

is my grief too public for you? the digitalization of grief

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it all started when I lost a friend on facebook...

The screenshot shows a Safari browser window displaying a Facebook profile. The browser's address bar contains the URL `http://www.facebook.com/jail.sindair.121`. The Facebook profile page is visible, featuring a profile picture of a black and white dog. The navigation tabs include **Timeline**, **About**, **Friends** (5 Mutual), **Photos**, and **More**. A post from 54 months ago is visible, with the text "54 months today. We love and miss you. Xoxo" and a photo of two young children. The right sidebar contains sections for **YOUR GAMES**, **RECOMMENDED GAMES**, **GROUP CONVERSATIONS**, and **MORE FRIENDS**. A sponsored advertisement for Weight Watchers is also present. The browser's menu bar at the top includes **Safari**, **File**, **Edit**, **View**, **History**, **Bookmarks**, **Window**, and **Help**. The system tray at the bottom shows various application icons.

grief

- kubler-ross model of grief (1969)



(Kubler-Ross, 1969)

parasocial interactions



Justin Bieber

@justinbieber



Follow

RIP to the best that ever did it. RIP to the KING...RIP Michael Jackson. You will never be forgotten. **#INSPIRATION**



Reply



Retweet



Favorite

47,045

RETWEETS

15,731

FAVORITES



social media and grief

- social media platforms offers an attractive space for grieving because people find relief in sharing their feelings about grief
- expressing one's emotions about grief has been a recommendation made by clinicians to clients to help them cope with bereavement for many years

(Doka, 1989; Rennels & Paxton, 2013; Rosenblatt & Elde, 1990; Smith & Segal, 2016)

social media and grief



Remembering [REDACTED]



We hope people who love [REDACTED] will find comfort in visiting his profile to remember and celebrate his life. Learn more about the [legacy contact](#) setting and [memorialized accounts](#) on Facebook.



Remembering [REDACTED]

Timeline

About

Friends 6 Mutual

Photos

More ▾

- previous research on grieving on social media has shown that users appreciate the forum provided by websites like facebook, and that posting on the deceased's profile page assists them with the grieving process
- “emotional rubberneckers” or “bandwagon mourners”

(Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Morehouse & Crandall, 2014)

- other research has shown that people feel a connection to the deceased when using social media to communicate with the deceased
 1. direct communication with the deceased
 2. adding “@” to link deceased to one’s own page
 3. adding a hashtag # to connect to conversation about the deceased

(Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2012; Irwin, 2015; Pennington, 2013; Walter, 2015)

social media and grief

- social media users paved their own way



A screenshot of a Facebook post. The post is from Lisa Moyer, dated September 12, 2010. The text of the post is a message of gratitude and remembrance for a friend who has passed away. The post includes a red heart icon and interaction buttons for 'Like' and 'Comment'.

 **Lisa Moyer** ▸  ...
September 12, 2010 · 🌐

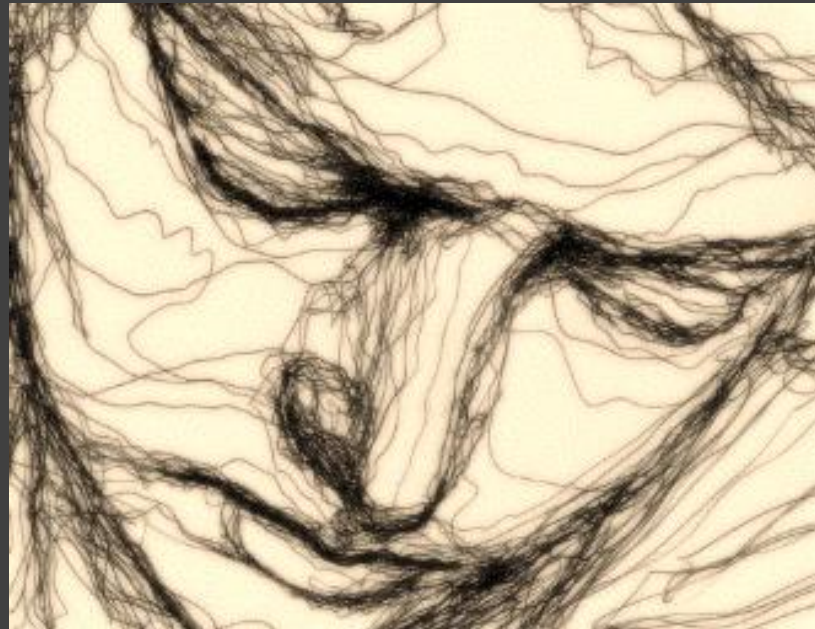
 - woke up thinking about you - i just wanted to thank you for taking me under your wing when i was just a teenager - you always had such a way with people - i only hope that i can be as unselfish and giving as you were - i really believe that you were an angel walking among us. rest well, my friend.

