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Expressions of Grief on Facebook: Navigating Discomfort, Persistent Identity, and Public Memorialization

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Abstract

When someone dies, their online identity does not die with them. If a deceased Facebook user leaves behind a once active profile, friends and family members may choose to use this virtual space to express grief, interact with one another, and engage in active memorialization. Young adults who are traditionally marginalized in the grieving process can take advantage of the digital space to engage in mourning rituals. Through qualitative inquiry and in-depth interviews with 20 young adults who have dealt with the death of a friend or family member on Facebook, this study addresses phenomenological research questions concerning expression of grief on Facebook, what memorialization on Facebook entails, and how young adults interact with a deceased user's profile. Grief theories and characteristics of social network sites (SNSs) are considered as concepts of thanatechnology and online community are explored. Emergent theme analysis shows that young adults can contribute to a dynamic memory archive associated with a friend's identity by sharing stories and photographs on Facebook. Finding and giving support as well as maintaining a connection with the deceased are important to participants, who navigate a complicated hierarchy of acceptable expression, based on their relative closeness to the deceased. Participants also express varying levels of comfort and discomfort, related to appropriate expression and interaction with a persistent profile. This research study discusses the implications of such interaction, concluding that Facebook prevents users from addressing the fundamental reality of death and that the site can enable disingenuous expression of grief.

Keywords: grief, bereavement, memorialization, thanatechnology, online identity, online community, social media, social network site, SNS, mourning ritual

EXPRESSIONS OF GRIEF ON FACEBOOK: NAVIGATING DISCOMFORT, PERSISTENT
IDENTITY, AND PUBLIC MEMORIALIZATION

by

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B.A. Villanova University, 2011

Thesis

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Chapter 1: Introduction

At some point, there will be more Facebook profiles of deceased individuals than those who are alive. Yet status updates, photographs, and interactions with friends will remain visible on the site after they have died, reflecting how our offline lives are continually intersecting with a carefully cultivated online presence. The notion that our online data will outlive our offline existence combined with the exponential increase in the number of social media users has contributed to growing interest on the part of cultural critics, entrepreneurs, and academics alike. Current estimates place the number of Facebook accounts at over 1 billion active monthly users, over 800 million of which visit Facebook on a mobile device (“Key Facts,” n.d., para. 4). These numbers are almost incomprehensible in their scale, and denote the ubiquitous nature of social network sites. At the same time, some estimates place the number of Facebook users who die each year at 375,000 (Walker, 2011). While 375,000 people is only a small percentage of total users, these users’ profiles are connected to unspoken numbers of friends who may learn about this person’s death through the deceased user’s Facebook page, just one of the ways social network sites act to mediate feelings of grief and loss in the wake of another’s death.

Facebook has been proactive in finding a solution for the inactive profiles left behind by deceased users, even posting a public note on the topic offering to “memorialize” an account to prevent uncomfortable birthday notifications and to preserve the site as a space for family members and friends to grieve (“Remembering Loved Ones on Facebook,” 2011). Online services like If I Die and DeadSocial allow users to set up messages that will be sent out to their friends and followers once they pass away, subverting the notion that our virtual interaction ends once we die. The service LivesOn draws from users’ Twitter account activity and is marketed as a way to maintain an online presence after death, as postmortem tweets are generated based on

your own syntax. LivesOn promises potential users “When your heart stops beating, you’ll keep tweeting” (Liveson.org). Even without signing up for this service, our social media profiles are already likely to become a site of interaction in death – they act as both a representation of us and as an outlet for grieving survivors (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010).

The bereavement process is technologically mediated regardless of whether or not we set up messages to be sent postmortem. Philosopher Patrick Stokes addresses several issues that arise as a result of online memorialization in *The Atlantic*, discussing how social media sites act uniquely upon notions of identity through online representation during the bereavement process (Anderson, 2012). Indeed, living in an age where our birth is the first entry on our virtual Facebook “timeline” requires us to rethink the end of this timeline, where our death will eventually be recorded. Stokes sees this as a sort of survival despite death, albeit a diminished one, and a survival that may ultimately serve those who remain alive (Anderson, 2012). This new kind of “survival” speaks to our need to address death online, and how loved ones who remain alive both process death and mourn through new, technologically mediated, grieving rituals.

Research Context and Significance

Social media sites themselves have evolved significantly since their inception. Characterized by such rapid evolution, research is conducted even as the social media landscape continues to change. Such development and change contribute to a lack of unifying social media theory, yet there are still specific theoretical lenses that can be helpful in further research as well as our understanding of social media in a larger cultural context.

Significant social media theories describe social network sites (SNSs) as networked publics, or virtual communities (boyd & Ellison, 2008; boyd, 2011; Parks, 2011). Understanding SNSs through this model frames our understanding of interaction that occurs on such sites.

Theories that position the social media user as a member of a participatory audience, involved in many-to-many communication, are also important in understanding how social media act upon the understanding of death (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). Furthermore, social media as a tool from which to share information and keep in touch with people contributes to the conceptual framework of this study. These concepts provide a reference and sense of positionality in undertaking further exploration of the subject. Past research points out that characteristics of social networks have “reshaped” the process of grieving and announcing someone’s death (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). Mourners are now faced with a blurring of the public and private boundaries afforded by a social network site, and whatever information they share can reach a large, geographically disparate audience. The information is also persistent, in that it remains online long after it is posted (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 380). The grieving process is inevitable: “Since Internet use is almost ubiquitous in Western countries and social media have been widely adopted by the general population, one (perhaps unexpected) consequence has been the need to confront death within social media” (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010, p. 311).

Ubiquitous Internet use has added another dimension to ongoing research and studies concerning media, death, memory, and bereavement. The emerging field of *thanatechnology* incorporates an understanding of computer technology with the traditional term for the study or science of death, *thanatology* (Sofka et al., 2012). Use of social network sites further integrates the Internet into our daily lives, and the intersection of offline and online identity is important. As these identities overlap, we must look more closely not only at the use of social media and the Internet, but also how our online expressions of identity live on in spite of offline death.

Those who have grown up with access to the Internet are already blurring the notion of public or private spheres through both unfiltered online representations of self and online expression of emotion. Despite some research considering the ways in which the Internet changes the representation and understanding of death and mourning (Jones, 2004; Walter et al., 2012) and the specific use of social network sites to share or send messages to the deceased (Carroll & Landry, 2010), the interrelation of these concepts remains relatively understudied and somewhat varied in method and subject. Some research focuses on the content and use of Web memorials to explore the role of community in memorialization (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; de Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Roberts, 2004). Other recent research investigates the impact of technical features and characteristics of social network sites on Facebook grieving processes on memorial pages, focusing on the public nature of grief and how the identity of the deceased is negotiated (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Past studies draw on survey data as a means of conceptual mapping (Carroll & Landry, 2010) or engage in content analysis of MySpace or Facebook memorial page comments (Dobler, 2009; Williams & Merton, 2009; Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Researchers Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) analyze interviews with Facebook users in order to learn how users engage in mourning rituals on the site, and consider in what ways Facebook provides a space for these rituals.

These studies have only begun to explore what mourning in the digital age means. Quasi-public mourning will continue to evolve alongside trends in communication technology, and will be particularly relevant as young adults, often considered “digital natives,” experience the death of their Facebook friends. Embarking on research and data collection with these concepts in mind, qualitative interviews will provide richly detailed responses to unanswered questions concerning expressions of grief, digital death, and interaction with a persistent profile when

mourning. Speaking with active Facebook users who have engaged with the profile of a deceased friend allows me to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning the way users feel they are able to and do express grief from a phenomenological perspective, according to the social reality of these individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 19).

Statement of Purpose

In conducting qualitative, in-depth interviews with college students, this study explores the ways Facebook users experience grief and recognize persistent online identity by relying on phenomenological inquiry. This recognizes the value of subjective personal experience, drawing on a philosophical perspective of phenomenology that informs the approach and research methodology (Creswell, 2009, p. 13; Schwandt, 2007, p. 224). The growing intersection of private and public life that is facilitated by social network sites like Facebook is particularly important for young adults, as this new social experience is potentially a radically different way to learn about death and express grief. SNSs provide a place for users to partake in narrative creation in terms of both their own and others' identities – this concept is especially important in terms of users' persistent online identity and a new context in which to express grief or interact with someone who has died. An interest in these concepts leads me to several research questions:

RQ 1: How do Facebook users experience interaction with a deceased user's profile?

RQ 2: How do young adults experience the expression of grief on Facebook?

RQ 3: How do Facebook users engage in online memorialization of a deceased user?

I draw on several areas of literature in order to address these research questions. First, I discuss current relevant theories concerning grief and mourning, and examine how communication technology has changed these processes. I continue to explore the intersection of death and the Internet through a discussion of thanatechnology, and how online expressions of grief can be

both public and private. Lastly, I consider theories concerning social network sites as networked publics and virtual communities, in which one creates an online identity. This literature appropriately frames my examination of expressions of grief online, the persistence of postmortem identity on SNSs, and how characteristics of SNSs may influence expressions of grief and memorialization. In order to address my research questions, I identify and explain the reasoning behind my qualitative methodological approach. In addition, I describe and justify my particular theoretical perspective in regards to my own research background and positionality in approaching this topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to understand how existing and interacting online changes the grieving and memorializing process, we must look at the relationship between grief theories and the culture of communication. Determining and analyzing grieving and memorialization processes is a goal of researchers across academic fields and within changing cultural contexts. Understanding death and mourning is made more complex when considering how to interact online with someone after they die, what artifacts of a person's life remain online in their death, and how the memorialization process is changed by the nature of social network sites and technology. As a site, Facebook is more than an online profile on which that person persists even after they are physically gone – it is an extension of a person's identity in the form of a social network site, or SNS, that requires a closer look through the lens of existing literature.

Contextualizing Grief

First there's denial. Then come anger, bargaining, and depression. The last stage of grief is acceptance. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's 1969 analysis of grief contributed heavily to the development of stage theory in the late 60s and early 1970s, framing death and bereavement research in terms of a person's adjustment to loss, in which they contemplate mortality and seek to understand death (Small, 2001, p. 29). Other stage theory work identifies feelings of numbness or pining, and draws upon various approaches to more fully describe the "grief work" that occurs after the loss of a loved one (Small, 2001, p. 30). In some ways, the development of stage theory grew out of a theoretical system of psychoanalysis. Freud wrote *Mourning and Melancholia* in 1917, in which he explored grief as he experienced it. The Freudian understanding of grief, then, is based in the understanding of your relationship with the deceased person – "recognizing which aspects of yourself you had located in the now dead person, taking these back into yourself and

so being able to both know better what is you and to know what attributes really belong with the dead person” (Small, 2001, p. 25). Attachment theory later evolved in a somewhat reactionary way to Freudian notions of grief, around the same time as stage theory. Attachment theory focuses on bereavement as rooted in separation anxiety, and theorists like Bowlby, in 1973, sought to fill in the gaps that emerged over time in the psychoanalytical approach (Small, 2001, p. 26). Work of both attachment and stage theorists brought a more formal understanding of grief and bereavement processes to light.

Grief theories have developed such that scholars now recognize the need to socially contextualize grief and mourning, regardless of discrepancies in identification of specific stages in the processes (Small, 2001). Theorist Tony Walter views awareness of cultural context and individual differences in the experiences of the bereaved part of a “‘postmodern’ culture of grief,” which requires tolerance of these cultural differences (1999, p. 207). Contemporary research on grief and bereavement focuses on specific understandings of grief based on socialization, gender, ethnicity, and the nature of a particular death itself (Neimeyer et al., 2011). Experienced all over the world, grief is universal yet culturally dependent. Accepting it as such is in line with Walter’s postmodern paradigm (1999).

Differentiating between grieving and mourning is key moving forward. While *grieving* refers to a more private inner process, *mourning* describes the way in which grief is expressed socially. The fact that “there is no death that is not experienced within cultural categories expressed within cultural guidelines and expectations” suggests the importance of context in mourning (Klass & Chow, 2011, p. 342). Klass and Chow go on to describe how mourning can be policed and regulated by the culture in which it occurs (2011, p. 344). Revealing the appropriate emotions for the circumstance is important; this self-regulation is based in

comparison of oneself to others, and is really an act of self-policing in order to follow the proper guidelines (Walter, 1999, p. 124). Three themes emerge in Klass and Chow's comparison of Western mourning rituals to those present in China: bereavement occurs in a cultural framework, this framework regulates expression of mourning, and culture affects the handling of grief (Klass & Chow, 2011, p. 349). This cultural contextualization is significant in any understanding of expressions of grief, memorialization, or mourning ritual.

Rosenblatt (1988) puts the process of grieving and bereavement into context by investigating social interactions and symbolic interaction theory, addressing the notion that bereavement includes a loss of reality. That is, in mourning one must learn to deal with a new reality with which he or she is faced (p. 68). He also argues that the social context in which grief occurs can change the process itself – perhaps drawing it out, or alleviating grief (1988, p. 68). Identifying and understanding varying cultural definitions of grief or appropriate expression of bereavement is also important, just as we should take into account that “a person who has died continues in some way beyond death” is a notion accepted cross-culturally (Rosenblatt, 1988, p. 69). This is a crucial point that is just as relevant with the advent of social network sites on which a person cultivates a very particular identity that continues to exist in cyberspace after they die. A person lives on, in one sense, in that profile. At the same time, the persisting profile may act as a site on which surviving users choose to interact virtually with their loved ones. If social context somehow mediates the grieving process, the nature by which grief or mourning is communicated – like the online profile – may also affect the process.

Communication Technology & Grief

Communication technology, or the medium by which we communicate, is another factor in our understanding of truth and culture. But truth may need contextualizing, just as grief

theorists argue mourning does. In “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” media theorist Neil Postman argues that truth has cultural prejudice that depends upon its medium of communication (1986, p. 22). Postman asserts that:

As a culture moves from orality to writing to printing to televising, its ideas of truth move with it... every epistemology is the epistemology of a stage of media development. Truth, like time itself, is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented. (p. 24)

Postman draws from Marshall McLuhan’s work on communication and culture, positing that we can understand a culture by looking at its “tools for conversation,” or, medium used to disseminate messages (1986, p. 8). Writing at the same time as Postman, Eric Havelock looks to McLuhan’s discussion of technology in his work on the transition between oral and literate culture. The “technology of electronics” changes communication style, just as the cultural shift from an oral culture to one dependent on the written word may have changed the very structure of human thought processes (Havelock, 1986, p. 27). Where the transition from orality to literacy made linearity of thought and argument a necessity, visual or electronic communication reintroduce a nonlinear way of thinking that contribute greatly to the cultural context of communication processes, not excluding expressions of grief and mourning rituals (Havelock, 1986, p. 27). Communication technologies also present an opportunity to exteriorize memory outside of our bodies – whether by writing things down or holding onto memories electronically. Bernard Stiegler differentiates between these two exteriorizing processes: *mnemotechniques* are methods of memory storage, but a *mnemotechnology* “systematically order memories” (2010, p. 67). When someone dies, we may frantically seek to catalog memories with this person online, via mnemotechnology. Memory making is dependent on technology, and since “memories

operate to render present that which is absent” we should consider what is left out and forgotten when Facebook users rely on the site during the memorialization process (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 3).

In placing grief and mourning rituals within a technology or medium-based context, there are vastly different expressions of grief across media platforms. Although mourning practices that evolved out of oral and literate cultures are still common in the age of the Internet, a eulogy, obituary, or online memorial page each have unique implications and embody the feelings associated with grief different ways. As Rosenblatt says, “Presumably, what most people do most of the time in grieving feels real to them, and their expressions of emotion serve to validate the cultural rule system for grieving and become part of the context of grief for others around them” (1988, p. 69). This sentiment is applicable whether grieving is expressed aloud, in writing, or in cyberspace.

Spoken aloud, a eulogy is a generally private expression of grief to close friends and family members that remain alive. The eulogy happens one time, in one space. Only those at the event (another site of mourning and expression of grief) are able to hear the spoken eulogy. An obituary is quite different. It is read to oneself – a completely different experience than listening as someone else speaks on a subject. An obituary is also more permanent in nature, as the written word can be disseminated farther and be read or re-read long after a person’s death. The publication of an obituary invites a public audience in a way that is different than a eulogy might at a private funeral. Computer technology can aid in the production or reproduction of eulogies or obituaries, overcoming geographical barriers and lending permanence. Beyond this, the Internet and social network sites have different attributes than either a spoken eulogy or a written obituary, with important implications for mourning and memorialization processes (Carroll &

Landry, 2010). When SNS users engage in online memorialization, they are exteriorizing memories about the deceased (i.e. posting messages, photographs, or videos to a Facebook profile). It can be advantageous to use digital technology to catalog these memories, but there are potential negative consequences to doing so:

These cognitive technologies, to which we consign a greater and greater part of our memory, cause us to lose ever-greater parts of our knowledge. To lose a cell phone is to lose the trace of the telephone numbers of our correspondents and to realize that they are no longer, or perhaps never were, in physical memory but only that of the apparatus.

(Stiegler, 2010, p. 68)

If Facebook can be considered an apparatus in which to collect memories of our friends and relationships, Stiegler might warn us of the potential danger in relying on the site to collect and archive our memories.

Aside from their archival nature, memorial pages or memorialized social network profiles have both private and public elements of interaction. Arthur (2009) observes this blurring of private and public grief in research concerning 9/11 memorial sites, in which he studies online community formation; this is relevant in other instances of bereavement, not limited to national grieving experiences. Close friends of the deceased may participate in the community grieving and memorializing process on his or her Facebook profile. Users can also observe others as they grieve publicly, if active public participation is uncomfortable. Although seemingly more public, the Internet memorialization process may allow for a greater sense of privacy if maintained by the grieving community (Arthur, 2009). Social network sites provide a unique space in which the identity of the deceased person persists. Persistent communication characterizes the way in

which grief and mourning are expressed online, and this sense of interaction is absent in reading an obituary or hearing a eulogy.

Thanatechnology

As people who engage in the scientific study of death and the practices associated with it, thanatologists have been faced with new research questions as the Internet and social network sites threaten the societal understanding of identity and death (Sofka, 1997; Sofka, Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). The term *thanatechnology* identifies the way in which computer technology can be incorporated into continued research; the way technology changes interaction and communication in society is key in understanding grief (Sofka et al., 2012, p. 3). In considering historical and societal understandings of death and grief, what it means to interact with a person who has died is changing as a result of the so-called “technological revolution” (p. 4).

Thanatechnology research investigates how computer technology impacts the understanding of death, and also how it changes the experience of death and grief. Computers and the Internet are so much a part of Western culture that experiences around death cannot help but be affected: communicating news of a death, organizing a funeral or memorial service, and dealing with grief are all mediated by technology (Jones, 2004; Webster, 2012).

Terminology is indicative of the need for research on death and grieving through technology beyond an incorporation of the term *tech* in a field of research. For instance, a commonly used phrase “passing away” suggests that with bodily death comes a permanent loss of a person, and a reliance on others to keep his or her memory alive. This term is less meaningful as a descriptor of someone dying in an Internet based society. Our bodies still pass away, but the memory of a person can persist in a new form – a Facebook profile may act as a digital narrative and archive of that person’s life – and those who remain alive often continue to

interact with that person's virtual identity (Sofka et al., 2012, p. 4). This complicates the grieving process, "rendering loss as ambiguous" (p. 9). In grief studies, an emotional loss rather than a physical one characterizes ambiguous loss. Researchers Boss, Roos, and Harris (2011) describe the stress associated with ambiguous loss: "[Ambiguous loss] is not typically officially acknowledged, and there is no possibility of closure... the loss remains unclear, as people don't know whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present" (p. 164). Although interacting with the profile of someone who has died is not necessarily indicative of confusion over whether or not they are alive, feelings and grief associated with ambiguous loss are still of concern when death is technologically mediated, and "the dead remain both psychologically present and physically (i.e. virtually) present" (Sofka et al., 2012, p. 9).

