

Death and Communal Mass-Mourning: Vin Diesel and the Remembrance of Paul Walker

Social Media + Society
January-March 2018: 1–11
© The Author(s) 2018
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2056305117751383
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Lisbeth Klastrup 

Abstract

This article examines Vin Diesel's use of his public Facebook Page to mourn the loss of his friend and co-actor Paul Walker in the period from 2013-2015. It discusses how Vin Diesel performed his grief and how his mourning process was communally reflected and repeated by both Vin Diesel and Walker fans, who used Vin Diesel's page to share and verbalise their own feelings of loss in a both public and safe space. An analysis of Vin Diesel's own status updates and 1800 comments reacting to three popular status updates related to the death of Paul Walker posted over the course of more than a year show that commentary was used to make condolences to both Vin Diesel and Walker's families and to affectively express the users' immediate feelings, both verbally and through the use of emojis. However, over time, both the form and intensity of expression of both Vin Diesel and his followers changed, pointing to the need to further study celebrity mourning processes on social media over extended periods of time.

Keywords

celebrity, mourning, social media, Facebook, parasocial interaction, affect

Introduction

On November 30th 2013, fans of the *Fast and Furious* blockbuster movie series learnt some devastating news. Paul Walker, the actor who played one of the lead characters in the series, was publicly proclaimed dead following a fatal car accident, caused by high speed driving (Walker was a passenger, not the driver). Immediately fans took to social media to express their shock and grief over the sudden loss, and so did actor Vin Diesel (VD), Paul Walker's co-actor, friend and self-proclaimed "brother". Ever since the death of Walker, Vin Diesel's official Facebook page (www.facebook.com/VinDiesel) has served as a public outlet, through which VD has given his many followers an insight into his own grieving process, including the sharing of photos of and stories about his experiences with Walker. Through this process, VD has implicitly given his fans the opportunity to affectionately support and mourn *with* him, as well as the possibility to tell their own stories of loss and mourning related to the *Fast and Furious* star. Indeed, it seems that VD's Facebook page has been one of the main go-to page for Walker mourners. In 2016, the most popular R.I.P page for Paul Walker had less than one million likes, notably fewer than his official fan page, and only a few of the

existing R.I.P-pages seem to remain active. By comparison, VD's Facebook page seems to attract a huge following of *Fast and Furious* fans. He is currently (2017) amongst the top three most popular celebrities on Facebook, and in summer 2016 passed the magical 100 million fan mark. In numbers, he is surpassed only by Shakira and Cristiano Ronaldo, who both have much less engagement with their fans in terms of likes and comments made to their respective posts. Thus, this case provides us with a prominent and highly interesting example of how a modern day celebrity can engage strategically and emotionally with a huge fan audience through the process of public mourning.

While researchers have paid increasing attention to the mourning of celebrities (see f.i. Bulck & Larsson, 2017; Courbet & Courbet, 2014; Gil-Egui, Kern-stone, & Forman, 2016; Harju, 2015; Radford & Bloch, 2012; Sanderson &

IT University at Copenhagen, Denmark

Corresponding Author:

Lisbeth Klastrup, IT University at Copenhagen, Rued Langgaards Vej 7,
2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark.
Email: klastrup@itu.dk



Cheong, 2010; Walter, 2011), attention has so far been focused on memorial pages created by fans or the mourning of a celebrity on for instance Twitter, and the phenomena of mourning *with* a celebrity on his Facebook page has not yet been explored. Therefore, The Vin Diesel case may provide useful new insights into the interplay between fandom, affect, and the emerging practice of parasocial mourning on social media (see Klastrop, 2011, 2015; DeGroot & Leith, 2015; Gil-Egui et al., 2016). Specifically, this article examines how over the span of more than a year (during which the latest *Fast and Furious* film was also completed without Walker), VD wrote about and engaged his Facebook followers in his mourning process. Furthermore, the article explores how the fans of Vin Diesel and Paul Walker has used the comments to VD's post to both support VD and verbalise their own affective states of shock, loss and grief in relation to Walker's dead. Consequently the article asks: how do fans and celebrities mourn together and what can this tell us about the affective uses of social media in a celebrity mourning context?

Vin Diesel and the Use of his Facebook Page in the Mourning Process

Vin Diesel's Facebook page was created in 2009. Since then VD has consistently catered to an ever-growing fan following on the site, by providing an abundance of primarily visual material. He regularly posts star photos and selfies (often depicting VD with a naked torso); exclusive onset footage; personal photos of his family; inspirational meme-like quotes on how to live your life; and on occasion he promotes select fan art. Officially, the Facebook page is maintained by VD himself, and it is in fact difficult to imagine someone else being able to emulate his personal writing style, which is plain, humble and emotionally laden ("blessed" is one of his favourite words, "thanks for the love" an often used turn of phrase). His steady and long-time presence online, also on his own website and blog, has created a large online community of fans, generally referred to as *Vinbook* (Mire, 2016). It is not unusual for one of the more popular Facebook post by VD to attract more than 2 million likes, and thousands of shares and comments. Since the death of Paul Walker, the status updates making reference to Walker has been amongst the most popular posts. To corroborate this claim, I made a sample analysis of the 109 accessible posts, VD posted between July 1st and December 31st, 2014. This analysis revealed that the top 10 most popular posts in this period in terms of total engagement (likes + shares + comments) contained at least three posts referring to Paul Walker, including the two most popular (shares per posts were around 24.700). The posts related to Paul Walker (including the release of the *Fast and Furious* trailer) in average were shared around 67.000 times each. This indicates that posts about Paul Walker seem to engage fans beyond VD's own immediate

fan community. Not the least his heartbreaking update (see below) a week after Walker died was massively shared and commented on, also in the popular press (see for instance Richards, 2013). This update to date (January 2018) has attracted 8.2 million likes and more than 248.000 comments, and it has been shared more than 620.000 times.