❤️

 Like  Comment

research questions

- why do facebook users post about their grief?
- how does posting about grief on facebook help the grieving process?



methods

- survey research with closed-ended and open-ended items
- survey was developed after researching available literature on social media and grief
- survey was administered online – recruitment through facebook

sample

- $N = 392$
- of those, 91 (23%) had a close friend or family member pass away with an active facebook page – this was the sample we analyzed
- most were caucasian (91%) and female (86%)
- $n = 91$

- on average, participants had an active facebook account for 7 years ($M = 7.57$; $SD = 2.01$)
- number of friends ranged from 50 – 2000; (median = 400)
- respondents had lost three facebook friends on average ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 2.28$)
- the mean length of time that had passed since the participants' most recent facebook friend had died was 18 months ($M = 18.05$, $SD = 18.64$)

table 1

number of times participants visited the most recently deceased friend's facebook page

# times visited	number*	% of sample
once	8	8.9%
2-5	42	46.7%
6-10	17	18.9%
11-20	5	5.6%
more than 20	18	20.0%

**numbers do not add up to 100 as 13 cases were missing data*

table 2

type of relationship participant had with close friend/family member

type of relationship	% of sample
friend	42.7%
aunt/uncle	11.7%
parent	10.0%
cousin	10.0%
co-worker	4.9%
in-law	4.9%
spouse/partner	1.9%

**percentages less than 1.0% included: grandchild, grandparent, high school sweetheart, husband of a husband's cousin, ex-realtor, ex-spouse/partner*

- **how do you feel about deceased friends having an active facebook page following their death?**

68% of participants reported that they felt “good” or “great” about it

- **how helpful is it to be able to visit the deceased’s profile page following their death?**

60% said it was “helpful” to “very helpful”

1. commemorate

- *“tributes to my father”*
- *“a memorium [sic] about my feelings for him....”*
- *“a farewell message to my mother”*

2. connection

- *“it makes me feel I’m still connected to her”*
- *“i don’t know, I thought it would make me feel better”*
- *“i posted a picture that he and I took and some of the last words he posted. It was a way to remember the better days when he was alive. I know hes [sic] passed on but I like to keep positive memories”*

3. express emotion

- *“the promised [sic] I kept to a family member before they passed. I posted it because it was my daily reminder that I’m still upholding the promise I made to them and to let others know she’s on my mind”*
- *“song lyrics, pictures, things that remind me of them”*
- *“i wrote about her influence in my life and in my work (writing)”*

4. remember special occasions

- *“i’ve posted about missing them on their birthday, date of their death, etc.”*
- *“happy birthday, miss you, thinking of you”*
- *“on the anniversary of birthdays to continue to bring awareness, to the deceased’s life, legacy, and undying spirit”*

- please describe, in your own words, how you think facebook affects the grieving process
- *“when an extremely close friend of mine died at 16, all of us (his close friends) were able to come together and say our goodbyes through facebook in the wake of a sudden and traumatic death”*
- *“...it gives people a place to ‘talk’ to that person still...”*
- *“... I check fb first thing in the morning before getting ready for work and see reminders of my friend who killed herself or my girlfriend who died drinking and driving, that takes me some time to reorient and prepare for my day again”*

- do you want to have your facebook profile page memorialized when you die?
 - most (71%) said “yes”



conclusions and implications

- participants used facebook to commemorate their loss, express their feelings, connect with others, and remember special occasions
- can be jarring to see messages about the deceased for some users
- some people post things when they didn't know the deceased
- facebook is a tool that can help with grief, but no social etiquette yet exists for posting about the deceased

future recommendations

- diverse sample (i.e., age, ethnicity, gender) and qualitative methodology needed
- not yet clear why some facebook users choose to post about grief while others don't?
- conversations with practitioners regarding how facebook can be beneficial to those that are grieving

Current research

- disenfranchised grief
- undergraduate research assistants
 - their involvement
 - what they've learned
 - surprises

(Doka, 1989)

final thoughts...

- facebook is willing to accommodate and grow with its users – this line of research can help them
- social media is not going away – it's up to social science experts to make recommendations about how to use social media in a sensitive and inclusive way

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