The ambiguous nature of "passing away" is reflected in research conducted by Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2012) in their discussion of unintentional memorialization that occurs through the digital evidence of a person's life that remains online after they themselves have "passed away" (imagine a Google image search for a person who has died – their death does not wipe away their digital existence). In their research on social network sites, Walter and colleagues (2012) discuss this immortality of digital data and focus on the way SNSs bring death and grief into the public sphere, rather than contribute to what has been recognized previously as a generally sequestered experience (p. 284-285). In the past, the act of dying has been referred to as "sequestered death" because of its nature as a private experience. In a direct way, the dying process has been blogged about by terminally ill patients. Facebook profiles persist in a way that publicizes death as well. Publicizing one's individual grief can contribute to the sense of communal grief that exists even when the person may not have had a "social death" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 292). The Internet provides a space in which to interact with those who have died.

And if “the social interactions of dying or grieving people change, then the experience of dying or grieving may well change” (Walter et al., 2012, p. 276).

In a public online sphere, persistent communication with and on a person’s profile even after their death can become common practice. The Internet is unique in its ability to provide support for those grieving by being a source of information, a place in which emotional support is provided, or where continued expression of grief and memorialization is not deemed bad “mourning netiquette” (Gilbert & Horsley, 2011; Sofka et al., 2012, p. 10). Supportive online environments include online support groups (Weinberg et al., 1996; Sofka 1997) and formal Web memorialization within virtual “cemeteries” (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; Roberts, 2004; Arthur, 2009). Bereaved survivors can more easily find others who feel similarly within support groups, whereas memorial sites like The World Wide Cemetery “include image (photos, artwork) and sound, giving visitors an opportunity to see and potentially hear things that provide a connection to the life of the deceased” (Sofka, 1997, p. 559).

On SNSs, users can self-identify as mourners through status updates, by posting old photos of loved ones, or by including “RIP” in a descriptive area of their profile. When this intentional mourning process takes place on SNSs – non-grief-specific sites – it allows for continued interaction in the public eye (Walter et al, 2012, p. 283). A deceased person’s profile is also a place where those typically disenfranchised by the grieving process can congregate. Now, youth and peers of someone who has died can publicly mourn, or engage in voyeuristic practices as they watch others grieve online. Traditional mourning rituals may ignore friends or acquaintances of those who have died, while SNSs provide a space in which those traditionally left out of the grieving process can employ traditional post-death rituals (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004, p. 15; Gilbert & Horsley, 2011, p. 369).

The psychological sense of community that one may find gathered around an individual's Facebook profile is a supportive network of people with whom interaction may alleviate feelings of grief: "The innovation of interactive social media is that grief is reemerging as a *communal* activity, within existing social networks" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 289-290). Researchers Sanderson and Cheong explored the interactive, communal grieving process on Twitter in the wake of Michael Jackson's death (2010). With this case study, they determined that mourning on SNSs has contributed to the emergence of new mourning rituals that reflect the conventional stages of grieving via new media. As a result of their study, they conclude, "social media [sites are] facilitating traditional grieving stages as well as enacting social change in contexts that are themselves part of a wider reformulation of the relation between the public and private" (2010, p. 337). Twitter and Facebook provide a new kind of platform for those grieving – one on which users in the grieving community contribute to a person's legacy and narrative identity through memorialization (p. 337).

Online Community Formation

The formation of community is vital to the online grieving process, whether in traumatic events (Arthur, 2009) or in personal loss. Aspects of online community lend themselves well to healing through mourning, and the Internet can be a source of social support in the process. Gilbert and Horsley (2011) identify these aspects to include anonymity, the absence of traditional media gatekeepers, and a more controlled environment (p. 366). The nature of online communication is such that communities form and create a space in which the grieving process can occur.

In her thematic discussion of the dynamics of online communities, sociologist Mary Chayko describes the constant availability of social networks as a perceived benefit of this

interaction (2008, p. 120). There is a sense of companionship and comfort that results from online interaction with a community, that is “unparalleled in its constancy” (2008, p. 120). These qualities may be particularly beneficial to bereaved SNS users, since they are likely to seek companionship and constancy (Gilbert & Horsley, 2011). Online communities also provide users with a sense of control over time, space, and relationships with people (Chayko, 2008, p. 142). Communication becomes asynchronous and controlled by the individual; when in mourning, this may contribute to continued interaction between the SNS user and the profile of someone who has died. The blurring of private and public communication is enabled by these qualities of online communities. Chayko describes the way some users of SNSs find it therapeutic to publicly share personal stories, details, and feelings online (2008, p. 137). Others generally interact with these personal stories in a supportive and positive way, even when the details revealed would typically be considered private. The structure of online interaction is such that “the public has become personal [and] the personal has become public” (Chayko, 2008, p. 138).

Before the advent of Facebook, virtual cemeteries and web memorials provided bereaved individuals a space to connect with others and form communities online (Roberts, 2004). On Facebook, the bereaved are already connected with other survivors within a network of Facebook friendships. Context collapse ensures that friends from high school and college might comment on a deceased user’s profile alongside family members or work acquaintances (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Friends of varying closeness are each connected to the deceased online, and can easily find one another when grieving.

Social networks as communities. Looking more specifically at SNSs as virtual communities, researchers recognize that SNSs are places where many sub-communities form, as opposed to the platform being one large community (Parks, 2011). Typical of SNSs like

MySpace or Facebook is the ability to “friend” other users, or add them to one's network – in effect, determining that they are part of one's virtual community (Park, 2011, p. 110-111). The rhetoric used by sites like MySpace or Facebook is just as community-oriented as this action. Words like “connection,” “friendship” and even “community” are used to describe these sites on their homepages, which reinforces the idea that an SNS is a place where a group of people who feel connected come together and communicate with one another, regardless of geographical separation (Park, 2011, p. 106-107). Some acknowledgement of the existence of a virtual social tie is necessary in order to qualify users as part of a community, which the “friending” process seems to recognize formally.

Creation of virtual ties reflects how social network sites act as networked publics (boyd & Ellison, 2008; boyd, 2011). While initial research on social network sites suggested that users flocked to virtual sites in order to make new connections and meet people, current research proposes that an individual connects with people online with whom he or she already has a relationship (boyd, 2011, p. 39). In this way, the connections of an SNS reflect your real-life connections in what is described as a networked public (p. 39). Networked publics use technology to recreate an already existing network of friends and acquaintances in a virtual atmosphere. Social network theories in communication research characterize such networks as having invisible audiences, collapsed contexts of space and time, and a blurring of public and private spheres; an SNS is an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and place” (p. 39). I believe that this intersection, and the resulting characteristics of SNSs as networked publics, will have a direct impact on the mourning and memorialization process as users engage with one another in a new sphere.

Audience and narrative formation. Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) seek to define social media by their audience and mediated relationships. As a channel of communication in which users participate and interact within a community, SNSs necessitate interaction and activity (2010, p. 310). The many-to-many communication style affects the way users learn and deal with death, grief, and mourning. This process is no longer hampered by geographical distance, and involves interaction and discussion (p. 311). The two-way audience contributes to the changing notion of online identity, as users continuously contribute to each other's identity formation in the process of posting to one another's profiles. Marwick and Ellison (2012) posit that identity performance on SNSs might be complicated by context collapse, as bereaved individuals posting on a deceased user's profile are aware of their potential audience and the requirement to appear genuine or authentic (p. 397).

Despite often occurring as an interaction between close friends, social media is quite public; the posted content persists as part of a narrative, even in death (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010, p. 311). People come together online after death "to commemorate, to grieve, to debate, to sympathize, and to provide emotional, social, and economic support" (p. 311). This process is one of memorialization in which expressions of mourning are exhibited within a community, as opposed to memorialization through funeral, cremation, or other physical site of memorialization (i.e. a bench at the person's favorite park; a plaque in their honor) (Bradbury, 2001). Carroll and Landry (2010) find that memorialization on SNSs can be empowering to individuals. These features of SNSs contribute to a specific process of community formation and alleviation of grief through online memorialization that requires further research.

Intended Contributions to Research

The contextualization of grief – both within a specific culture and as determined by communication technology – is only one point of view from which researchers seek to understand mourning and memorialization. Incorporating thanatechnological research on the experience of death and ambiguous loss with studies of online community formation during mourning illuminates the differences between private and public grief as well as a changing memorialization process. In a mixed-methods exploration of how young Internet users interact with peers who have died, Carroll and Landry (2010) envision public and communal displays of mourning on SNSs as creating a contextual framework for new social grieving practices (p. 342). These sites allow populations who are often excluded or marginalized in a traditional, and often familial, grieving process to express grief and “honor a friendship” (2010, p. 344). The memorial sites themselves serve as living documents on which grieving community members contribute to an ongoing biography and narrative and form a sub-community regardless of geography (2010, p. 344).

The research findings of Carroll and Landry (2010) are part of a growing body of research on the intersection of these theoretical elements. While Carroll and Landry use MySpace memorial pages and survey responses in their data analysis, other research has focused on Facebook and social support through thematic mourning rituals by using qualitative surveying (Fearon, 2011) or on meanings that people in mourning attribute to SNSs of a deceased friend (Hieftje, 2009). In order to gain further understanding of a Facebook user’s experience, this study explores and clarifies the phenomenological elements of persistent identity, expressions of grief, and memorialization. Speaking with Facebook users directly and at length extends research that focuses on patterns in postmortem comments on MySpace and Facebook profiles (Williams

& Merton, 2009; Brubaker & Hayes, 2011), activity on Facebook memorial pages (Marwick & Ellison, 2012), and Facebook as a space to publicly mourn (Brubaker et al., 2013) by relating these patterns to personal experience of users. The in-depth interview process affords me the ability to more broadly explore practices and experiences of young adult Facebook users within an online community, while considering what aspects of Facebook enable effective expression of grief and an ongoing relationship with the deceased.

Chapter 3: Methods

In the following chapter, I describe participant selection, an overview of the interview process, and data analysis procedures. This process of qualitative inquiry is an inductive analysis of emergent patterns and themes. Validity is also addressed.

Research Design

In-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified SNS users who have previously experienced the death of a Facebook friend. Interview subjects were voluntary participants of this research project, willing to speak about their experiences with grief and memorialization on Facebook. These interviews took place locally, in a somewhat private setting. Interviews were held in the University student center or in a quiet seating area of an academic building.

This research design most effectively answers my phenomenological research questions. Within the qualitative research field, phenomenological research aims to describe a particular phenomenon, as people understand it to occur (Creswell, 2009, p. 173). These internalized experiences contribute to the way an individual constructs and understands their reality – learning about the ways online identity and the grieving process are experienced on Facebook is phenomenological in that I seek to understand the process as young adult social media users experience it. Qualitative research emphasizes understanding a process through the eyes of a participant, gathering meaning through the course of research (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). In this study, the interview process is vital to learning about the specific experiences of young adults. Since specific questions were designed from a phenomenological perspective, these questions posed “[aim] to identify and describe the subjective experiences of respondents” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 226). Rather than generalize these experiences, phenomenology focuses on the point of view of the subject. In the course of this research, interview participants were initially asked to

speak about their personal experience with grief on Facebook, after which they were questioned based on these experiences. This process is in line with the phenomenological ideal of “turning from things to their meaning” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 225). Practically, this involves asking questions about participants’ feelings during particular moments, emotional response to grief, and judgment of others’ actions on Facebook.

The holistic nature of qualitative inquiry suits this research, in part because of the difficulty of determining a singular definition of either grief or identity (Creswell, 2009, p. 176). Interviews effectively reveal many different facets of these topics. Understanding grief and identity on SNSs is established through emergent design, in which the process of qualitative inquiry and analysis adapt as the study unfolds in order to deal with unforeseen issues – whether in the interview process or in my understanding of grief and identity that I inherently bring to the research process (Schwandt, 2007). Qualitative research allows me to acknowledge this potential bias, and change my research design accordingly. I limit my research to the interviews conducted, and do not examine online memorials through ethnographic research or content analysis as part of this study.

Role of the Researcher

Through my interpretation of qualitative data, I necessarily bring a specific point of view to my analysis. As a social media user, I have a certain way of thinking about, talking about, and understanding my own online identity and experience with an online community. I have not experienced the death of a close friend on Facebook, although I have seen others express grief or condolences online. I have also spoken with numerous people about this experience – in casual conversation, and also in a related pilot study and past research.

In phenomenological research, the role of the researcher is discussed in the context of bracketing. I am responsible for bracketing my experiences so as to not interfere with the analysis of data. I have set aside previous experiences in order to gain insight into participants' actual experience of life or the *lifeworld* (Creswell, 2009, p. 13; Schwandt, 2007, p. 177), the grieving process, and online identity without inferring certain themes or imposing my opinion upon participants.

Interviews were conducted with participants only after approval for the research project was gained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board at the site of research. This application process includes the submission of a sample of informed consent read and signed by each participant prior to his or her interview (see Appendix C). In order to maintain privacy of interview participants, all names have been changed and identifying details of participants or those they chose to discuss have been minimized.

Data Collection

Data collection involved reaching out to students of a mid-sized, private, Northeastern university during the spring semester of 2013, between the months of January and February. First, professors were contacted for permission to speak to their class about this research project (see Appendix A). After gaining permission, classroom visits were scheduled in which I spoke about the topic of this study and the interview process (see Appendix B). Students had the opportunity to ask questions, and personal contact information was distributed in order for interested students to participate or share information with friends who might be interested. Gift cards to local restaurants for \$15 were offered as incentive to participate in this study.

The university setting, while convenient, also provides access to a population that is vital in this study. Participants are at a stage in life at which online identity is of continued

importance; it has been suggested that 98-99% of students ages 18-24 have at least one active social media profile (James, 2009; “Social Networking Statistics,” 2013). This generation of active social media users is essentially made up of early adopters of a new form of communication. Additionally, college students are part of the demographic that researchers identify as marginalized by traditional grieving practices, and may be likely to use online media to express grief (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Williams & Merton, 2009).

Following classroom appeals for participation, interviews were coordinated with students who expressed willingness to participate in a face-to-face, in-depth interview lasting around an hour. The first 20 students who were available to meet within a designated block of time were interviewed if they disclosed that they experienced the death of a Facebook friend. Interviews took place between February 11 and February 26, 2013. Speaking with individual students at length in a casual, somewhat private setting facilitates a conversation in which their specific, subjective experience becomes clear. Interview questions dealt directly with a participant’s experience of the grieving and memorialization processes. This experience was not limited by time frame or proximity to their personal grieving period, since experiences of grief and expressions of mourning according to varying periods of time provide a wide range of data in order to determine how young adult social media users feel regarding proper memorialization procedures or mourning rituals.

The interview process provides rich data concerning a phenomenon that cannot be studied through direct observation, like personal expression of grief (Creswell, 2009, p. 179). Describing an experience or a feeling in an interview setting is not without its limitations – interview participants filter an understanding of their experiences through their own worldview, and the experience itself has no concrete natural setting in which it may be observable.

Additionally, not every interviewee is able to articulate his or her feelings or experiences in the same way or with the same amount of detail (Creswell, 2009, p. 179). Since this is a sensitive subject, interview participants might be hesitant to describe their experiences. At the same time, a casual interview setting provides the most sense of ease with which to address this topic, and other data collection processes would not provide the same sense of open communication and comfort with the researcher that interviews can achieve.

In interviews with 20 young adult participants, a variety of experiences with online grieving were discussed and considerable data was collected from which to determine patterns and draw conclusions. All interviews were conducted in-person and were semi-structured, following a general interview protocol which included an opening statement informing the participant of their ability to suspend their participation for any reason and at any time. Participants were asked questions concerning how it feels to interact with a Facebook profile of a deceased user, what types of posts or messages participants shared on these profiles, and how participants feel when a profile of someone who dies remains online, among other topics (see Appendix D for complete interview guide). Each interview was audio-recorded with permission from participants, and upon conclusion a short memo of initial impressions was written down. The recorded interviews were then transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After the interview and transcription process, the collected data was organized and read for initial impressions in the data immersion phase (Tracy, 2013). In doing this, a more complete picture of the data collected emerges. Through general thematic coding, I looked for similar clusters of interrelated topics (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). An iterative analysis method was used to analyze the data and determine themes according to an emergent reading while also keeping

theoretical underpinnings and explanations in mind (Tracy, 2013). Coding of interviews was conducted within the data analysis system, Dedoose. This software was used in order to identify emergent themes over the course of multiple readings of interview transcripts: relevant codes were created and assigned to excerpts based on content, and the coding scheme was refined during ongoing analysis of the data. Refining this coding scheme involved creation of umbrella codes, modification of the coding scheme over time, and engagement in a constant comparative process in which data was reread and recoded as necessary after new codes emerged later in the analysis process (Tracy, 2013).

There was no predetermined coding scheme in place; rather, I sought to code excerpts based on relatedness to research questions and underlying emotion of each participant statement. More specifically, umbrella codes emerged that described excerpts in which participants discussed characteristics of Facebook or the Internet, their feelings associated with death on Facebook, specific acts of mourning, and concepts relevant to research questions (i.e. identity, and memorialization). Data analysis and interpretation were conducted while considering applicable theory and specific phenomenological research questions. After coding was complete, the emergent coding scheme was considered and synthesized within the context of this research project. Preliminary thematic analysis involved creating a loose analysis outline in which important concepts and interesting findings were considered (Tracy, 2013). In order to understand these findings a chart of code co-occurrence was evaluated within Dedoose, and specific patterns within major concepts or themes were considered and elaborated.

Validity

Relatedness to theory and general data analysis methods should not pose any threat to the validity of this study; however, it is important to acknowledge any validity issues that arose in the course of research.

The nature of interviews in the data collection process is such that the participants chosen are not random. Qualifying questions were asked of young adults willing to participate in the interview process to ensure that each participant experienced the passing of someone with whom they are or were connected online. However, those willing to partake in this study were not initially questioned about their closeness to this person or willingness to speak about their experience. This opened up the interview process to participants who may not have had the specific experience expected. The \$15 gift card offered might have also attracted participants, which should be taken into consideration.

All but a few participants accepted their \$15 gift cards after the interview. These individuals explained that they wanted to share their experience but were uninterested in compensation. There may also be potential researcher bias present. My interpretation of the data comes from a specific worldview, and may represent my understanding of the phenomenon based on my own experiences. This is acknowledged and taken into consideration, but does not pose a serious problem since I lack the direct experience of potential interviewees.

Ultimately, the data analysis and results will be most applicable only for the population studied. The young adult participants provide valuable and rich information that informs my analysis of posthumous online memorialization and mourning rituals, and should be a starting point for further research on the topic.

Chapter 4: Participants

Each of the young adults interviewed for this research project had unique experiences with Facebook and expressions of grief. The following section describes some of these specific participant experiences and information they chose to share about themselves during the interview process in order to contextualize my research findings. Participant names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Ben

Ben is an energetic first year student who considers himself an active yet cautious social media user. Ben uses Facebook daily, for many different types of relationships, and is invested in it as a place to communicate – he calls it a “fifth limb.” Sometimes Ben contradicts himself, going back and forth on the importance of his Facebook profile and reflecting on whether or not he should place so much value on Facebook relationships. When discussing grief, Ben finds the sense of community that is available online can be more comforting than going to a funeral. Yet, he also considers a physical memorial service to be the best way to remember this person. Ben wants to support people and reach out to as many people as he can, which is easiest for him to do on Facebook. However, he has specific ways he feels comfortable doing so. It is most important for Ben to feel comfortable and to feel that his way of reaching out is appropriate for the person and the type of grief when he posts messages or “likes” comments.

