Facebook use?

General Thoughts about Online Mourning

Do you feel more comfortable expressing grief online or offline?

Would you be more comfortable hearing about someone's death offline or online?

Do you think Facebook is the right place for memorial pages/expressions of grief?

Do you think memorial pages should be open to the public or just to the friends/family?

Would you want a memorial page made for you after you die (who would you want to maintain it)?

Does the way in which you are represented after your death matter to you?

Appendix B: Memorial Page Examples

facebook
Home Profile Friends Inbox
Brittany Turner Settings Logout



[Invite People to Join](#)
[Leave Group](#)

Information

Category:
Common Interest – Beliefs & Causes

Description:
Words can not express the sadness shared by everyone after losing our most loyal friend, Dustin Rich. If you didn't know him then well you should have is all I can say. Anyone who did know him would know that he would want everyone to have good times for him. So take a hit for our D Rich and let him never be forgotten.
If anyone has any pictures of Dustin I would love to have some

R.I.P. D Rich

Wall
Info
Photos
Discussions

Write something...

Attach:  
Share



Christopher Barrota i miss you man ! much love

October 29 at 11:15am · [Comment](#) · [Unlike](#) · [Report](#)

 You like this.

Write a comment...



Jennifer Rincon Happy Bday Dustin :o) I love you and miss ya tons

August 19 at 1:45pm · [Report](#)



Molly Margaret Talbot I cannot believe it will be two years tomorrow. There are so many things that remind me of you. I think about you all the time and miss you more than could ever be imagined. ♥

April 16 at 6:58am · [Report](#)



Brittini Waldow <http://i4.photobucket.com/albums/y134/brittinipictures/dyustin.jpg>

<http://i4.photobucket.com/albums/y134/brittinipictures/duustin.jpg>

End of 7th grade. You rubbing the janitor's bald head. Such a goof. I miss you in all your tye-dyeness.

September 25, 2008 at 10:40pm · [Comment](#) · [Like](#) · [Report](#)



Jennifer Rincon Hey babe! I love and miss u soo much! Happy Bday.

August 19, 2008 at 8:14pm · [Comment](#) · [Like](#) · [Report](#)



Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Mourning 2.0: Experiences of Death, Bereavement and Memorialization on

Facebook

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Mourning 2.0: Experiences of Death, Bereavement and Memorialization on Facebook” that is being conducted by Logan Macnair.

Logan Macnair is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria and you may contact him if you have further questions by emailing lmacnair@uvic.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a master’s degree in sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Steve Garlick. You may contact my supervisor by emailing sgarlick@uvic.ca.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to discern the various ways in which the mourning and memorialization of the deceased occur in an online capacity. The research aims to discover how mourning and memorialization is expressed online (through Facebook), and whether or not it is expressed in a way that is fundamentally different from conventional offline procedures.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because the mourning and memorialization of the deceased through online spaces such as Facebook is a relatively new phenomenon that as of yet remains to be thoroughly defined academically. The proposed research will endeavor to begin defining this phenomenon and will provide insights in the fields of bereavement studies as well as Internet and online media studies.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an active user of Facebook who has at one point, either actively (by posting comments, pictures, or ‘liking’ the content that others have posted) or passively (by strictly observing without making any contributions), interacted with a memorialized Facebook page. As such, you may provide useful information regarding your usage habits, particularly with regard to the memorialization of the deceased.

What is Involved

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an interview with me (anticipated to last 30 minutes) containing various questions relating to Facebook, online bereavement, and online memorialization.

All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Written notes will be taken during the interviews.

ADDITIONALLY, YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL INVOLVE SHARING LINKS TO SPECIFIC FACEBOOK MEMORIAL PAGES THAT YOU HAVE PREVIOUSLY INTERACTED WITH.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you due to the time commitment required for the interview (30-60 minutes).

Risks

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research, specifically, there is a risk of emotional discomfort. To prevent or to deal with this risk, you will be continually encouraged to share any discomfort you may experience. At your request interviews may be paused, or stopped entirely. In the rare case of extreme emotional turmoil, I will walk you to the counseling services center located on the University of Victoria campus.

Benefits

Participants may potentially find that by discussing the various personal issues relating to this study that they have an increased understanding and awareness of how the phenomenon of online mourning/memorialization occurs and what part they play in its inception. In addition, it is possible that participation in this study will add to the general state of knowledge by sharing their insights.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, the data you have provided will not be used and your interview recordings/transcripts will be destroyed.

Anonymity

In order to protect your anonymity pseudonyms will be employed for the final research project. Additionally, all personal and potentially identifiable information that is collected from Facebook will be disguised.

Confidentiality

All data will be stored on password-protected portable electronic devices (USB drives). Only I will have access to these devices. This is done to ensure your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data. All information provided that may potentially be used to identify deceased Facebook users will be removed from the final research project.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the form of a publicly accessible master's thesis, potential academic journal articles, and presentations at various academic conferences. All participants will be sent an electronic copy of the finished study.

Disposal of Data

Data from this study will be electronically stored on password protected devices for five years. After this time has elapsed, all data will be permanently deleted. This includes interview transcripts and interview recordings, as well as all links to Facebook pages that have been provided by the participant.

Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include Dr. Steve Garlick (sgarlick@uvic.ca) and Dr. Sean Hier (shier@uvic.ca)

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Future Use of Data

I consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant to provide initials)

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.