Brittany

On Facebook, Brittany is very aware that what she posts is public. She acts accordingly, using Facebook to keep in touch with her family and close friends while being respectful and conscious of what she posts. For Brittany, using Facebook to communicate with her friends and

family at home is just as important as her continued connection with her close friend who died after battling cancer as a high school student. She is relatively far away from home, and her tight-knit hometown community, and finds that Facebook is the easiest way to keep in touch with these friends. Similarly, Brittany talks about how she feels that Facebook allows her to continue her relationship with her deceased friend since he is also “far away,” in a sense. She generally enjoys continuing this relationship on the site, and also gets emotional when recounting some of the ways the legacy of her friend lives on in her town.

Carlos

Carlos is soft-spoken and thoughtful as he reflects on his experience with Facebook and grief. In the beginning of his interview, Carlos speaks about how he does not generally find Facebook to be a good way of personally connecting with someone. However, it has been helpful for him when keeping in touch with his family in Puerto Rico while away at school. Carlos states that he does not necessarily consider Facebook a “real” form of communication – with those who are alive or dead – and thinks of it as a last resort for maintaining relationships. Carlos was also recently put in touch with his estranged father, who unexpectedly died shortly thereafter. Since he lost this connection so suddenly, Carlos uses Facebook to learn more about his father. He admits that he is grieving the loss of this potential relationship, and uses Facebook to try and learn a little about his father through his extended family. He has expressed his grief differently than his estranged family members, and talks about the resulting conflict on Facebook.

Cecelia

While speaking about the loss of a former co-worker, Cecelia is respectful and even-tempered. She speaks very quickly and responds promptly when asked about this friend and how she dealt with the news of his death while in high school. Cecelia heard something had happened to her

co-worker when reading Twitter updates from mutual friends during the school day, and speaks about using Facebook to look at her friend's profile and share memories about him while supporting other people experiencing grief. She feels that Facebook is a tool that allows her to effectively meet with others in real life, and that it provides a space to share stories about the person who had died. For Cecelia, Facebook reflects how this person is remembered in real life.

Dan

Dan “[uses] Facebook pretty much all the time,” often joking or sharing funny videos with friends. As an active user, Dan mentions that he is careful not to come across as a jerk or as disrespectful since Facebook provides a different – and public – context to how he might usually interact with friends. Dan had only recently learned that the younger brother of a close friend died unexpectedly. He immediately went home to be with his family and friends, and notes that this loss is very fresh and that it has been difficult for him to cope. Dan describes the overwhelming response to the shocking death of his friend, and how he felt like he needed to stay away from Facebook initially because of how upset he felt. For Dan, the site evokes a strong emotional response as he read stories shared on his friend's profile, yet he continues to use Facebook to interact with his friend's profile and to share messages about how he is feeling via status updates. Dan particularly values the ability to access Facebook from his phone, whenever and wherever he may be. Another participant, Shannon, went to school with Dan and talks about this experience from her perspective.

Erin

While in high school, Erin found out that a friend from school died via Facebook. She speaks calmly about this at first, but as she recalls the specific circumstances of his death she becomes more upset. Erin watched her friend's page after he died and saw his mom use the profile to

interact with others while signed onto the profile as her friend. She expresses that she feels very conflicted about using Facebook after the death of her friend, and that his profile picture troubled her because it was a reminder of the way that he died. She was emotional when speaking about these circumstances, tearing up several times. In contrast to the discomfort Erin feels on Facebook, she enjoyed participating in a group memorial event. In order to avoid being confronted by her friend's active profile, Erin chose to "defriend" him. However, she feels guilty about doing so.

Henry

Using Facebook to interact with friends who are alive sometimes feels "unnatural" to Henry, who sees the site as a way to have all of your acquaintances in one place and prefers talking in person. Henry is very matter-of-fact in his analysis of Facebook use, and sometimes seems to be speaking in quotable sound bites as he uses metaphors and comparisons to describe his relationship with the site and the grieving process. Henry's father died a few years prior to his interview, and he reflects on the way his family handled this as well as the continued impact of the Facebook profile on his family and their ability to grieve and move on – including his mother's desire to take down the profile. Henry feels that Facebook users should take advantage of the opportunity to maintain a relationship with a deceased loved one. In speaking about this, he outlines various ways Facebook should consider a preservation system in which information and photographs can be passed down to new generations who never had the chance to meet a deceased relative.

Janelle

Janelle comes across as straightforward and humorous, and does not overthink her answers when asked about her Facebook use. In Janelle's experience, two female classmates who were injured

or killed inspired very different reactions on Facebook. One girl was killed in a car accident and had many hateful comments left on her profile, while another girl was severely injured and received posts wishing her a fast and healthy recovery. Janelle attributes these reactions to the way the two girls presented themselves on Facebook, considering herself realistic about the types of messages a Facebook profile can send. Even though posting cruel messages is perplexing to Janelle, she is not personally offended and is just as wary of writing a kind message to a deceased user. She is matter-of-fact and does not see a point to posting a message on Facebook because she does not believe that this person will see it.

Justin

In his interview, Justin touched on both personal experience with loss and also on grief at a national scale, as we talked about the school shooting that took place in Newtown, CT in December of 2012. Justin has been using Facebook throughout high school and college. As we sat down to talk he explained that he did not know what the interview would be about – only that it dealt with Facebook. He initially seemed like he was trying to figure out the interview and determine what it was I wanted to know about, but eventually let down his guard and spoke openly about his experiences and emotional responses to death online. His personal experience included learning about two former classmates committing suicide, and his reaction as others posted messages about people in Newtown that they had never met. He seemed incensed by this type of Facebook activity, but he is more understanding when he sees personal messages of condolences or grief online.

Kyle

When learning that a former classmate died after speaking with a friend, Kyle feels compelled to take part in the public grieving process on Facebook. He has a very optimistic view of how

people can use Facebook to express grief, and feels strongly that everyone is able to use the site to express their feelings in a way that is potentially more helpful and more truthful than in person at a funeral or at a gravesite. Most of these feelings, though, are not related to direct experience with grief. Although Kyle has witnessed mourning on Facebook, he acknowledges that he did not feel bereaved in this instance. Kyle is an example of someone who might only have access to Facebook as a space in which to express grief since he was not particularly close with the person he knows who died.

Lauren

Being away from home has made Lauren turn to Facebook in order to stay in touch with friends now that she is at college. Lauren is blunt when describing how she uses Facebook and how she feels – she gives short answers that get straight to the point. The most useful aspect of Facebook for Lauren is connecting with those friends when she feels sad or upset about the death of her friend, whose death she learned about when she happened to be looking at pictures of this friend on Facebook. She was rattled to learn that something had happened. Lauren feels somewhat uncomfortable using Facebook since losing her friend, but it is a valuable resource for her when other types of mourning rituals do not alleviate her grief. Lauren describes seeking out her own personal rituals for most occasions, but does find the connection with others to be beneficial in other cases, especially when she wants to support her friend's bereaved family and is unable to do so in person. Regardless, Facebook does provide the best space in which Lauren can communicate with her friend, since she does not enjoy visiting the cemetery.

Maggie

As we talk at length, Maggie sometimes struggles to put her emotions into words. She stops and starts answering questions with some regularity, and acknowledges that she is feeling frazzled.

Despite this, Maggie tries to answer thoughtfully. When Maggie learned that a childhood friend of hers died, she made sure to contribute a message of condolence on Facebook. It was easy to write something even though she is far from home, and Maggie also feels compelled to do so because it feels like the right thing to do. Maggie actively looks at Facebook to see what others post, even though she feels a bit uncomfortable when she thinks about the implications of a Facebook profile left behind when she dies. Maggie talks a lot about active identity construction, and how being able to control how she is seen – or remembered – online is a benefit of Facebook.

Mark

Mark was one of a few participants who experienced the death of a family member on Facebook. He speaks about this experience openly and does not hesitate to share what happened while considering all parties involved. When Mark's cousin died in a tragic accident his extended family used Facebook to organize the funeral, coordinate with their community to host memorial events, and to talk to his cousin on his public Facebook wall. Mark mostly expressed discomfort at this type of interaction, but was also compelled to be involved since he wanted to show support to his family members. Even when family members express themselves in a way that is different from him he tries to understand and analyze why they act in a certain way. Mark is slightly older than most other participants, and is a Ph.D. candidate; these factors seem to contribute to a more analytical discussion of his Facebook use. He mentions many layers of interaction on Facebook, and speaks about specific experiences as well as abstract concepts of grief online and what the site will mean in the future for expression of grief.

Melissa

Melissa is a little standoffish during her interview, in which she describes her experience of

learning that a friend's brother had committed suicide while in class during high school. She opens up as the interview progresses, and seems more comfortable. After learning of this death, Melissa saw that Facebook groups were formed in memory of this student, but she did not participate directly in expressing grief online. She finds using Facebook to be less personal than other ways of mourning, but acknowledges the pressure to take part in this expression online. Melissa is also highly aware of the norms that determine the appropriate type of expression in these instances, and abides by them.

Nicole

Nicole is very open and willing to speak at length about her experiences on Facebook, in school, and with death. She has had several different experiences with death and grief online, and shares long, detailed stories about each of these experiences. She first learned via word of mouth that a classmate committed suicide, and was shocked by the news. This classmate was a former bully to Nicole, and his death made her think about what she would have wanted to say to him if he were still alive. Nicole recalls several other classmates' suicides, and also learning that a close family friend died. She is very concerned with this friend's young daughter, and talks about communicating with the deceased from both the perspective of this young child and in her own mourning rituals – writing letters to the child's mother, and writing Facebook messages on her friend's profile herself. Nicole is very aware of who can read what she posts, and takes this into consideration when writing.

Olivia

Olivia is upbeat and friendly when we meet for her interview. She answers questions quickly, but not without thinking through what she would like to say. When reflecting on how people in her community use Facebook after a friend died, Olivia describes the profile as a shrine and a place

to find a support system. She finds writing on Facebook to be the most comfortable way to deal with a friend's unexpected death – news that she learned from a phone call before going online. For Olivia, turning to Facebook, and to other social network sites Instagram and Twitter, is natural. She also spoke about the eeriness inherent with this type of interaction. In her experience, some posts that remain online now seem to foreshadow her friend's death and act as unpleasant reminders of his untimely passing. Olivia seems to enjoy speaking about her experiences, and is curious about how others feel.

Ryan

Ryan is generally reserved and unflappable when speaking about grief online, even as he shares stories that make him angry or upset with how people use Facebook. After learning that a childhood friend was killed in a fatal accident, Ryan says that Facebook became a place for memorialization. He posted on his friend's profile, and has seen others continue to do so with some regularity for the past 3 years. Ryan describes how Facebook enables a community grieving process from the perspective of a peripheral friend, but at the same time sees that it can be difficult to navigate appropriate posting. It might also be used as a space to post hateful comments, which confuses and saddens Ryan. After some anonymous Facebook users posted images of his friend's accident in a memorial group, Ryan researched why this was happening and talked about how he discovered this type of posting within grieving communities.

Shannon

As we meet each other and find a space for the interview, Shannon comes across as sociable, chatty, and ready to share whatever information is necessary. She shrugs off conflict that can come from using Facebook to instigate fights or keep tabs on an ex-boyfriend as normal and expected. Shannon characterizes the site as a “personal but public” space, where this type of

interaction is taken for granted amongst young adults. This publicizing happens on a large scale when a former classmate of Shannon's died, and to a lesser extent when the mother of a friend and teammate died after fighting cancer. Shannon talks about the difference between using Facebook to grieve and "over sharing," when certain users ignore boundaries when mourning. Much of the interaction on Facebook revolves around organizing memorial events for an acquaintance of Shannon's that died recently. During the interview process it becomes clear that this person is the same as discussed by Dan, who attended the same high school as Shannon.

Taylor

Taylor comes across as laidback and our conversation flows easily. Although she calls herself "old fashioned" when it comes to communication and technology, Taylor primarily uses Facebook to stay connected with her friends from home who live across the country. She says that the Internet scares her a little bit, mentioning that at one point she discovered a fake profile someone had created with her pictures under a different name. While in high school, she learned on Facebook that a friend had gone missing. In an effort to reach out to her, Taylor wrote messages and closely followed her friend's profile. When she learned that this friend died, she turned to Facebook again. Taylor explains that she didn't feel that she had closure or any chance to say goodbye. She was comforted by the ability to write to her friend, but also expressed annoyance with the way that others acted online. Now, the site is the best way that she feels she can pay tribute to a friend.

Tricia

Tricia seems a little self-conscious and hesitant to share how she feels at first. She slowly opens up, but our conversation does not flow very easily. Tricia talks about moving around a lot when growing up, and see Facebook as a good way to stay connected with her friends in old towns.

Now at college and far away from her friends from home, she uses Facebook to keep in touch with them. She experienced the loss of her grandmother, and watched what happened on Facebook after that, on her grandmother's profile and from the perspective of her mother. She was particularly annoyed and frustrated with the way that the Facebook algorithms acted once her grandmother died, and she experienced trouble as she tried to take down the account.

Chapter 5: Results

The 20 young adults I interviewed each had unique experiences on Facebook and with grief. Some participants dealt with the loss of a close friend, whereas others learned about the death of an acquaintance with whom they had primarily interacted on Facebook. A few participants discussed losing a family member. Each interview revealed an array of emotions and attitudes concerning the use of Facebook in the grieving process. The grieving experience is a universal one, but is certainly contingent upon cultural and social factors that may influence individual experiences (Walter, 1999). Some common experiences emerged that provide answers to the question of how Facebook users express grief online, and how memorialization of a person's identity via their Facebook profile is undertaken by the surviving community. Relevant themes that are pervasive in these experiences are discussed here.

Participant Experience

Participants learn of someone's death on Facebook when they read a Facebook friend's status. Some participants watched as multiple people shared Facebook statuses or expressed condolences to the family and friends of the deceased. Messages were also posted on the deceased user's *Facebook wall* (or just *wall*; a virtual space on which other Facebook users write; when alive, wall posts are addressed directly to the owner of the Facebook profile). Participants reported that status updates or wall posts show up on their Facebook *newsfeeds* (a perpetually refreshed list of updates from Facebook friends that acts as the "home" page of a user's Facebook account) and would provide information about this person's death. Status updates do not necessarily address the deceased Facebook user, as the perceived audience of a Facebook status is one's own friends. However, messages that were posted on the deceased user's wall were generally written to the person who died.

When learning about someone's death, the amount of Facebook activity on a participant's Facebook newsfeed varied. This may be due in part to the size and closeness of the community grieving a loss, or the number of people within a grieving community with whom a participant was connected (thus determining the number of posts each participant was likely to see in their newsfeed). The size of a community has been important in the way a community grieves historically, as smaller communities may experience widespread mourning of a person characterized as a "shared ancestor" (Walter, 1999, p. 30). Facebook can reflect the relationships within a physical community through its members' virtual connections, and on the site these relationships appear to have equal weight, regardless of how close two users may be. The social network site facilitates connection between people and a public display of self-identified social spheres. Traditionally, a funeral acts as a space in which survivors might come together from various social groups and mourn publicly (Walter, 1999); Facebook acts as a semi-public space in which members of various social groups also come together to grieve.

Depending on the situation, affiliated social groups have varying levels of relational closeness with the deceased; determining one's relational closeness is vital before expressing grief on Facebook. The death of a peripheral friend may create less Facebook traffic in a user's newsfeed than the death of a close friend with whom this user may have many mutual Facebook friends. Some participants learned about a friend's death in another way (i.e. a phone call or text from a mutual friend, or hearing an announcement at school) yet in these scenarios participants would quickly turn to Facebook or Twitter to learn more information. Shannon saw multiple friends post cryptic messages that did not identify the deceased on Twitter, but after texting a friend and looking on Facebook she discovered who had died. In Carlos' case, he learned that family friend had died when he read a Facebook status. Just the fact that Carlos learned about a

death this way upset him. He explains, “I felt kind of sad to hear from Facebook and not from his family. Yeah. Even though it was from his family, but, I felt like it was Facebook who told me. And not a person.”

Participants reported that statuses posted would often include phrases such as “RIP” or “We miss you.” Close friends as well as acquaintances of the deceased posted short messages like these. When Nicole learned that a fellow student committed suicide she noticed that even “complete strangers that happened to be friends with him [on Facebook]” would post a short message. Posts of acquaintances exist alongside longer comments or stories that friends wanted to share. This is a familiar practice, as sharing anecdotes at a funeral or wake have become common practice in Western mourning periods. Funerals and other memorial services have been traditional places in which the bereaved have publicly contributed to the shared memory of someone who has died (Walter, 1999). Facebook provides a virtual forum in which this conversation can and does continue, as users address the deceased directly, make sure to include the context of their relationship in their post, and sometimes post continuously in the months or years after the death of a Facebook friend (Williams and Merton, 2009, p. 76).

Whereas the Facebook profile was a virtual place in which users shared and read one another’s stories, the Facebook group tool was often used organizationally. In groups created in someone’s name after they die, users can reach out to the grieving family and learn details about the funeral or memorial service. Shannon “liked” a page on Facebook in order to show support and stay updated about ongoing memorial events, including the funeral of her friend’s brother who died very unexpectedly. Participants Dan and Shannon attended the same high school and both followed this specific memorial page, which was primarily used in order to raise money for funeral costs. Memorial pages like these also serve as a space in which to talk to one another

rather than address the deceased. When Brittany lost a close friend to cancer she saw a Facebook page created in his honor, on which people share information about fundraising events for a memorial scholarship. These uses are also in line with previous research (Williams and Merton, 2009)

These results point to some of the ways that Facebook has become a place where grieving is certainly happening, and where some traditional grieving norms or rituals are adopted and altered as necessary on a virtual platform. The way that the site operates allows users to visit a friend's profile or feel as though they are communicating directly with their deceased friend. However, this experience can be extremely personal and specific to the Facebook user. In this study, participants sometimes felt similarly but at other times expressed completely the opposite opinion concerning Facebook use when grieving. While there were certainly differences in the experiences of these young adults, several themes emerged that further explain this phenomenon and reveal a complicated relationship with the site.

Theme 1: Seeking Comfort; Feeling Uncomfortable

In many ways, the young adults interviewed conveyed that they felt uncomfortable when looking at or interacting with the profiles of a deceased Facebook friend. At the same time, there was a certain level of comfort provided by the profile for those experiencing grief. Often, the affordances of the Facebook platform itself were related to the comfort and discomfort associated with the interaction. Each participant turned to Facebook for different reasons depending on the context of their loss and their comfort level with using Facebook to grieve. Overall, any comfort participants were seeking seemed to be challenged by the inherent discomfort of using of Facebook to continue to interact with someone who has died – or, in many cases, the discomfort felt when witnessing others using Facebook to express grief or maintain

bonds with the deceased. Thematically, these feelings appear to co-exist. However, it is important to disentangle feelings of comfort and discomfort, and determine in what capacity they are related to other grieving experiences on Facebook.

During analysis of interview transcripts, excerpts were frequently coded as referencing comfort and support alongside excerpts that described discomfort. Those excerpts coded as relating to discomfort often related to the persistence of the Facebook profile, as participants discussed the identity of the deceased and norms related to use of Facebook. Participants reported that the shock of learning about a friend's death was followed by heavy usage of the Facebook page in an effort to grieve, which could be an initial source of comfort. Taylor describes her experience reaching out to others on Facebook as bizarre, but something in which she wanted to participate nonetheless:

...I found myself, like – it's almost relieving, 'cause, you know, who actually knows what happens when someone passes away, and if you feel like you sort of reach out to them in any way, you know, it just – it feels better, I guess, for someone who's grieving. Like for me it really helped just being able to, like, get out what I was saying.

This participation as part of the grieving community can be helpful and comforting when dealing with grief, but Taylor also describes feeling alone and sad when expressing grief through the site. She explains that being around people at a memorial service was more comforting to her, even though she described the Facebook page as a virtual representation of that grieving community. Other participants also discussed this connection to a grieving community made possible by Facebook, but some agreed with Taylor's notion that comfort was most easily found through personal connections in real life. Nicole felt strongly that she could use Facebook to communicate with a deceased family friend, just like she might write a letter or speak out loud to

someone who had died. She explained why this was a comforting experience for her: “You know how when people die you always say like ‘I wish I could have had one last conversation with him,’ – it kind of gives you that feeling, that that was your one last conversation. It kind of makes you feel like they’ve seen it; they know you said it. It’s out there.” Writing down a message to the deceased or in their honor is a way to make these messages tangible and visible within a community of survivors. Nicole uses Facebook to maintain a relationship with her friend, but written messages like these Facebook posts are also “intended for readers within particular communities of memory” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 175). Henry also considers Facebook to be a good way to share positive messages, rather than write a private letter. For Henry, “It’s like the letters you might put on a grave. Except they’re actually readable.” Writing on Facebook might be considered a better alternative to writing a letter by hand, due to convenience and the fact that others can see what is written. Ben remarks:

I guess in “olden times,” you would send letters to the grieving family – but I guess now that’s the easiest way to show affection for someone. Is through Facebook. Because so many people can see it – so quickly. Um... so, I don’t know, I just. I guess it was... Facebook was the best way to say thank you.

The act of writing messages to the deceased can be comforting to a bereaved Facebook user like Nicole, but other users might choose to write a message in order to provide comfort to those reading posts on the site (as Hieftje, 2009 also notes).

Connecting with others and finding support while grieving may happen on Facebook, but it is occurring alongside the discomfort of having to see this person’s profile in everyday use of the site. Erin described how overwhelming it became to use Facebook when a friend of hers died:

And then after awhile it just made me, like, uncomfortable, like there was something wrong about it to me? I don't know what it was, but it just made me really uncomfortable. And I ended up, like, hiding him from my newsfeed – because I knew he was dead, and it's like – [it] kept coming up in my face, and I don't know, it just felt weird to me.

Dan, who is away at school, felt similarly when he learned that a friend from home died. Dan looked at Facebook as his newsfeed was flooded by what seemed to him like an endless stream of messages posted by almost everyone in his hometown. He reflected on this experience and how Facebook mediated the situation in both a positive and negative way, explaining that, "...it was probably the hardest night of my life to be on Facebook... It was nice to see that everyone cared about him, but it was – it was really, really hard to deal with stuff like that online. Like, I... I found comfort in it eventually, but at first it was like the posts were too much."

Studies have shown that adolescents express themselves on Facebook after loss by using a variety of coping strategies (Williams & Merton, 2009) and may feel empowered by engaging in memorialization processes on the site (Carroll & Landry, 2010), which is reflected in my participants use of Facebook to communicate with the deceased and seek comfort in connecting with others experiencing this loss. However, interviews also reveal that the perceived comfort of interacting on Facebook may also be a source of discomfort – especially over time, as users of the site witness others publicly communicating with the deceased or sharing their bereavement long after this person's death. In-depth analysis of codes and code co-occurrence reveals the relationship between comfort and discomfort according to the participant experience. These concepts are elaborated below.

Technological (in)convenience. Part of seeking comfort via Facebook is related to the convenience of using the site compared to reaching out to the family or friends of the deceased in other ways. Writing on Facebook may feel like an easier emotional task than offering condolences by calling someone on the phone or speaking in person about their loss. In general, the attitude of my participants reflected a preference for using Facebook in most cases. Olivia explained, “Usually over the Internet you’re a lot more comfortable. Or at least for me it’s easier for me to talk to people on Facebook than in person.” For Olivia, talking to someone face-to-face is unpredictable and potentially awkward. She described the theoretical situation in which she might encounter the mother of a deceased friend in person, explaining that, “She just had a sad aura, and if I didn’t have to witness that [in person] it probably would’ve been easier for me to say something.”

Maggie also described the experience of learning that a friend had died via Facebook, and seeing this friend’s parents use the site: “I think her parents took over her profile, and like, it’s so weird, because ... they’ll like, post stuff on her profile – which just like, weirds me out (*sic*).” Witnessing these posts was uncomfortable for Maggie, but still provided her a way to connect with the family that was preferable to communicating in person, which she seemed to fear: “...[The family] had friends come over. I mean they posted it on the Facebook so anyone could have gone, but I didn’t go, I would have felt really, really uncomfortable going to her house,” For Olivia and Maggie, Facebook was a convenient and preferable place in which to share condolences or express grief after experiencing a death. However, their status as a peripheral friend of the deceased is important to take into consideration.

For participants, situating themselves within the grieving community is an important way in which they can prevent as much discomfort as possible, and may explain why some users of

Facebook felt comfortable expressing grief while others did not. Some participants interviewed were closer with the person who died, such as Henry, who lost his father and experienced having friends and family reach out to him on the site while he was grieving. He was comforted by the gesture of reaching out, even if it was on Facebook:

It felt good. Like I said, they cared enough to say something, even if they wouldn't have been around without Facebook. I know it's easy to be cynical about that, but I credit Facebook for – it does bring people together. Even if it doesn't – it can't, sometimes it lacks in depth, but sometimes volume is enough. Especially in grief. You don't want to feel alone... And maybe Facebook can mitigate that a little bit. Because instead of 30 people caring, there are 3000 people caring, potentially.

Henry values the amount of feedback that the site allows – this is a beneficial aspect of the Facebook platform that provides comfort. For him, the quantity of messages was *comforting enough* in the days and weeks following the death of his father.

When hundreds of people are connected on Facebook there is the potential for all of these people to write something positive on someone's profile. The platform allows friends of varying closeness an equal opportunity to post how they are feeling online. Sometimes it may feel like a requisite part of being this person's friend on Facebook; indeed, witnessing this public expression of grief causes discomfort for some people. Janelle, for instance, does not feel that posting something online is necessarily helpful. She is not comforted by seeing others posting, and does not feel compelled to post herself. Rather, she remarks: "I feel like people do it 'cause like, they feel like they have to, because so many other people – like you'll see so many, like, 'you were a great person,' like... I don't... I don't like it. I would never [do it]." Janelle feels troubled by the posts she sees on Facebook, which are written so that others can see them and

continue to be posted over time. Melissa found the continuous posting of messages to be the most frustrating part of trying to move on. While Facebook does provide a forum in which messages can be posted at any time, of any length, and as long as the profile remains online, these technological affordances might be an uncomfortable reminder of this person: "...you kind of try to get over it, and then you get these updates. Months later. From his dad, just 'I miss you' in the [Facebook] group. And so that's the continuous nature of it, [which] is I think the hardest part, because I'm still in the group and so are all of my friends."

Continuously posting in a group or a profile can be uncomfortable for those who are witnessing this interaction – as in, everyone connected to the deceased on Facebook. When a Facebook memorial group is created, the notification system on the site will alert users whenever someone posts on the page. These notifications can serve as an uncomfortable reminder of this loss. Furthermore, Facebook tends to alert users to topics that are being talked about by multiple people in a network. When many Facebook friends are posting about this person or writing to them it is more likely that this activity will show up on a user's newsfeed. Other participants discussed the discomfort inherent in seeing a profile picture of someone who died, which gives the impression of the person frozen in time. Erin felt so troubled by the ever-present interactions on her friend's Facebook profile that she "defriended" him, or deleted him as a Facebook connection, in an effort to move on. His profile remains online today, and is used by his mother to write messages as if they were coming from him. Many participants felt uncomfortable when they witnessed someone else taking over the profile of their friend. Erin finally had enough:

And I was just like, "What?" like, why is she posting this? And it was just... I don't know, it just... it bothered me. So I decided – I was like, okay, I can't do this anymore, because it was just a constant reminder that someone was gone and that he died on his

bike, and that he didn't graduate with us, and it was just, I don't know. So that's, like, I think that was... the last time I saw his Facebook and I was like, "Okay, I need to delete him."

Nicole and Carlos also had strong reactions to the profiles of their friends or family members when someone else started using the account. Nicole felt that she could not write exactly what she wanted, since it would not be guaranteed to remain between her and her friend, while Carlos resisted writing to his friend because he felt that the profile could not reflect who his friend was once someone else was controlling it. Certain actions on Facebook seem harmless when using the site daily, yet once experiencing the loss of a Facebook friend these same affordances are sources of discomfort.

Violation of perceived norms. Participants like Erin, Nicole, and Carlos explain their discomfort by saying that what they've witnessed on Facebook is "just wrong," or "it irked me." This points to a violation of what is perceived as appropriate behavior in the wake of someone's death. As a result, Carlos was incredulous at the continued interaction with his friend's Facebook profile, in which he explained, "I feel like it's unreal, I feel like it shouldn't – I think it's completely wrong. Because it's not him. It's not his thoughts, it's not him. You know? I feel like someone else took his body. And is trying to be [him]. You know? Things like that. But it's not him." Erin was sympathetic to her friend's mother who was grieving the loss of her son, but she was distressed by this woman's actions, which in her view was violating how the profile should be used:

...It wasn't him, and it just didn't even feel right, because it was like – at first it was like she was saying "oh this is Kevin's mom," but then after awhile it was just she posted as, like as if she was Kevin, like "I miss you guys..." cause we were gonna graduate that

year, and it was like, “I wish I could have graduated with you all.” Stuff like that. And I don’t know, it just kind of irked me, because it wasn’t really him.

Sometimes participants point out how specific expressions of grief were less valid than others, since they are not in line with what they deem appropriate use of Facebook under these circumstances. Participants did not identify definitive norms or rules that they expect others to follow, but they did point out when something instinctively felt “wrong” or “weird.” They were often unable to describe these feeling beyond identifying their discomfort with the way someone used Facebook in violation of what they deemed to be acceptable behavior.

This reaction was sometimes related to whether or not the person in question was being genuine. In these cases, posts on Facebook following someone’s death may have elicited anger or confusion in those interviewed. During my interview with Justin, he expressed dissatisfaction with how others were using Facebook to express grief in speaking about the December 2012 school shooting in Newtown, CT. Justin saw people writing Facebook statuses about the shooting and was uncomfortable with what people wrote:

They posted statuses being like “I’m so angry that this happened. I feel so bad for these families,” and it’s like I know you do, but you don’t know them, and like, you might – it sounds like you’re fishing for your own sympathy, and it’d be more respectful if you didn’t say anything... I mean, unless it was connected to you, I don’t really think you have much to offer – in that sort of grievance (*sic*), and like you can grieve as a nation, but you don’t have to grieve as a Facebook user. Um... For people you don’t know.

Justin felt that this expression of grief may not have been particularly genuine, and questioned the motives of posting a message like this. There was some code of respect that was not being followed correctly. Although he was speaking about a national news story, others expressed the

same feelings concerning posting messages about or directed to someone who has died. Ryan witnessed a variety of posts on his friend's Facebook profile and memorial site, and felt as though some of the people posting photos on Facebook were doing so just to show that they knew the boy who died. Ryan explained that he could determine which posts were like this because he knew who were actually the close friends of the boy that died, and that the difference in relationships was not necessarily reflected in the different profile posts. Taylor also felt extremely uncomfortable when she read some of the posts on her friend's wall, since she found them to be self-serving rather than an actual sign of grief or even expression of condolence. This type of posting, which feels inappropriate to Taylor, might be related to students' desire to maintain social capital in this situation. As Ellison and colleagues point out, "students' Facebook use [is] significantly related to their levels of social capital" and the site enables maintenance of ties between acquaintances and friends that might be uncomfortable for some users to witness while grieving (2011, p. 134).

Interviews revealed that participants recognize a system of relational closeness – like that mentioned by Ryan and Taylor – in which appropriate expression of grief is determined according to one's relationship with the deceased (and sometimes their family). Users gauge their own relational closeness within a hierarchy of users who are all connected to the deceased, and may observe public Facebook activity relating to this person's death before posting their own comments in order to feel most comfortable. Not following these hierarchical norms can be cause for discomfort, and so can witnessing others posting in a way that is not reflective of their position within this hierarchy of relational closeness.

Taylor's experience is similar to that of Nicole and Maggie, who each referenced the relationship between the commenter and the deceased as a consideration when posting on

Facebook. These three young women all discussed how it was possible that people who were commenting may want to appear to be closer to the person who died than they actually were. Whether this was an effort to seem like a good and caring person, or to build their own social credibility, these efforts did not fit into the hierarchy or appropriate reaction based on relational closeness on which these participants seemed to be operating. Nicole wondered if one commenter was posting messages just “to make people think that he was friends with him,” since the boy who died was popular and well liked by his classmates before committing suicide. When a childhood friend of Maggie’s died, she was annoyed and uncomfortable when reading posts from peers that she knew had made fun of her friend while alive. That they were posting on the Facebook profile made little sense to her, other than to make it seem like they cared.

There were some extreme cases in which normative behavior on the profiles was challenged. Ryan and Janelle both felt distress when they saw intensely negative comments posted on Facebook about someone who died. These types of comments are in line with definitions of *trolling*, in which a user intends “to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). Trolling behavior on a Facebook group created as a memorial or on a deceased user’s page goes beyond violation of norms regarding length and content of messages posted. Ryan described the experience of finding graphic pictures depicting the death of his friend online, and asked, “Who would do this?” Janelle also watched as other Facebook users posted graphic and cruel comments intended to aggravate and anger friends of a girl who died: “I just felt so, like, how could you say that? Like I mean – you’re entitled to your own thoughts, but like, you don’t need to post something like that, for other people to see, or give that idea to other people. I don’t think it was right. At

all. I think it was awful.” When faced with Facebook activity like this, participants felt the posts were in poor taste and quickly identified the behavior as “wrong.”

While these participants questioned other users’ motives, some felt conflicted. Shannon saw a clear boundary in who should be sharing messages (i.e. “it’s not their place”) yet also considered the fact that if she were experiencing this loss she would appreciate any support. As someone on the receiving end of Facebook condolences after the death of a parent, Henry came to expect different things from Facebook than some of the other participants. He also recognized the hierarchy of relational closeness in terms of what to expect from people on Facebook; Henry valued the quantity of condolences that Facebook facilitated, and especially appreciated when people took time to share their thoughts and well wishes with him online. He explained that those who commented may or may not have been close to him, but that this wasn’t necessarily the point of Facebook. Sharing a message is all anyone with “peripheral friend” status should feel obligated to do under the circumstances:

If they were close enough in the inner circle, they were gonna call anyway. That’s how Facebook is a network of acquaintances. Of course the acquaintances are gonna speak up if they’re good people. That’s all I expect if you’re an acquaintance. If my uncle never calls then that’s different.

Henry points out that Facebook compresses these social groups – peripheral friends, close friends, and family members – to the point where everyone is reacting to a death in one place. This makes the hierarchy of relational closeness important in understanding what is expected as a supporter of someone grieving, and in what way grief can be suitably expressed. When the hierarchy is violated, many Facebook users feel discomfort.

Finding comfort and discomfort in persistence. Part of the relationship between finding comfort or discomfort on Facebook is the persistent interaction between users and the deceased. This idea of persistence takes on several meanings within the comfort/discomfort dichotomy. Participants expressed that they like being able to stay connected to the deceased as time passes, as Brittany explained how “it just feels like I’m talking to him over Facebook, like we always did.” Taylor turns to the site when she’s feeling upset and wants to reach out – the profile remains online, and seems like the only place to talk to her friend, “when there’s, like, this representation of them – somewhere, it’s like, you feel like, in some weird way you are communicating with them, I guess.” In these instances, simply knowing that the profile is online is comforting. Users expect the profile to remain online in the foreseeable future, but the space provided by the profile can perpetuate feelings of grief that are expressed via comments and pictures shared by the bereaved.

Both of these notions of persistence are related to the affordances of Facebook, in that anyone connected to the deceased can see the profile, at any time, and the profile itself is seemingly permanent. The persistent nature of a Facebook profile goes beyond affordances, though, in that it presents this person as if they have not died; the profile is representative of this person and their identity – it can feel as though this person is still alive and able to hear or see what is written on their Facebook page. Again, participants gave varying descriptions of the comfort and discomfort they felt by interacting with this person’s profile, which is related to where they see themselves in terms of hierarchical relational closeness discussed previously. In order to make sense of how persistence is thought of by Facebook users, code co-occurrence was employed. Excerpts of interviews coded for “persistence” were often also coded as related to “affordances” and “discomfort.” Participants appear comforted by persistence in terms of

affordances and feel discomfort when interacting with the profile as if it's that person or representative of the deceased person's identity.

Some participants described feeling troubled or distressed when the profile of someone who died is still active, whether there are many people posting on the profile or someone else has taken over the site and is responding as them (as discussed in terms of norm violation).

Participants describe feeling that they cannot believe what happened, or that it doesn't feel like this person is really gone. Maggie says, "I think it's really weird, because I feel like it, I guess, takes away from the realness of death." Just looking at the profile can be difficult. For Erin, discomfort with the situation seemed to stem from the persistence of the profile. She explained, "I actually ended up deleting him from Facebook because it made me – it just made me really uncomfortable for some reason... So just like seeing it, constantly, it just like, made me feel weird."

Despite feelings of confusion, anger, or both, there was often a feeling that the profile did serve a purpose of being a source of comfort. Even though Erin felt emotionally upset enough to delete her friend on Facebook, she elaborated on the comfort she found in looking at Facebook and why she may still spend time visiting the profile:

Well I mean, it kind of makes me feel comforted almost, just because, he, like – I mean he is dead. And he – obviously he's not gonna post any more pictures because he doesn't – can't... Those were his last memories, and... if you go back through his pictures of, like, tagged pictures and everything [you see him] with friends over winter break, and like at homecoming that year and stuff, so that's, like, a good way to, like, remember him. Because you see all the good times that he had throughout high school and everything.

The fact that Erin could go back and look at her friend's Facebook profile – which remained online and visible to the public, even when Erin chose to defriend him – was reassuring and comforting in its persistence. Erin's experience epitomizes the dichotomous comfort and discomfort associated with the Facebook profile that remains online after someone dies, and illustrates how Facebook acts to mediate the experience and expression of grief.

Defriending someone due to discomfort is an extreme yet valid reaction to discomfort felt by participants, but in most cases participants brought up ways that others were using Facebook in a way that was uncomfortable to witness. Nicole did not like how the husband of her family friend used his wife's profile as though he was trying to keep her alive by updating the profile with new pictures and messages. Mark saw his aunt continue to access his cousin's profile in the months after this death:

I see the Facebook page as more symptomatic of that desi – that belief in the ever-presence. And maybe it's the material expression of that continued presence – the closest thing she has to that expression? Um, or that persistence? Because it was something that was his. It's an extension of him in a very real way.

Although Mark personally felt that he did not want to keep interacting with his cousin who died on Facebook, he understood that his aunt found comfort in an act that he would have found uncomfortable.

Ultimately, those interviewed were often willing to risk possible discomfort while or after engaging with a deceased user's profile because of the other benefits associated with this interaction. Melissa considers the profile to be “kind of a nice memory to have of him” and Dan thinks that being able to read and share stories about a loved one who has died can be “mentally stabilizing” in times of grief. Participants seek to experience a momentary sense of comfort in

looking at a person's profile. In a way, it feels very much as if the person is still alive, and viewing the profile is a way to recall happy memories while surrounding oneself with people who relate to the experience and lend support. Brittany observes that, "It just feels like I'm talking to him over Facebook, like we always did." She feels like she can keep in touch with one of her best friends even though he has died, and values the profile for the connection it allows. Seeing new pictures or messages can sometimes be overwhelming, but Brittany hopes that the profile will remain online. In many cases there is enough *possibility* of comfort in the profile that participants felt it should remain online, since it can be a source of solace for some. The way that Facebook users remember this person through the profile relates to the comfort or discomfort they derive from the profile, but requires more analysis in terms of identity and persistence, and their relationship to the memorialization process.

Theme 2: Identity of Deceased Needs to be Preserved

A person's persistent online presence after they die can complicate the comfort or discomfort of other users, but is an important means of remembering a person regardless. In discussing the purpose of using Facebook while experiencing grief, participants consistently referred to the importance of remembering this person in the future as a reason to keep the profile active and to post on it over time. This goal of remembrance is not specific to the use of Facebook, but the profiles that remain online are already associated with this person and commonly become important for this reason. Participants emphasized that using Facebook helped them remember their friends who died even when they fear forgetting about this person; aspects of Facebook like the notification system were mentioned as a way that Facebook is a constant reminder of this person, and also their death.

In-depth analysis of interviews with participants reveals a group of codes relating to remembering. An emphasis on the importance of remembering someone after they died was also related to memorialization processes and sharing stories about the deceased on their profile. There was also a discussion of the benefits or conveniences, in terms of remembering, associated with the Facebook profile remaining online. Coding also showed a strong association between remembering and discussing the gravesite, which was usually compared to visiting the virtual profile. Writing messages directly to the deceased was described as an important way to remember them or keep their memory alive in some sense. In a separate analysis of code co-occurrence, it becomes evident that technological affordances (i.e. the ease and convenience of using Facebook, its persistence in the online space, and its archival nature) are important to consider in terms of remembering and memorialization processes. Code co-occurrence analysis further suggests that identity and persistence are closely related to the process of remembering that takes place on Facebook and on the profile of the deceased.

In death studies and anthropological literature, sites of memory are characterized by their materiality, symbolic nature, and their functionality as a way to pass on memories (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 34). Although the Facebook profile has not traditionally been considered a site of memory, it certainly acts as one during the grieving experience of my interview participants. A profile provides a material (albeit virtual) space in which messages are left and within which a community can grieve. The profile is a symbolic representation of a person while they are alive, and in death it may be the best representation of them that still exists. While objects can be vital to everyday remembering practices, participants differentiated between the Facebook profile and other ways of remembering. Mark wears a bracelet in honor of his cousin, but he admits, “I can forget what this actually means, even though I touch it on a daily basis.” Facebook does not just

bring up memories for Mark, but it feels like new memories are created as people post new messages directly to his cousin. Posts directly on a profile can recreate the feeling of an ongoing relationship with this person; Maggie even explained the difference between looking at a friend's profile versus a memorial site created in her memory:

...It wouldn't be like, "Megan," her personal profile. It'd be like a group or a page. I don't know if there's a difference between them. But um... It would have a different name. It'd be like "In Memorial of Megan." But like, instead it's just like – cause like, your personal profile - that's like, you.

Maggie's sentiments reflect the notion that the Facebook profile left behind after someone dies is perhaps the best way to remember them. It is the closest object left in the world to them. Not only did they manage the profile when they were alive, but the profile consists of photographs of the person, status updates conveying their thoughts, and is a record of their interactions with others on their wall and in their network of friends.

Telling, sharing, and reading stories. Photographs and writing can act as powerful mementos or even as an extension of a person (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 12). Participants describe the Facebook profile of the deceased similarly. It is unsurprising that college-age young adults might feel so strongly about how their Facebook profile represents them, as they are highly engaged users of the site who communicate with peers and family members both near and far away (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 125). Ben, a student who has chosen to go to school across the country from his home, explains how he feels about the site: "Yeah... it's just – Facebook is like a fifth limb, so it's kind of like a part of you, so you have to associate yourself with Facebook. But it's just – it's the easiest way to connect with people. So I feel like it's also the easiest way to remember people [when they die]."

Part of the ease associated with using Facebook when grieving is the fact that it is a semi-public space in which anyone connected to this person can also read others' posts for support. These posts may include stories about the deceased, which can accumulate in memorial or tribute to the person who died. Cecelia talked about the way that storytelling was used to keep the memory of her friend alive after his death. Storytelling was an important emotional activity for Cecelia in the grieving process, and people shared stories in person at organized and informal events as well as on the Facebook profile left behind. Cecelia found it comforting to both share and read others' stories:

...it was very nice to kind of, like, very comforting to go through and read the memories. And it was just nice to remember good times that other people had, and stuff that – maybe stories that I never heard before – but they were really funny stories, and it was nice to be able to read them all at that time. And I know that whenever any of us miss him we always go back to the page and stuff.

Initial feelings of grief may be addressed within this community-oriented storytelling space, but the profile proves to be a beneficial source of comfort over time. Cecelia reflected on this, remarking that, "I feel like people use it more just to show they remember him. It's less for trying to get through [bereavement], and more trying to be like 'we won't forget you.' And just anything that reminds you of him, they'll just post stories."

Participants like Ben, Dan, Melissa, Ryan, and Brittany had experiences similar to Cecelia's – they felt compelled to share their memories and wanted to read others' stories on the Facebook profile. These stories may have been written with the public in mind, or addressed to the deceased directly. Taylor found herself wanting to write to her friend who died and reminisce

about happy times they shared, even though she felt a little uncomfortable when she considered what she was doing:

And it's totally, it's like a bizarre concept to me too, but I found myself doing it, and I found myself, like... it's almost relieving, 'cause, you know, who actually knows what happens when someone passes away, and... if you feel like you sort of reach out to them in any way, you know, it just, it feels better, I guess, for someone who's grieving. Like for me it really helped just being able to, like, get out what I was saying. I don't know.

There are strong feelings of connection when Facebook users post messages or share stories with the deceased on their profile, since it can feel as though communication is uninterrupted even after a death. The community of those grieving can also use the Facebook profile to connect with others and feel supported while in a period of bereavement. Once Lauren was away from her family and friends at college, she posted several messages on her friend's Facebook page that remained active after her death. Lauren expressed that she was happy to have other friends comment on that post, sympathizing with her and relating to her emotions.

Profile as representative of identity. Being able to share stories on Facebook is part of the reason why participants felt that they could most effectively contribute to the legacy of their deceased friend on the site. In contributing to the page that their friend had created and used while alive, participants felt that the profile was inherently tied to the identity of the deceased. Specific elements of the page are strongly related to traditional memorialization processes. Photographs can preserve someone's identity in their ability to freeze that person in time, creating a memorialized vision of this person (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 142). On Facebook, these photographs that accumulate on the profile so that, viewed together as a continuous thread of this person's identity, a narrative of the person's life is maintained even after they die. Words

written by a person – such as the Facebook status updates left on the site – are also preserved as moments in time that illustrate who this person was and what they were thinking. These words constitute part of this person’s identity, but the Facebook profile also gives others the opportunity to write their own words and share stories, in effect preserving this identity by keeping the profile “alive.”

The strong relationship between the Facebook profile and its user’s identity makes the profile a natural place for memorialization and showing respect during the public grieving process. The profile has a function that is similar yet fundamentally different from a gravestone. As Justin says, “[It’s] kind of like a gravestone, but it’s obviously a lot more present, or very – a lot more accessible than something like that. It’s definitely a reminder.” Here, Justin suggests that visiting a Facebook profile may be more helpful than visiting a physical memorial space, considering its accessibility and convenience. When considering this comparison, Dan remarked:

I don’t think they’re comparable at all. I think that the physicality of him in the actual grave is more meaningful. You can sit there and pray to it... I don't think you can pray to a Facebook profile. I think that’s a little strange. But Facebook also has pictures... So that – that helps with the grief. But I think [visiting] the gravesite would be more real.

While there may certainly be aspects of the Facebook profile that seem similar to visiting a grave, those interviewed had varying ideas of which was “better” or a more “true” way of expressing grief. For Cecelia, it seemed to be more convenient to go visit the gravesite, since she lives close by: “I went and visited and I felt like that was really when I could say anything, because I didn’t have to worry about what other people would, like – how other people would react to it, or... I don’t know; it was just a lot more comfortable.” Ryan considered the fact that visiting a gravesite is a more emotional experience than visiting a Facebook profile, but felt that

the page was a better place to remember his friend. For Ryan, the pictures, wall posts, and interactions represented on the site are a more effective means of preserving memories and being able to think about the deceased, as he was while still alive. When families choose cremation over burial, this also complicates the relationship between grief and Facebook use. Mark questioned whether or not Facebook's existence contributed to the decision to cremate his family member who died. He presumed that the family knew the Facebook profile existed and figured it would be there as a site to visit in the future, which perhaps made the lack of a burial site easier to reconcile.

Visiting a grave or looking at a Facebook profile – while perhaps comparable – produce different emotions in different people. Even after discussing her aversion to using the Facebook profile to remember a friend, Melissa wanted the profile to remain online: “So the reminders are, like, important, but I had to turn off the notifications because it was so many, but it's still – I think it's still important that it's there, and that's another reason why deleting his Facebook would be weird, because he's still, like, a person, you know?” Melissa was able to control the amount of time she spent thinking about her friend on Facebook by changing her notification settings. Taylor also referenced her preference for using Facebook to remember her friend rather than focusing on a physical grave, which felt less accessible to her. She disliked the idea of going to a cemetery, associating it with a more visceral grief to which she did not want to be exposed, explaining:

...I find someone's grave to be very, like morbid, and kind of like a religious [representation] of their death, whereas if you go on their old Facebook page you see these pictures of them laughing, them on a hike, doing all this stuff, it's like you're remembering the good things about them rather than like, their physical death.

By visiting on Facebook, Taylor was able to focus her grief in a positive way while protecting herself from discomfort. Some participants favored Facebook for this reason, finding it easier to share stories and also to remember someone in a way that felt more comfortable and more permanent than by visiting a grave. Taylor and Justin both talked about how the Facebook profile becomes a “marker,” of this person’s identity after their death; the timeline feature of the profile includes a user’s birth, shows some of their accomplishments and interactions with others, and ostensibly marks their death when there is an outpouring of “RIP” posts – ultimately, the timeline of their life is a more extensive, and perhaps more useful, type of grave marking than a gravestone.

Facebook as dynamic memory archive. A visit to a gravestone might feel like an event – spending the day thinking about the person who has died and taking time to travel to and from a distant location. The Facebook platform can be accessed at any time, from multiple devices. This type of constant availability offers mourners a place to go whenever they feel the urge to think about this person, provided that mourning takes place within the context of the profile. Participants like Dan talked about their use of Facebook as constant and habitual. Dan accesses the site on his phone, and takes advantage of its technological capabilities to create his own memorial token: “What helped were all the pictures posted about him, because I got to, like, screenshot a picture [and] keep it for myself.” Facebook permits Dan to sort through a virtual archive of photos and posts to save something meaningful to him. The profile will remain a dynamic archive that can be accessed at any time or place, via mobile device.

A Facebook profile can contain endless posts and words describing a person, whereas a gravestone or an obituary are limited in what words can be used to memorialize the person in death. Rereading these posts as they accumulate year after year makes Facebook a sort of archive

of compiled memories, all speaking to who the person was and who loved them. Stories and memories are often posted throughout the year, but participants like Ryan, Mark, Brittany, and Lauren all spoke about the increased Facebook activity leading up to and around the time of the anniversary of their friend's death.

And it wasn't just on Facebook, it was on Instagram, Twitter, everything. All social media ... But it was just nonstop; my newsfeed, just – everything was about her. Just like Carrie, Carrie, Carrie. And it was like – it sort of gave me the chills, like I – like part of me is like, I don't want to look through it. I can't look through it. But the other part of it is nice to see, like, how much people cared about her. Her [family] has Facebook, so we see the way they're, um, remembering her. So that's nice too. (Lauren)

Ways of remembering the deceased might depend on the site. Lauren feels like Instagram is also a community-oriented space for mourners. Dan and Cecelia use Twitter to participate in conversation and share condolences, but the 140-character limit makes posting meaningful messages difficult. In some cases a hashtag is used to designate a tweet as part of this conversation, or to simply honor the deceased. As Janelle says, "There was a hashtag for her." These services are useful for specific expressions of grief, but participants feel that Facebook serves the grieving community in their pursuit of memorialization especially well during an anniversary or on the birthday of the deceased, allowing users to read, share comments, and "like" one another's posts to engage in this act of remembrance. Twitter and Instagram may be used, but Cecelia notes, "the more heartfelt stuff [is] on Facebook."

Henry also talks about the opportunity that memorialization on Facebook presents users in the future. Speaking from personal experience, he considers grief to be about remembering a person first and foremost. Facebook can be a space "...for collecting all these artifacts of who a

person was,” that is so powerful and emblematic of them as a person that it seems to bring them back to life, since “...it can highlight all the important things about [them].” Such artifacts may include tagged photos, status updates, and stories shared by Facebook friends – accumulating while the person is alive as well as after they die. Ultimately, interviews with participants suggest that Facebook may be a preferable way to “archive” this person due to its dynamic, interactive, and supportive nature. In fact, use of the site while grieving points to the pervasive attitude of participants that the identity of the deceased *needs* to be preserved in this way, to be true to the person and their identity that was maintained online before death. When considering the deletion of the profile, Ben epitomizes the attitude that the site acts as an extension of this person, even in death:

I feel like that would be weird. It would be the same way as if I “defriended” him. It’d be like Facebook or whoever deletes it to say – “okay this person officially does not exist.” ... For someone who has an online presence – people are still interacting with [that] person, it’s like why are you gonna take such a... second life I guess. Like everyone lives in real life, but everyone also lives on the Internet.

Not only do participants feel that there is no reason to delete the profile, but Ben and others go as far as saying that there is reason *not* to delete it. Ben insists again, “Deleting a Facebook account because they passed away is like deleting another part of them,” and the best way to move forward after they die is to contribute to the identity they left behind in a process of continual and necessary memorialization.

Theme 3: Publicizing of “Dialogues with the Dead”

In asking participants how they use and interact with the profile of a friend who has died, it is important to consider this interaction within the context of a public Facebook profile and a

community of mourners. During transcription of participant interviews, multiple codes emerged that spoke to the different ways young adults communicate with someone who has died. What emerged regarding these grief practices was an acknowledgement of a public conversation with the deceased that, being public, contributes to a sense of support but also a self-regulation in what is posted based on community standards. This conversation contributes to feeling both comfort and discomfort, and is also related to the way users seek to memorialize a friend's identity. However, focusing on the practice itself reveals a specific understanding expressed by participants concerning how to maintain a connection with a deceased friend.

When describing their own use of Facebook when someone dies, participants bring up the fact that Facebook is a very public place to share stories and interact with others. The coding scheme that delineates this theme involves a variety of codes, and often involves concepts that overlap with the two previous themes. When viewed as codes in conjunction with one another and in the context of these interviews we can see how these practices contribute to the larger conversation around grieving processes. Participants talk about continuing to interact with their friend or family member online after they have died. For participants, this dialogue is inherently public on Facebook, which means that they can find support within a grieving community. Interview excerpts coded as "public," "interaction," and "support" emerged as important codes referring to the nature of using Facebook and connecting with the mourning community. Within the supportive community there was also a sense of self-regulation that acts as a filter on posts made by community members. These interrelated concepts were explored further in order to describe the way young adults are communicating with the deceased as part of the grieving process.

Public nature of Facebook profile. Participants reflected on the interactions they have and observe online after learning of a Facebook friend's death, and frequently brought up the public communal space that is open to those grieving in the Facebook network. Facebook users recognize that if they write something to a Facebook friend in their personal status or on this friend's wall it is likely to be seen by a wider audience than just that person – this is just as true in habitual use of the site. There is not an assumption of privacy when posting on Facebook, even when engaging with customizable privacy settings; rather, the Facebook profile of a friend is a space on which all of their friends – or anyone who takes over the inactive profile – can read what is posted. For Nicole, this means that she does not want to write anything too personal, since she feels uncomfortable that the husband of her deceased family friend reads and responds to comments: “You kind of lose that connection when someone else is looking at your writing.” Tricia does not participate in memorialization because of the public nature of grieving on Facebook in any situation, saying, “You don't need to have a public display of that.”

During interviews, participants exhibited an awareness of these dialogues taking place in a public space – finding it somewhat natural to participate, and with some consequence for the types of messages and dialogues they engage in while on Facebook. Walter describes the tradition of engaging in “dialogues with the dead” in his research, pointing out that there may be infrequent opportunities to talk about the deceased in modern Western society (1999, p. 24). In fact, this type of communication is hidden from the public, and privacy while grieving is expected, since “mourning should not be allowed to leak into the everyday life of passers by... for the protection of both the dead and the living” (Walter et al., 2012, p. 291). Walter and colleagues assert that expression of grief is becoming more public and perhaps community oriented through the use of SNSs (2012, p. 268). Other researchers reiterate that relying on a

community of others grieving can be helpful when struggling to make sense of death, which is reflected in my participants' discussion of the support gained online through Facebook interactions and sharing of stories (Rosenblatt, 1988; Sofka et al., 2012).

When participants decide to participate in this continued interaction and communication with the deceased they also understand that they are speaking publicly to a community of mourners. Maggie mentions that she was taught from an early age that everything one posts online is public, which includes Facebook. Shannon agrees that using Facebook is flirting with the line between personal and public expression. Several participants describe how the public nature of Facebook extended beyond the virtual – Ben had a friend's mother describe the support she felt when reading the Facebook posts of her son's friends after he died, while Lauren felt compelled to post on the profile of her friend after hearing the same thing from her friend's mother. Participants expressed that engaging in these public dialogues is a way to be supportive of others and also a way to find support for oneself. Ben talks about why posting publicly can be more helpful than sending a private message:

Because Facebook messaging someone – yeah you can always do that – but like, I know when I were to write on his wall or someone else would, they know that his mom would see it, or his brother would see it. So it's also people closer around the person, so if was gonna write on his wall I would be able to know that people that were actually in his family could see that people still care about him. So I guess a lot of times people post some things that, they want people to see it.

Seeking support in this way is part of the sense-making process after someone dies, yet public expression of grief is traditionally regarded as embarrassing or inappropriate (Francis et al., 2005, p. 178). The cemetery has often provided a place in which mourners can freely express

private feelings in a public ritual space, but young adults may not be able or allowed to visit a friend's grave due to geography and travel restrictions and so the traditional performance of grieving rituals might find an outlet on the Facebook profile (Francis et al., 2005, p. 143).

Although Melissa felt uncomfortable grieving publicly on Facebook, she points out the benefit of using the site for this purpose:

[It's] very convenient and [has] the same sort of effects – well, it also involves all of his friends also. You can see how they're all feeling versus going to the cemetery, standing there paying your respects, and then kind of leaving... like Facebook kind of includes everyone, so you can see everyone's feelings at the time.

Olivia agrees with Melissa that Facebook is another, potentially “better,” option for expressing grief than a private place like a cemetery, since “if you put it on Facebook, you know everyone can read it” and that is likely why someone might want to post how they feel – subtly asking for support without saying that they feel emotionally fragile or upset by a friend's death. This sentiment hits on another aspect of sharing one's feelings publicly that is important in the grieving process. A sense of community can exist or grow as different friends and family members write on a Facebook profile or group dedicated to the deceased. Public expression identifies Facebook users as community members who are then likely to feel supported in the grieving process.

Communal support. After the death of a close friend, Taylor used Facebook to connect with people who were deeply affected by the loss just as she felt she was. She turned to her friend's Facebook page and saw many others writing how they felt when hearing the shocking news of her friend's tragic death, determining that “...everyone was publicly grieving, which just made it sink in faster I guess.” When different types of community members all connect with one

another online, Facebook can quickly become a support system in which users feel compelled to write something supportive or “like” and comment on each others’ posts. Although Lauren mentioned that no one “likes” her private grieving practices, she finds herself affected by the way people react to her Facebook posts. Lauren expects “likes” and comments on her posts, which she sees as making herself vulnerable to an audience. Cecelia appreciates these types of interactions when she posts on Facebook – she knows that she can find support when she posts something on the site:

A lot of people – I mean, every post that’s on there, at least 10 people will have liked it, or people also comment on it. So it’s just nice to know – I don’t know. Also I feel like if you’re struggling with something, and you post it there, sort of like a prayer to him, that other people – it’s sort of a way that you can let other people know that you’re struggling without... sometimes people I feel like are afraid, like, don’t like to go up to people and be like, “I have this problem in my life,” but when they post on the page we all can find out about it and it’s sort of like a less intrusive way. So then we’ll all think about it and pray for them too.

Cecelia sees Facebook as an environment in which support is easy to give and receive, even when people may not ask for it explicitly. Participants describe both asking for and lending support to others in this public space. Engaging in a dialogue with the deceased can also be a public statement asking for help or support while grieving. Olivia explains that she knows her deceased friend won’t respond to her public post, but says, “When I do it I expect a reaction from someone – you know, even if it’s not him.” Tricia feels that posting something on Facebook is probably a way that people are “trying to reach out, whether they’re aware of it or not” when they’re affected by someone’s death. Participants like Olivia and Ben are likely to provide that

support on Facebook. Olivia “likes” and comments on posts because she expects the same in return; Ben thinks that it’s healthy to ask for support online rather than keep those emotions to oneself, and is willing to interact with others’ posts if that will enable others to mourn in a healthy way.

The support garnered in the public space of a Facebook profile seems to be a positive outcome of expressing grief online for people who partake in this community expression. Maggie finds that the support system on Facebook provides people a space to congregate and find support, especially when they are not as close with the deceased – in a way, this validates her experience of grief:

...If it wasn’t, like, all over Facebook, like, just the close friends and people that were actually connected to her would’ve um... shown like, support. But like people like me or like, other, like, random people in the community – like I’m sure we would’ve felt, well like obviously we would have felt like something, but it wouldn’t have been publicly shown. So I guess with Facebook you can – even if it doesn’t, even if you’re not like, super close with them – you can still show support.

That her expression could be made public on Facebook gives credence to Maggie’s emotions, and she is able to identify her own grief when dealing with an unexpected loss of an old friend. In her interview, Lauren identified expressing grief as an expression of vulnerability – saying, “this is how I feel” or sharing extremely personal stories with anyone who might have access to the public profile. When people decide to be vulnerable like this, Lauren says, “...you’re writing on the wall – not necessarily for her... I think it goes past that, and it’s also for everybody else.”

Ben actively participates in a community of those writing on his friend’s Facebook wall, but he also values this process for the experience of sharing grief in a public space – he conveys

that he wants to look at what others are writing just as much as he feels relief in sharing his feelings online. When visiting Facebook for the purpose of expressing or observing grief, Ben explains that, “even though I didn’t know some of the people [posting] it was nice to see that other people cared about [my friend].” The practices of actively writing on Facebook versus observing what is written reinforce one another for Ben: “Yes, if someone else mentions it I will go look at it, definitely. Because it’s like, I want to see who else is thinking of him. ‘Cause now I’m thinking of him.” Dan also finds that reading others’ messages makes him happy and feel supported while in mourning, since he can think of his friend in a spiritual way or picture him in heaven getting these messages. Mark and Kyle agree that reading others’ messages on Facebook is a way to participate in communal grieving – something that the network of friends on Facebook makes possible.

Grief voyeurism. Reading what other people write on a Facebook profile is a moderately noncommittal way of dealing with grief; when users choose not to post condolences or stories online they can still find comfort in the community by taking on a more voyeuristic role and reading what others write. Dan touches on this feeling – he appreciates when other people in the community write on his friend’s Facebook wall since it can act as a tribute to his friend, describing how each post contributes to the legacy of his friend who died. Shannon talks about her use of Facebook after learning that a friend’s younger brother died. She looks at her Facebook newsfeed to learn more about the circumstances of the death, and then follows what people post in the days and weeks afterward: “...when it first happened of course it was all over my newsfeed, completely up and down, everywhere, and there were like videos made, and like even teachers in my school had gotten involved in it.” Shannon and other participants watch their communities use Facebook to express grief, while perhaps working through their own grief in

the process. The site is part of the public sphere in which communal mourning can take place or be observed, which Kyle considers a positive aspect of using Facebook:

I think it's definitely similar. Because, it's – you go there to, kind of, remember him, and show thanks and everything. But um, the Facebook is kind of unique because you can see what everybody else has done. Which is cool. Um, 'cause I know if you go to a grave you can leave flowers, and that kind of thing, but um, people's posts will always be on that Facebook, which is really nice.

Kyle uses Facebook primarily to observe what others write, since he is peripherally connected to someone in his community who died. He does not consider himself a close friend, and does not feel he should post something about this death publicly, but still values the types of interactions he can see taking place. He acknowledges that he uses Facebook in this voyeuristic way.

Peripheral friends or acquaintances with access to the Facebook profile may feel less of an obligation to post, but can still find comfort in reading what others write. The term “grief tourism” implies partaking in communal expression of grief without having an authentic relationship or experience oneself (Walter et al., 2012, p. 291). Grief tourism has been associated with trolling on deceased Facebook users' profiles (Marwick & Ellison, 2012), but grief *voyeurism* is a byproduct of the public nature of Facebook and is a way to witness the grief of others and experience one's own grief in a safe environment that may not exist elsewhere. Voyeurism comes naturally on Facebook when a friend dies and we do not know what to write – or whether or not it would be acceptable to write something. Ben, Lauren, Justin, and other participants describe their experiences looking at what is posted on Facebook after a friend's death as a way to deal with an emotional response to this news, and find some positive outcome. Ben and Lauren both recall watching what was posted on Facebook before they decided to post

something. When Ben first learned that his friend died he remarks, “I didn’t post anything immediately. I kind of waited, because I didn’t want to be the first.” When speaking with Justin about his experiences on Facebook after learning about the Newtown school shooting, he was adamant that people did not need to comment on what happened if they were not involved personally, and he doubted that people were actually feeling bereaved. Watching what people posted during this event made Justin angry, rather than providing him comfort. Yet he still exhibited characteristics of grief voyeurism, explaining, “Like, I wouldn’t share it, but sometimes I like reading those [posts]. It’s just... It’s kind of funny I guess. I wouldn’t want my – I guess I wouldn’t want my name to be associated with sharing it, but I would read it. It’s kind of weird. But it’s true.”

It is understandable that participants value the voyeuristic quality of expressing and observing grief on Facebook, since young adults may feel that their grief is not recognized in traditional mourning practices that occur face-to-face (Walter et al., 2012; de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). While close friends of the deceased may be included in familial mourning, peripheral friends or those who live far away may feel disenfranchised in the process. By watching others react and reading messages of grief, this group of people are provided an opportunity to address their emotional response in the face of death without feeling guilty or stigmatized.

Self-regulation of mourning community. By observing what other people are writing and how various community members react to those posts, a Facebook friend of the deceased can learn what is appropriate or inappropriate to post. The community self-regulates in the public forum provided by Facebook, something that happens in other public spaces of mourning as well. In their analysis of cemeteries and gravesite behavior, Francis, Kellaheer and Neophytou

describe how the cemetery creates a public space with specific social context in which emotions can be expressed (2005, p. 105-106). Being a social space where the identity of the deceased is actively maintained, one's actions in the cemetery are contingent upon cultural norms created by this self-monitored and self-regulated community (2005, p. 106). Walter considers this self-regulation a form of self-policing, in which people compare themselves to others. Community members want to know how others have been able to move on, pinpoint where they are personally in the process, and determine whether or not this is normal (Walter, 1999, p. 124). While the community of mourners can provide support, it is also a strictly self-regulating community in this way.

Understanding appropriate behavior on Facebook emerges under these self-regulating circumstances, and can be learned by observing how others post or interact with posts by "liking" or commenting. Olivia talked about her experience in terms of how people interacted on the site, explaining, "...it's kind of turned into people interacting with each other, if that makes sense. Like if I go and leave a comment, everyone else will come and comment on that comment, say exactly what I'm saying – 'I'm here for you, of course we all still miss him...' stuff like that." She posts knowing that it will be public, and takes this into account when deciding what to write. Taylor also recognizes that posting on Facebook is usually more for the benefit of hearing from others; the act of posting itself can be a public request for support by expecting "likes" or comments. Knowing that posting is public means that users who post might be directly asking for support, and that users make sure to filter their posts.

Some Facebook users express that they know they *should* post something online that expresses condolences or in some way addresses a death, but they might be concerned knowing that others will judge the post for acceptability. When Mark experienced the death of his cousin,

he felt familial pressure to express his grief online, since he witnessed his other relatives doing so. Knowing that his family members see what he posts or comments on, Mark is careful to act appropriately on his cousin's active Facebook wall:

Rarely will I make a comment, but I'll acknowledge – through "liking" it I guess, I mean, which means so many different things in different contexts. I mean like, and for me it's acknowledging that I support or share that feeling, and I keep this alive, and make sure – it is a lot for, more to remind my family that are seeing this that I'm still connected to this individual and I still care...

Mark brings up the semantics behind lending support on Facebook, which can sometimes complicate what is deemed appropriate behavior. For Mark, "liking" a comment is the best way to show support in his specific context of grief, but "liking" a status about death can feel inappropriate in the moment. Mark acknowledges his uncertainty about "liking" and does it anyway, since he knows his family members will appreciate it. The "liking" concept is troubling to Ben as well, since he associates "liking" something on Facebook with enjoyment. However, he rationalizes aloud that people use that "like" button to show support in their own way:

...I noticed that when I got a "like" or a comment or something, um, it was helpful to me. To deal with it. Because people were saying, "Hey I'm here for you, even though I'm just pressing one little button." So I would do the same to people, like "look you're not alone, I agree with you." But at the same time I feel weird... because whenever I think of the "like" button I think, "you like it, you enjoy it." So if someone were to post something like "rest in peace," I don't enjoy that that person passed away. So, I guess for me it – I would never really "like" things, I would just comment, like "I'm here for you," because if someone's gonna say, "Rest in peace Grandma," I don't want to say I like that. If you

were to say that verbally that sounds weird, right? But if you were to do it on Facebook, it [would be okay].

Ben seems hyper-aware of what he is posting and how he is showing support for others; he explains how he chooses to send a message to someone on Facebook privately or to “like” or comment on a post based on the context and how much time he has to show support to everyone, since he wants “to acknowledge as many people as possible” in an appropriate way.

Participants like Henry and Tricia think less about the appropriateness of semantics and more about the necessity of showing support in the social context of grief. They are each members of the self-regulating body of Facebook users; they admit that they monitor what others post and also that they consider how their public actions will be perceived. Henry, who lost his father, knows that if he were to post something as a status or on his father’s Facebook profile he will engage others with what he writes. He might post a status, and then “see when people interact with it... You can put it out and see how many people like it, what they say, and that’s it. It’s like putting a hook into the sea, and seeing what you come up with.” After his mother took down his father’s profile, Henry might only be able to find this support by posting a status updates; he can find some relief in making his grief public via his own profile, which he anticipates through “likes” and comments on what he writes online. In this circumstance, Henry can expect that those who are closest to him will make an effort to support him publicly. They may even feel obligated to do so, since Henry has made this public statement. Even though the cemetery has been considered a public sphere where grief can be expressed (Francis et al., 2005, p. 178), the nature of a social network site is such that a Facebook user can broadcast his or her feelings to their entire network and expect a response. In the cemetery or at a wake those emotions would have at least been confined to a specific time and space, as well as a limited

group of people. In contrast, a Facebook post is made to an audience that includes both relatives and peripheral friends, and it will remain on a user's profile as long as they refrain from deleting it.

People who lie on the periphery in circles of friendship are more easily able to choose whether to post or read what others post, since there is less social pressure to express condolences or actively contribute to the community of mourners. When people do choose to post, many are aware that people can see what they write to the deceased and are observing this expression of grief. There are mixed feelings concerning the public evaluation of their expression. Henry takes the public nature of writing on Facebook as matter of fact: "So I guess people are held to a certain standard, when so many hundred thousand potential people are potentially watching. Like through all the degrees of separation. You don't know who's gonna be looking." Understanding the public nature of Facebook is part of making informed decisions when posting. Users can still seek support in a public way, but should abide by certain norms or values that the community has deemed acceptable. Melissa points out that simply becoming aware that posts are public can influence what survivors write on a deceased friend's Facebook profile:

I think that people think – sometimes, especially with posting in the [memorial] group, they think about what they're going to say a lot more before they post it than they would any other post. Like, I know that things that really changed for me from before and after, is like, I was more aware that everything I posted was public... I think you think more about what you're going to say.

When posting on someone's profile it is necessary to accept what is posted as public because posting appropriately requires an awareness of what is acceptable or expected of a communal mourner.

When faced with death online, positive messages are generally acceptable to post for the public to see on Facebook. Mark points out that writing positive messages is one way of abiding by the "rules of social engagement" online. These rules exist offline too; it's just that when young adults go online they are faced with an adaptation of these rules within a new cultural context. When Mark experienced the death of his cousin, he saw very positive Facebook messages from his family and his cousin's friends. Mark is an anthropologist, and through this lens he considers that these positive messages may be attributed to a replication of offline rules of behavior we have learned are appropriate during the grieving process. This may be unconscious to an extent, but Mark also considers the thought that goes into acting appropriately within the public community on Facebook:

I think that when you have a specifically unique situation like interacting with a dead person's Facebook page, you have to have a bit of conscious effort into it because you're thinking, "this is different." And I think it does lead to a little bit of dissonance in terms of what is a typical post, like writing a statement because you know it's not going to be heard by that person. So you then have to think about it, so I, you know, I think there maybe is a bit of an act of engagement with like, restricting what you – not restricting, but shaping what you say to fit the context. But I think a lot of it is just playing on these sort of unconscious rules, about how we interact with the dead in general. And just putting it into a new media.

There are already ways that society regulates appropriate expressions of grief or actions taken after a death; Mark thinks that learning how to use Facebook after someone dies involves observing traditional cultural values and considering the audience. Posting on Facebook means writing to a larger, public audience that can visit and revisit this post over time – a post that implies an attempt at communication with the dead, not the potential audience.

Implications of public dialogues with the dead. Those interviewed agreed that Facebook users who go online to express grief or condolences are generally expected to be positive and should not over-share or get too emotional. What users should post is also closely related to their relationship with the deceased. Both of these findings are in line with previous research concerning commenting on a Facebook page of the deceased (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 22). When someone does not follow the contextual norms in place, participants might feel uncomfortable, angry, or upset. These feelings are elaborated upon previously, in relation to the dichotomous relationship between comfort and discomfort when using Facebook in these circumstances. However, it is important to consider the social pressure young adults feel to communicate – in an appropriate way – that they are in mourning. These circumstances differentiate the modern public nature of our dialogues with the dead from previous private or sequestered experiences of grief.

We need also to consider the distinction between a public display of mourning and private grief described by Jenny Hockey in her work on changing death rituals, since she points out that we cannot necessarily know how someone actually feels based purely on their public expression (2001, p. 199). Facebook provides a new space for an old ritual that was traditionally a private and time-constrained experience – speaking with someone after they die has only relatively recently been something that can take place online. Private “dialogue with the dead”

can and does still happen, as participants like Dan, Cecelia, and Nicole talk about visiting a gravesite or writing a private letter to a deceased friend. But for others – namely, peripheral friends or those who are prevented from visiting a grave by time or geographical restrictions – a public dialogue may be the best opportunity to express grief.

There is still an obligation to partake in this communal, public expression of grief even if one attends a funeral or visits a gravesite of the deceased. Posting something on Facebook is not unlike participating in the ceremonial weeping described by anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, which “affirmed the bonds between society’s members and therefore fulfilled the function of maintaining social solidarity” (Hockey, 2001, p. 200). In both instances, the expectation of a public display of mourning is more important than whether or not people actually feel bereaved; Facebook posts show solidarity and affirm community bonds in the new public space provided by the social network site.

Chapter 6: Discussion

I began this project seeking to learn about the different ways in which Facebook users express grief online and what this means for questions of persistent identity and digital memorialization. After speaking with 20 young adults who experienced the death of a friend or loved one it is clear that Facebook can be a beneficial space in which to grieve, but not every user has a positive experience. Even though the experiences of these interview participants are varied and culturally specific, there are clear thematic notions of what grieving on Facebook entails. Expressing grief on the site can invoke discomfort, but the profile of a deceased user can also turn into an active memorial space that is used to communicate with this person in a way that is comforting. The profile can even host a community of mourners through public dialogue and support.

In the phenomenological tradition, researchers take into account that “there is not ‘one reality’ in how each of these events is experienced. Experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions: how the experience is lived in time, space, and vis a vis our relationship to others, as well as a bodily experience” (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011, p. 19). Facebook can complicate the notions of time, space, and relationship to others. Previous researchers examining grief on SNSs have concentrated on some of these complications and how Facebook might change or transform traditional grieving rituals. This study advances previous lines of inquiry by dissecting the elements of online grief expression, addressing how the nature of Facebook might affect users’ comfort when grieving, and interrogating the persistent nature of the profile in terms of active remembrance through memorialization. Speaking with individuals directly and at length is vital to this process.

Awareness of a deceased friend's digital presence is also a reminder of their physical absence. When users rely on digital communication to maintain this relationship they indicate a fear of addressing death in a productive way. This study finds that reliance on Facebook as a space for mourning problematizes an individual's grieving process and ability to come to terms with mortality. In addition, the pressure to post appropriate condolences and messages to the deceased results in generic or forced posts that call into question the benefits associated with grieving opening on Facebook. In the following discussion I further address the results of this study regarding my research questions with these theoretical complications in mind.

Young Adults & Bereavement

First, it is important to consider why specific themes emerged during the analysis phase. This group of young adults has varying prior experiences with grief, but it is likely that they are reflecting on one of the first experiences with grief they have had, which has been mediated by the lenses of Facebook and cultural expectations. Many authors point out that young adults who lose a friend are typically considered disenfranchised or are marginalized during the grieving process, since mourning rituals are traditionally limited to family members of the deceased and take place offline (Gilbert & Horsley, 2011; Walter et al., 2012; Carrol & Landry, 2010).

Research suggests that SNSs like Facebook provide a space in which a wider audience can mourn, since friends "may find a valued and rare place to articulate their grief in cyberspace" (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004, p. 15).

Young adults, often college students, who are part of geographically disparate networks can benefit from using SNSs when they cannot easily participate in face-to-face rituals – part of what Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish term "spatial expansion" of mourning made possible by Facebook (2013, p. 160). College students who benefit from this spatial expansion might also

experience a sense of oscillating grief, which is apparent in conversations with participants. Students who are bereaved might be dealing with the death of a friend or family member at home, but potentially spend more than half of the year away from home. They are members of two different communities: “one in which the deceased played an important part, the other in which the deceased played no part whatsoever” (Walter, 1999, p. 77). College provides a space in which to momentarily forget about a loss, but this might also cause a student to feel little or no support during the grieving process. By logging onto Facebook, young adults can feel supported in their expression of grief and find others who are experiencing the same thing.

Communication technologies, and SNSs like Facebook, subvert those challenges posed by geographical distance and disconnection from community. Other researchers (e.g. Carroll & Landry, 2010; Brubaker et al., 2013) have also made these claims, but this study reveals a more complicated relationship between Facebook and expression of grief. Facebook is valuable because it contributes to an expansion of death and mourning; at the same time, an opportunity to constantly participate in active mourning on Facebook seems to disrupt traditionally contained expressions of grief and challenge the concept of oscillation as well as other traditional grief theories. Grieving within spatial and temporal boundaries may be frustrating, but without these boundaries some young adults express that they feel uncomfortable, unable to set aside their memories with the deceased, and aggravated by the persistence of a profile that they sometimes wish would cease to exist as a site of interaction.

Expression of Grief on Facebook

Grief studies is an interdisciplinary field that has grown to include technological concerns as the Internet and new communication technologies transform the way we learn about death and express grief. There are theoretical implications for the use of Facebook in its mediation of

emotional response after death. My first research question addresses these implications, as I consider how young adults who use Facebook experience the expression of grief on the site.

Discomfort in postmodern grief paradigm. Even though stages of grief put forth by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969 are still referred to popularly, other theories have more effectively shed light on the use of Facebook in the grieving process. Tony Walter (1999) describes a *postmodern* grief paradigm, which emphasizes that each experience of grief may be different, and that we should be tolerant of these differences (1999, p. 207). This contrasts with the traditional stages and “grief work” one must work through in order to move on (Small, 2001, p. 30). On Facebook, people are confronted with the reality of postmodern grief. Users might have their own expectations about appropriate expression, and yet others in their Facebook network express grief differently. Some participants are more tolerant than others, in these cases. Melissa described the different types of posts she saw on her friend’s profile: some people contribute generic messages like “Rest in peace,” but others write long paragraphs that include a specific memory or reflect on their friendship. Melissa explains that she tries not to judge the different posts, since she considers the different ways of grieving and the fact that the family might appreciate any condolences offered.

Other participants were uncomfortable when people posted in a way that felt inappropriate to them. Taylor was bothered by the fact that people who did not know her friend were posting on her Facebook wall. She was conflicted as she considered different ways of looking at the posts:

...everyone has the right to, you know, grieve, and be a part of something, but I felt like for a lot of people that’s what it was, it was being part of it...I guess that’s selfish of me to say, because you don’t have to know someone to grieve their death, I’ve been in that

position before, so... I don't know, I guess it's just since I knew her so well and felt like so devastated by her loss, and then people that didn't even know how great she was, being like "oh..." like, I don't know, it bothered me I guess.

Taylor acknowledges that people grieve differently, but still feels uncomfortable with the way that this grief manifests. While Melissa exemplifies how we learn to grieve in a postmodern way, Taylor has a particular set of social expectations that impede her from expressing grief on Facebook comfortably. Ultimately, Walter stresses that postmodern grief is a theoretical ideal, questioning whether or not we can mourn without a social script in place (1999, p. 166).

Part of expressing grief on Facebook is recognizing that seeking comfort can be rewarding, but that discomfort is also likely. Many participants want to connect with a deceased friend, but reaching out on Facebook is characterized by this conflict of emotions. There is comfort to be found in looking at photographs and reading stories shared by other bereaved survivors, but finding that other users have posted disingenuous or otherwise inappropriate messages is upsetting. It can be extremely uncomfortable to see new messages actively posted by the profile of someone who died. Participants feel like this is a social violation, and that the profile belongs to the individual user. These violations of perceived norms on Facebook can escalate to include trolling behavior like posting pictures of a fatal accident. For many interview participants any benefit of expressing grief on Facebook was challenged by these instances of discomfort with which they were likely to be faced.

Experiencing discomfort is a risk that young adults seem willing to take on Facebook. This may be due in part to their use of Facebook for daily interactions, for everything from sharing content with friends to keeping in touch with family members across the world. Facebook users might inconspicuously log on to their profile and suddenly learn that a friend has

died or be bombarded by messages and photos that they do not wish to see – their way of grieving might be different, Walter (1999) posits, and discomfort might be unavoidable. In their study concerning Facebook use after death, Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013) conclude similarly that Facebook users might feel discomfort when they see others' grieving. One reason for this is that "the public nature of the profile Wall can be seen as intrusive for those who prefer more private forms of mourning" (Brubaker et al., 2013, p. 157). Indeed, when others' grief is prominently displayed on a public newsfeed it can be unsettling. At the same time, expressing grief through mourning rituals is part of rebuilding a community and reaffirming existing social bonds when these bonds seem most fragile. Despite the potential for discomfort, we are still social beings for whom "involvement in groups generates sentiments and mutual sentiment generates social solidarity" (Walter, 1999, p. 21).

A Facebook profile becomes a communal space that invites the public expression of grief within the community of mourners, which Unruh (1983) calls "strategic social action" (as discussed in Walter, 1999, p. 56). When the community sets up a place to visit and think about the deceased in order to keep in touch with the dead, members of this community are better able to grieve and move on. Our sociality on Facebook – especially when bereaved – reflects this move towards social solidarity after a community is threatened by the death of a member. This study demonstrates that aspects of Facebook such as connection with a bereaved community facilitate comfort and mourning in a positive environment, but that discomfort arises when these mourning rituals are not deemed socially appropriate. Despite a sense of community when grieving online, the postmodern paradigm prizes an individual's personal grief on Facebook in potentially disruptive ways.

Preoccupation with ourselves as mourners. Discussion of community was pervasive during the interview process. Facebook seems to allow users to connect with anyone who might also be experiencing grief after the loss of a friend or family member. Yet this virtual representation of the physical grieving community is distinctly public and self-monitoring. Some of the discomfort that participants feel when expressing grief online is related to their ability to properly express grief within this public space. There is pressure to grieve “correctly” not only to spare others discomfort, but also to protect oneself from being implicated in a social faux pas. That expressing grief on Facebook is public, to an extent, means that users are careful to express grief and are highly concerned with how they should act and what they should say. In this way, the postmodern paradigm has created a group of mourners who are preoccupied by following social norms in the context of grief.

All but a few participants seem primarily concerned with the benefits they might gain using Facebook – appropriately – during the grieving process. These benefits are emotional and instrumental: bereaved Facebook users feel comforted by writing on the site, and the public sphere gives users a place to tell others what they are feeling, and to receive support when self-identifying as in mourning. Taking care of oneself is most important, and “the bereaved individual’s expressions of grief are privileged, with survivors constructing and expressing their own relationship to the deceased” in the blatantly individualistic space embodied by one’s Facebook profile (Brubaker et al., 2013, p. 153). Janelle considers posting messages to be for the benefit of the individual posting, as she compares writing condolences to wishing friends a happy birthday. Feeling obligated to share condolences can be “kind of sad... Like ‘oh it’s my friend’s birthday, have to write on their Facebook wall.’ Like ‘oh they died, I know them, let me go write, ‘I’m so sorry you died!’”” Janelle does not believe that the dead can read Facebook

posts, meaning that the only practical purpose of writing is self-satisfying. Putting it bluntly, Janelle remarks, “I think they feel better about themselves if they’re letting other people know.”

Posting on Facebook is considered a way for young adults to show respect to the families of the deceased and to the legacy of their deceased friend. Yet these actions are counterintuitive to some, who feel that there are other, traditional options if that is the ultimate goal. Attending a memorial event or making a phone call to offer condolences are both considered more personal ways to show respect, but it is easier to write a quick message on Facebook – in the sense of convenience, but also in order to spare oneself the emotional task of processing death. We distance ourselves from the reality of death and its implications when we choose to write a Facebook post without thinking, when really a post can be an insensitive response to an emotionally complex issue. Dealing with the implications of death beyond the social rules regarding condolences is important in order to deal with grief in a healthy way. Yet Facebook minimizes any inner philosophical turmoil with questions of life and death, instead offering users a way to feel as though they have properly dealt with their grief. Again and again, posting online comes back to the needs of the bereaved. Writing a status is a quick and easy way to broadcast one’s grief, or to position oneself as a mourner, without dwelling on the reality of death and mortality.

Simply visiting a profile after learning that a friend dies is an anonymous act that is not made public throughout Facebook. Within a thanatechnological death system is a changing context for expression of grief in which survivors are granted a space to express themselves and find social support amongst “like-minded others, who, like themselves, are no longer disenfranchised” (Sofka et al., 2012, p. 8). People who might have been physically isolated can connect to others virtually, and make more progress while dealing with loss (Rosenblatt, 1988).

Making sense of loss is vital for survivors, but “the simple act of anonymously visiting a page does not appear to be enough for many mourners. A more direct and perceptible engagement with the deceased has become necessary” online (Dobler, 2009, p. 178). Users seek to make this engagement public on Facebook in order to address their psychological needs rather than attend to specific spiritual needs of the dead (Rosenblatt, 1988). It seems that dealing with death online may never fully address the psychological needs of the bereaved. We are putting off the real emotional consequences of death when we feel that writing a Facebook post is enough.

Just as one might feel inclined to post “happy birthday” on a friend’s wall, Facebook users are faced with the social pressure to express condolences or write messages to their deceased friends, if only for the sake of appropriateness. Users are aware that anyone can see what they post, and closely monitor what others write and share on Facebook. While awareness of public perception might mean that bereaved families feel comforted by the quantity of Facebook posts that say “rest in peace” and acknowledge their loss, users of SNSs should be wary that an emotional benefit of such community-regulated expression of grief might be overshadowed by the potential implications. In my discussions with young adults, their experiences suggest that using Facebook might dull the expression of grief as posts follow specific social scripts, and users might not feel obliged to console survivors beyond a quick Facebook post, thinking they’ve done their part to console the bereaved. Personal, offline interaction should not be overlooked as unnecessary in the thanatechnological age of bereavement.

Facebook Profile as a Site of Interaction and Memorialization

Expressing grief on Facebook is complicated by the persistence of the deceased user’s profile. This profile is multifaceted: it is a relic left behind by the user, a site of gathering for survivors,

and comes to embody a person through memorialization. My research questions consider what happens to the Facebook profile after someone dies, when the profile's owner no longer uses it. Interviews suggest that the profile is attributed meaning when other users interact with it and engage in memorialization processes, as it comes to stand in for the deceased in their absence.

The bereaved have historically tried to remember or memorialize the dead by using physical objects, letters, or photographs left behind after someone dies (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). Sometimes, the objects that are most important to the bereaved only gain meaning after a death, such as the Facebook profile that was used as a site of communication or connection with the user when they were alive (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 12). Physical objects may become important sites of memory because they symbolize this person, as the most tangible extension of them that remains (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 21); a user's Facebook profile is also an extension of them that positions them within a "Friend" network and includes photographs, text, and shared preferences, all communicating facets of a specific identity. Sherry Turkle writes about the impact of technology on oneself and in relationships with others, and describes the strategic work that goes into these profiles: "There is nothing more deliberate than the painstaking work of constructing a profile or having a conversation on instant messenger in which one composes and recomposes one's thoughts" (2011, p. 276). For young adults, having the right kind of profile and using Facebook to connect and maintain friendships is an important way to expand their social capital (Ellison et al., 2011). Typically, "Facebook makes it easy to keep lightweight contact with each other even when the benefits of proximity are no longer available" (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 137). It follows that when Facebook users choose to maintain contact with a deceased friend they are choosing lightweight contact over visiting a grave.

In contrast to a tangible object that a close family member might find valuable after losing someone, digital space is equalizing. People who do not have access to these tangible reminders of their friend, like the college students who were interviewed as part of this study, find digital space to be helpful as they cling to something that feels material when grieving (Massimi, 2012, p. 140). Indeed, many participants consider the profile an extension of their deceased friend, describing the profile as the place in which friends seem “most alive” and where communication with the dead is possible, to a degree.

Benefits and problems with persistence. Visiting a Facebook profile after someone dies might be similar to holding onto photographs or letters, but the interactive nature of the site complicates this ritual. Using Facebook can feel like a form of communication, even though this person is not physically present. But, as Tricia says, it might be hard to move on and accept the death since Facebook “makes it seem like they’re not [dead], because it’s still a profile that you can, like, post on.” Persistence of the profile can make visiting an emotionally challenging experience. A Facebook profile is hardly a stand-in for people themselves, even though communicating on the site may feel very real. Regardless, users might be inclined to visit the profile because of other benefits that are unique to Facebook interactions.

In the generally supportive environment on Facebook, users engage in the preservation of a friend’s identity by continually contributing memories and stories via posts, photographs, and the interactive Facebook timeline. A traditional physical memorial “serves as a metaphor for the upkeep of the name and memory of the deceased,” and requires “sustained engagement” after someone dies (Francis et al., 2005, p. 113). Users insist that Facebook can act as a substitute for visiting a gravestone that is less uncomfortable than facing death in a more direct way. The profile has elements that position it as a memorial, while also being an archive of their life.

Persistence of the profile ostensibly makes memorialization easier. As Marwick and Ellison (2012) point out, context collapse gives access to people of varying levels of relational closeness. Beyond access, this study suggests that the online profile is itself a collaborative space for mourners to contribute in a community setting that is seemingly permanent and self-preserving in nature. Again, these qualities can seem beneficial at first glance but also pose new challenges when Facebook users try to move on from their bereaved state.

Interaction and memorialization are intertwining processes on Facebook, as users communicate with the deceased and also with each other. The profile is persistent but also acts as an extension of this person's identity, which can make the memorialization process more intense for those visiting the profile. A physical memorial or gravestone might come to *be* the departed in the eyes of the grieving, "but the marker gains this attribution only through its proximity to the bodily remains," whereas a profile was already an extension of the person when they were alive and might continue to be treated as such (Francis et al., 2005, p. 124). Having a sense of interaction with the deceased can feel strange, especially when someone else has taken over the profile. Participants were vocal about their apprehension at others taking over the account in the name of the deceased. Several participants felt so strongly against this type of Facebook activity that they "defriended" the deceased to avoid being startled and uncomfortable when new posts made under their friend's name. Persistence and continued interaction on the profile provoke different reactions and responses, but are overwhelmingly sources of emotional conflict.

Dealing with some discomfort on Facebook is a byproduct of grief expression online, which researchers have identified as present within virtual cemeteries (Roberts & Vidal, 2000) and in other studies concerning Facebook memorialization (Hieftje, 2009; Brubaker et al., 2013). Conversations with young adult Facebook users in this study suggest that discomfort on

Facebook is often preferable to the discomfort of facing death that is a part of visiting a cemetery or going to a funeral. Traditional mourning rituals can be circumvented by visiting and continuing to interact with a Facebook profile, which participants say is a more effective way to remember someone, since we have access to their digital lives that remain online – not only to view these digital traces but to contribute to the profile in a public sense that is both curatorial and archival. Remembering is a byproduct of interaction and memorialization online; we actively seek to remember through the memorializing of a loved one on their Facebook page. Using Facebook to share stories and photographs is still a valid expression of memorialization. Users themselves might not be quick to call their actions “memorializing” in nature, but many feel that they want to continue to view the profile and hope it is not taken offline. But does being able to look at a profile constitute remembering a person? How might this dynamic memory archive be disruptive to traditional grieving processes and needs of survivors? Facebook use after losing a loved one can be tremendously beneficial and comforting, but when we see this person as digitally immortal it might affect how we think about our own death and our ability to accept mortality.

Conclusions

For the young adults I spoke with, Facebook is a place to record what is happening in their lives and to connect with friends and family, near and far. A site that was not designed for mourning quickly turns into a place where anyone can share how he or she feels by posting a Facebook status or by writing on the profile of a deceased friend. Both actions expose the person posting to a wider community of readers – either one’s own network or the network of friends connected to the deceased. Expressing these feelings in such a public way means that we need to take relational norms into account, which emerge in this study as a hierarchy of relational closeness.

Understanding one's own relationship to the deceased is important in order to grieve appropriately, since users feel that closest friends are more entitled to share their feelings and stories with the community.

The concept of relational closeness and the consequential perceived norms of grief expression might cause discomfort if mourning comes across as inappropriate. Young users of Facebook might be experiencing grief for the first time, and are unsure what might be expected of them. They look to others on the site to learn what is appropriate and what is not, but these unspoken rules are still being cemented online. Not knowing what to do in this situation can induce discomfort, but dealing with death is uncomfortable for most people. Visiting Facebook has become a new ritual for survivors, whereas in the past survivors dealt with death in relative privacy:

...death and its aftermath are in many ways private affairs; feelings of loss and grief may be diluted and misrepresented if shared to widely. Though cemeteries are ostensibly public places with responsibilities to the neighbouring community, they exist to obscure the terrifying fact of death through ritual practice. (Francis et al., 2005, p. 214)

We do not enjoy thinking about death, and in fact tend to engage in an "endless shying away from confrontation with mortality" in Western culture (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 201) Facebook ultimately forces us to think about our own mortality by bringing death and the grieving process into a more public space.

Rather than focus on the death and decomposition of the body, we place importance on the things a person leaves behind. When the Facebook profile is taken up as representative of a deceased user's identity users maintain and preserve the profile as an act of remembering a friend. It seems though that remembering on Facebook can lead to confusion. When we place

importance on our interactions with the Facebook profile of a person who has died we are ignoring the reality of death and putting our needs as mourners first. A person can be idealized through memorialization on their Facebook account, just as “the idealized body implicitly denies the possibility of death – it attempts to present a realm of transcendence and immortality” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 76). Indeed, a Facebook profile suggests virtual immortality when users engage in persistent interaction with a deceased friend. An unintended consequence of this profile’s persistence may be conflicting feelings of sadness and comfort when visiting the profile. We are told that we should let go and move on when we are bereaved, but the Facebook profile challenges us in that mission and can avert users from acknowledging death. Quite simply, our digital immortality is challenging the notion of what it means to die, and posing a challenge to young adults who are learning to grieve online.

Facebook has built a dedicated user base of over 1 billion monthly active users (“Key Facts,” n.d., para. 4). If another social network site gains as many users as Facebook there will still be challenges for anyone who is faced with death and mourning in a digital space. Even though scholars like Walter and colleagues (2012) argue that death has become “sequestered” in America – hidden, and made private in hospitals, away from the home – we are likely to think about death when we use Facebook, where profiles of the living and the dead exist alongside one another. A friend may have died, but “we can differentiate between social and biological death in that the social lives of persons might persist beyond biological death, in the form of the material objects with which they are metaphorically or metonymically associated in social process of memory making” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 43). Participants stress the importance of maintaining the social identity of the deceased. We continue to create social narratives by telling stories, sharing photographs, and posting condolences or messages on the anniversary of a death.

Memorializing extends the social life of the deceased online, where “the dead continue as social actors” with whom participants are eager to maintain bonds (Walter et al., 2012, p. 292). It can be comforting to maintain these ties with the dead, but with ease comes the temptation to continue to interact with a deceased friend as if they were still alive and the ability to ignore our own mortality. “The threat of death is very much bound up with possibility of oblivion,” and Facebook provides a space where we can ignore the possibility and fear associated with such oblivion (Hallam and Hockey, 2001, p. 4).

Limitations and future research. Exposure to the persistent online identity of the deceased may impact a person’s ability or willingness to deal with grief and move on. If young adults learn about grief exclusively through Facebook then this will certainly color their perception of grief and the way that they mourn in the future. This is a major concern for future research, since this study preliminarily explores several phenomenological questions concerning expression of grief and memorialization.

Several limitations did arise as this study was completed, one of which is the interview process in addressing these phenomenological questions. It might have been helpful to hold a preliminary interview in order to become more acquainted with participants and learn about their experience with death online before asking more probing questions about their emotional state and personal grieving experience. There were also a few students who wanted to participate but whose experiences were not as relevant to the project. These participants did not have as much to say about their experiences, and it would have been helpful to know this after preliminary interviews. Participants were all students at a mid-size, private, Northeastern university, likely to have Judeo-Christian upbringings and thus culturally specific understandings of death and the afterlife. During his interview, Mark points out that religion and culture are inseparable, and that

these attitudes should be taken into account. Based on his experience in a Christian household, he remarks, “I think to some degree you have to have some conception of that in order to be able to engage with a page of somebody who no longer exists, and consider it to be – you know, before it was an avatar for their living self, and now it’s an avatar for their sort of, ascended self.” Communicating with a deceased user might not make any sense to a person who identifies as atheist or agnostic, which was not previously a consideration in this research. In the future, these limitations should be incorporated into research design. It can be difficult to record how people are feeling while they are grieving or expressing themselves online, but it is valuable to speak with individuals in order to understand their decision-making process and what they may feel when posting messages on Facebook. Asking participants about their religious upbringing or ideas about death in general might give more depth to their specific experiences when making conclusions. Additionally, conducting content analysis of posts or memorial groups is certainly useful, but should be considered in conjunction with individual experience and a phenomenological approach.

Future research should explore the relationship between comfort, discomfort, and the hierarchy of relational closeness identified by participants. Laying out a more structured understanding of appropriate or inappropriate behavior on Facebook will be helpful in understanding why the bereaved turn to Facebook and what they expect from the site. Grieving a peer in particular is a specific experience that young adults must navigate on Facebook while taking relational closeness into account, and theories of social capital are worth considering in this context in order to further understand the relationship between Facebook and identity in young adults. Grief voyeurism on Facebook deserves further academic attention in order to understand the motivations for reading comments expressing condolences or stories about the

deceased as well as motivations for perusing memorial pages without posting oneself. Another area deserving of study is the concept of materiality, and how a Facebook profile might constitute a material – although virtual – memory object that is left after someone dies. Future research can reflect on the similarities and differences in using a Facebook profile compared to keeping a physical photograph or letter from a deceased loved one. This research will allow a more complete understanding of interaction with the deceased and mourning communities through memorialization processes.

Final Considerations

It is clear that grief is complicated, and that expressing grief online has consequences that deserve consideration. Each individual has a different experience with grief that includes the circumstances of the death, how close they were to the deceased, and participation in offline death rituals. These variables mean that grief can be highly individualized and postmodern by Walter's definition (1999). Yet in the end, the urge to reach out to a friend in any way can feel natural and give survivors some closure, even if this is limited to Facebook. When Ryan learned that an old friend died, he turned to Facebook even though he could not explain why that was:

I kind of felt – I felt like it was one last thing to say to him, in a way, and that would stick between us forever, kind of. People that post more often, I feel use it as, um, use it as more of a conversation in a way. Like they'll post things that happen in their day, when they thought about him, but I'm more – I just used it as one last thing to say to him, that would remain on the Internet forever, I guess.

Ryan used Facebook for what he needed, and continued to observe what others posted in the days and weeks that followed. He understands that people will use the site for their own needs,

and is tolerant of that. If we are now living in a postmodern grief paradigm this tolerance will remain important as individuals do what feels right for them, when it feels best.

Users seem comfortable using Facebook as a stand-in for communicating face-to-face during bereavement – whether this replaces offering condolences to surviving family members in person or visiting a cemetery to speak out loud to a deceased friend’s grave. Creators of companies like DeadSocial or LivesOn suggest that technology can make grief more manageable as they promise users a chance to engage in postmortem communication. DeadSocial founder James Norris sees technology as changing the way people think about death to be more positive. Norris is quoted as saying, “We shy away from death. It reaches us before we approach it... We’re using tech to soften the impact that death has and dehumanize it. It allows us to think about death in a more logical way and detach ourselves from it” (Kelly, 2013). This justification reads like a warning as Norris ignores the fact that death is part of the human experience, albeit a painful part.

There is a fine line between using technology to connect with others and trying to sanitize death and the grieving process. For Sherry Turkle, use of evolving communication technology is blurring this line in our attitudes toward going online or using Facebook: “We go online because we are busy but end up spending more time with technology and less with each other. We defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other. At the limit, we will settle for the inanimate, if that’s what it takes” (2011, p, 280). In the future, users need to consider the long-term impact of turning to Facebook for momentary comfort. It is important to challenge the notion that a dehumanized, detached way of addressing death is a better alternative to the comfort people can find in each other when they step away from their devices and seek a more fulfilling life, in which pain and pleasure coexist.

Appendix A: Requesting Professor Permission for Classroom Appeal

Hello [Professor's Name],

I am asking for your help in conducting original research for my Master's thesis through the Media Studies program at Newhouse.

I seek to learn about the relationship between online identity, grieving, and memorialization processes on Facebook, which I find increasingly important to study as our physical lives become inextricably linked to our online identities. In order to address these issues, I am hoping to speak with students in an in-depth interview setting. Doing so will allow me to learn from their unique experiences online and draw conclusions about the way Facebook users express grief and engage in memorialization.

I would appreciate it if you would allow me to describe my research project and ask for participants during your class. I would like to speak for 5-10 minutes about the project, and will be offering \$15 gift cards to Chipotle or Starbucks for students' confidential participation in an interview that would take approximately 1 hour.

Thank you for your consideration in helping me with this project. If you have any questions please let me know.

Molly Kalan
Media Studies Graduate Student
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
Syracuse University
mmkalan@syr.edu
(609) 731-9440

Appendix B: Recruitment Script for Classroom Pitch

Hi everyone, I'm Molly Kalan. I'm a second year Master's student in the Media Studies program here at Newhouse.

I'm currently working on my thesis, which deals with online identity and the expression of grief. On a larger scale, I think the way that we use Facebook is changing, and will continue to change the way that we experience many different aspects of life. When someone passes away, our interaction with them online may even continue, and some of you may have experienced this personally.

I know this is a sensitive subject, and I am hoping to speak with people to learn about their experiences if they have known someone on Facebook who has passed away. I am hoping to be able to learn more about someone's experience in the context of this research. So I'm asking for your help in this process.

I'm hoping to interview people who have experienced this personally. Interviews would take approximately 1 hour, and we could meet at a local coffee shop, in Schine student center, or somewhere else that is preferable. If you would be willing to participate in my study, I want to let you know that your information will remain confidential in my research. I will also be giving participants \$15 gift cards to your choice of Chipotle or Starbucks for your time and willingness to speak with me.

I am going to hand out my contact information now, so if you would like to participate or just have questions about the project please don't hesitate to email me so that we can set up a time for your interview. If you think you know of someone else who may be interested in speaking with me feel free to give them my email address and have them contact me.

Thanks so much for your time.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Expressions of Grief Online, Public Memorialization, and the Modern Mourning Ritual on Social Media Sites

My name is Molly Kalan, and I am a graduate student at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

I am interested in learning more about the relationship between online identity, grieving, and memorialization on Facebook. You will be asked to participate in an interview in which questions about your personal experiences with grief and memorialization on Facebook will be addressed. This will take approximately 1 hour of your time. All information will be kept confidential. This means that in any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal details or I will change details that identify you in the research. I also ask that you do not share personal names or identifying information of others during the interview. Although this research deals with Facebook, we will not be looking at any Facebook profiles and I will not “friend” you on Facebook.

If you would like to speak further in an additional interview, we can arrange to do so. This is not required of you as a research participant. The follow-up interview would be conducted within two weeks of this initial interview.

I would like to use an audio recorder during the interview, in order to create a document from which to transcribe afterwards. I will refer to these recordings for data analysis purposes only, and will delete the recordings when the study is complete. No one else will have access to these recordings.

For your participation in my research project, you will receive a \$15 gift card to your choice of Chipotle or Starbucks. If you choose to withdraw after beginning the study, you will still receive a gift card in the full amount. If you wish to participate in a follow-up interview, you will not receive further compensation.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping me to understand the relationship between online identity, grieving, and memorialization on Facebook according to your personal experiences. This information should help me to add to previous research relating to online identity and grief within the communication field, and to have a better understanding of how these concepts interrelate. By taking part in the research you may experience the benefit of expressing your personal experience with grief online, but this remains a limited benefit to you as a participant.

The risks to you of participating in this study are those of minor psychological discomfort, as this is a sensitive topic. Discussing the nature of the interview prior to beginning will minimize these risks, and I am willing to answer any questions about the nature of this topic and interview at any time. I would also like to give you a list of on-campus resources that are available to you as a student:

- Counseling Center: <http://counselingcenter.syr.edu/> (315) 443-4715
- Hendricks Chapel: <http://hendricks.syr.edu/> (315) 443-2902

- The Office of Student Assistance:
<http://www.syr.edu/currentstudents/studentassistance.html> (315) 443-4357

If you do not want to take part in the study, you have the right to refuse to take part, without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, contact Molly Kalan at mmkalan@syr.edu or faculty advisor Carol Liebler at cmlieble@syr.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

All of my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I agree to be audio recorded.

I do not agree to be audio recorded.

Signature of participant

Date

Printed name of participant

Signature of researcher

Date

Printed name of researcher

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Today we'll be talking about how Facebook users express grief online after someone has died, and ways that people are memorialized on Facebook. Your participation is voluntary, so if you feel uncomfortable at any time or wish to stop the interview, please let me know.

Before we get started, I also wanted to let you know that I will be recording this interview but that you will remain confidential in my research. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Introduction and use of Facebook

- a. Name, age, hometown
- b. When did you start using Facebook?
- c. Describe your experience of logging onto Facebook - what do you do? How long do you think you might typically spend on the site at a time?
- d. What types of things do you typically post or share on the profiles of your Facebook friends?

Qualities of Facebook

- a. Describe how you interact with a person on Facebook.
 - i. How is interacting or communicating with a person on Facebook similar to interacting or communicating with them in person?
 - ii. How is it different?
- b. How does visiting a person's profile compare to interacting with them in person?
 - i. How do you typically use Facebook to interact with people? What kind of things do you do? (post? look?)
- c. How do you think a Facebook profile reflects who that person is?

Death & Grief on Facebook

- a. How did this person's profile change (or stay the same) after their death? Did the types of things posted change?
 - i. What's happening on someone's profile after they die?
- b. How did you hear that this person had died?
- c. How did you react?
- d. Did you feel the need to share anything on Facebook?
- e. Did you visit his/her Facebook profile? (How soon after? How regularly?)

- f. When do you still visit the profile?
 - i. How do you feel when you visit it? How do you feel after visiting it?
- g. Why may you choose to visit this Facebook profile rather than go to a grave or funeral?
- h. Did you ever reach out to this person after they died in any other ways? (grave, funeral, etc)
 - i. How does this feel compared to viewing their Facebook profile?
 - ii. How do you think interacting virtually is compares to interacting physically?
- i. How did you personally experience interacting with someone's profile after they died?
 - i. What types of emotions have you expressed on Facebook after someone has died? Where?
 - ii. How did talking to or reaching out to someone on Facebook after they died feel compared to when they were alive?
- j. What other types of interactions did you observe occurring on their profile?
- k. How did you witness their profile being used by others?

Memorialization & Persistent Identity

- a. How long after someone has died would you say you continue to interact with their profile (look at it, post on it, talk with other people who are active on the profile)?
- b. Did you witness or contribute to any online memorialization of this person on Facebook?
- c. What do you think long-term online memorialization of a person entails?
- d. How do you feel about someone's Facebook profile remaining online or taken offline after they die?
 - i. How do you think the fact that someone's Facebook profile is kept online (or taken offline) affects your ability to grieve or mourn after someone has died?
- e. How would you describe the way you interact with other friends or family members of this person on their Facebook profile?
- f. Have you considered the way that you interact with someone's profile when they die before this?
- g. How do you think the way we use Facebook may change as we get older and have used it for a longer amount of time?

Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

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EDUCATION

- 2011-2013 Syracuse University, S.I. Newhouse School for Public Communications,
Syracuse, NY
Master of Arts in Media Studies, May 2013 (GPA 3.9)
Research interests: Online identity, media convergence, expressions of
grief and memorialization, social media, public/private sphere
theory, heteronormative representations and images, “coming out”
narratives, celebrity culture.
- 2007-2011 Villanova University, *Villanova, PA*
Bachelor of Arts in Communication, Cum Laude
Concentrations in Media Studies & Media Production
Minor in Peace and Justice Studies

EMPLOYMENT

- 2013-present Account Coordinator, InkHouse Media + Marketing
Waltham, MA
Work with teams to organize and track deadlines for clients. Monitor for
client news coverage; prepare news scans for clients specific to industry &
appropriate trends. Participate in client calls, including preparation of
action items and memos resulting from calls. Prepare media lists, and
perform writing tasks as necessary (press releases, award applications, etc.)
- 2011-2013 Instructional Associate, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Instruct students in two lab sections of undergraduate multimedia
production and storytelling course, focusing on Final Cut, Photoshop,
Keynote, Wordpress, videography, and production techniques. Assist
professor in class and with grading. Coordinate shooting and production
schedules of student projects. Responsible for writing and grading quizzes

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based on course content. Prepared and presented several guest lectures. Worked with Professors Tula Goenka (Fall 2011), Aileen Gallagher (Spring 2012, Spring 2013), and Corey Takahashi (Fall 2012).

- 2012-2013 Graduate Production Assistant, Lerner Center for Public Health
Syracuse University, *Syracuse, NY*
Direct production of online video content for Healthy Monday campaign. Work with staff during video conceptualization; shoot and edit scripted videos, interviews, and cooking demonstrations.
- 2012 Communication Strategy Leader, Y INTERACT, *New York, NY*
Contribute to various campaigns and projects, including conceptualization and design. Edit HTML and digital photos. Coordinate with clients and assist in day-to-day operations. Responsible for website testing and copyediting.

CONFERENCES

- 2013 “The Fact is, I’m Gay’: Coming Out as a Public Figure”. Poster presentation at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference, *Washington, DC*, August 2013.
- 2013 “The Fact is, I’m Gay’: Coming Out as a Public Figure”. Paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Midwinter Conference, *Norman, OK*, March 2013.
Awarded Top Paper Abstract.
- 2013 “No Words! Just Tears #DearWhitney’: How Social Media Sites Change the Way We Learn About Death Online”. Presentation at the Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference, *Washington, DC*, March 2013.
- 2012 “The Digital Divide on the Move: Demographic Influences on Patterns of Mobile Phone Use”. Scholar-to-scholar presentation at the National Communication Association Conference, *Orlando, FL*, November 2012.
- 2012 “The Digital Divide on the Move: How demographics influence instrumental, advanced, communication, and information-seeking behaviors among mobile phone users”. Paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Midwinter Conference, *Norman, OK*, March 2012.

Molly M. Kalan

2010 “*Get on the Bus and Black Masculinity*”. Paper presented at the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Research Conference, *Villanova, PA*, April 2010.

RESEARCH GRANTS & PROJECTS

2013 Digital Methods Summer School: On the challenges of studying social media data. New Media & Digital Culture Program.
University of Amsterdam, *Amsterdam, Netherlands*.

- “Media ecology of a revolt: Following hashtags and hyperlinks in the Gezi protest movement”. Project presented at DMI, June 2013.
- “Amazon as Issue Engine: Islands of Weird”. Project presented at DMI, July 2013

2013 S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications – Thesis Funding,
Syracuse University, *Syracuse, NY*
To complete original research project titled “Expressions of grief on Facebook: Navigating discomfort, persistent identity, and public memorialization” as part of master’s requirements. A qualitative study exploring concepts of online identity and memorialization in relation to Facebook users’ mourning practices. In-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed for emergent themes; Dedoose research software was used for coding and analysis. Advised under Carol Liebler, PhD.

2012 S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications Research/Creative
Grant, Syracuse University, *Syracuse, NY*
To complete research for a paper titled “The Digital Divide on the Move: Demographic Influences on Patterns of Mobile Phone Use” with Rachel Somerstein, Ph.D. candidate in Mass Communication, and Alicia Wright, M.A. student in Media Studies at Syracuse University

AWARDS

2011-2012 Recipient of Corinne Hammond Gray Graduate Fellowship
Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women

2011 Student Leadership Award
Villanova University, *Villanova, PA*

2010 Father Ray Jackson Memorial Fund Scholarship,
Villanova University, *Villanova PA*

ACTIVITIES & SERVICE

- 2012-2013 Contributor to The Newshouse
 TheNewshouse.com, Syracuse University, *Syracuse, NY*
Entertainment & off-campus staff member. Interview subjects, write articles, and produce multimedia stories.
- 2012-2013 Student Representative on Graduate Program Committee
 S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
 Syracuse University, *Syracuse, NY*
Address relevant program issues, including curriculum changes and graduate student programs of study.
- 2012-2013 Student Representative on Awards Committee
 S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
 Syracuse University, *Syracuse, NY*
Read student candidate portfolios and applications for various awards throughout academic year.
- 2010-2011 Program Director, 89.1 WXVU Villanova Radio, *Villanova, PA*
Maintain program content and station, supervise air personnel, and initiate disciplinary actions. Host weekly ninety-minute show. Attend weekly Executive Board meetings, hold office hours in station. Previously: Training Director (2009-2010), Underwriting Director (2008-2009).
- 2010 Student Coordinator of Service Break Experience, Villanova University
 San Salvador, El Salvador
Facilitated weeklong service trip of 28 student volunteers to San Salvador. Coordinated with Project FIAT to bring students to local communities, working on construction projects and in orphanages. Led students in daily discussion and reflection.
- 2010 Participant of Service Break Experience, Villanova University
 Kingston, Jamaica
Traveled with group of students to work with volunteer organization Jamaica Volunteers. Visited several sites and worked with various populations in Kingston: assisting, feeding, and bathing the elderly and homeless at Missionaries of Charity; tutoring at-risk children at a local school; working with victims of leprosy; and serving as a teacher's aide in Riverton City, built within the community living on the former Kingston dump.

Molly M. Kalan

2009

Participant of Service Break Experience, Villanova University
Charleston, SC

Traveled with group of students to work with Habitat for Humanity for a weeklong service break experience. Worked on site, met with families through the organization, and worked in the local Re-Store.

SKILLS

Multimedia Production: Digital photography, videography, multimedia storytelling.

Editing: Final Cut 7, Pro X; basic Adobe Photoshop, Dreamweaver, & HTML/CSS.

Social & Online Media: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Klout, Blogger, Wordpress, etc.

Research Methods: interviewing, focus groups, textual analysis, survey methods, SPSS.

References available upon request.