In order to explore the mourning process over time, this article focuses on three select updates: 1) the above mentioned viral post from December 7th, 2013; 2) an update made exactly a year after Paul Walker died, and 3) a very popular update posted in April 2015 (almost 1,5 years after Walker's death), marking the release of *Fast and Furious 7* film that very month. This last post includes the memorial video for Walker produced as part of the official soundtrack for the movie. These three posts therefore also represent three different stages in the mourning process: 1) the initial shock and emotional turmoil after learning about Walker's death, 2) coming to terms with his death by marking the first year of mourning, 3) reflection on the life of Paul Walker and the impact of his death in relation to the grief -fraught completion of the film he should have taken full part in. In total, these three posts have attracted more than 300.000 comments - of which a representative sample of 600 comments has been drawn from each of the three updates in order to be able to qualitatively analyse and recognise themes and patterns in the comments. The analytical part of this article therefore draws on the study of VD's fan page in general, and on a coding of 1800 comments posted in relation to three select posts, as well as identifiable trends in the comment pool total. To contextualise the analysis, the article will briefly introduce to current studies of celebrity presence on social media, and the uses of social media for mourning purposes.

Celebrity and stardom in the age of social media – the “authentic” Vin Diesel on Facebook

Vin Diesel is by all standards a movie star, and not just a social media celebrity. He made his first appearance in a major Hollywood movie back in 1998 (*Saving Private Ryan*), and has since then performed as the protagonist in a number of large budget action movies, notably *xXx*, the *Riddick* and the *Fast and Furious 1-7* movie series. In more recent years, he has also performed the voice of Groot in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies. His initiation into the Hollywood star elite was complete, when he was rewarded with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2013. He is also one of the relatively few multiracial stars who have made it big in the Hollywood star system (others include Dwayne Johnson, Halle Berry and Keanu Reeves). In the scarce number of academic articles which discuss VD, researchers point out that VD's success and attraction as a mixed race superstar may be contributed to the fact that in his movies, he plays "America's

desired ‘other: multiracial, de-politicized, and lacking any serious racial allegiance’ (Dagbovie, 2007, see also Beltran, 2013; Park, 2008 and Schofield, 2016), while still displaying a sexy “hypermasculine identity” (Greven, 2009), or performing as someone with a “hard body and soft heart” (Schofield, 2016). His masculine, apolitical and multiracial appeal might be one of the reasons why he attracts so many global followers to his Facebook page. His own official take on his ethnicity is that it is “ambiguous” (Vincent, 2001), and he refers to himself as “multicultural”, a term which he notably also projects onto his followers on Facebook, such as when he talks about being “proud of Our multicultural non-judgemental page” [sic] (9.januar 2013, Feb 14, 2014). A study of his followers on Facebook does indeed demonstrate his global appeal: although the majority of fans are from the US, he also has huge followings in Brazil, Mexico, India and the Philippines (Busch, 2016).

For stars like Vin Diesel, social media platforms are increasingly used to build and maintain more direct relations with their fans. Lady Gaga, especially, has been recognised in academic literature, as an example of a star who is very adept at using social media and who has created an entire social universe of “little monster” followers (Bennett, 2014; Click, Lee, & Willson, 2013). In comparison to the mass-mediated engagement with audiences which broadcast media enable, on social media, celebrities and stars can engage directly with their fan on their own terms, creating the perception of both immediate access, mutual publicly visible recognition and an ongoing relation to the star (Barron, 2015; Baym, 2012; Kehrberg, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Stever & Lawson, 2013; Turner, 2014). For instance, when a fan addresses a star in an update on Twitter this act entails the possibility of very visible recognition by the star through a “retweet” or reply. Up until now, most studies of stars’ use of social media have focused on Twitter, while how Facebook works in terms of communication with fans is yet to be fully explored. Facebook does not hold the same promise of public recognition of the individual fan, since a star’s direct response to a fan could potentially be hidden in a long comment thread, but making comments to a star’s posts on Facebook does present the inherent promise of being *read or seen* by the star. In the case at hand, this possibility is explicitly verbalised by Vin Diesel himself when he states in his updates that he does read the comments, or when he posts pictures of select fan art. It seems that while the foregrounding of the #hashtag on Twitter and Instagram encourages a *horizontal and topical engagement* with and around the star profile, Facebook and its comment system encourages a *vertical appraisal* of the star; as well as *the broadcasting of one’s fandom*, through the act of sharing the star’s posts or photos with one’s own network.

However, while the presentational strategies on social media might be different from the presentational strategies stars employ on other media platforms (Marshall, 2010), making the star *appear* to be more accessible or authentic in

their communication, social media activity and the “texts” produced as part of the star’s performance still contributes towards the creation of the *image* of the star (Dyer, 1986). The relation between star and fan remains at heart imbalanced since the star is always the host of the conversation, without having to take part in it himself (Chin & Hills, 2008; Faina, 2012; Kehrberg, 2015; Page, 2012; Theberge, 2005). What the star in reality does on Twitter – and perhaps also Facebook – is to engage in “broadcast talk” (Page, 2012).

This also seem to be the case with VD’s Facebook page: in terms of presentational strategies he *seeks* to give an impression of an intimate and caring presence, a sense of community including both him and his followers, such as in this update (posted during the first year of mourning Paul Walker, and celebrating the fact that the page now had 60 millions followers):

The pride I have for Our collective, this global circle of positivity is real... **during the last five years, you have truly been a part of my life.** Thank you. P.s. **I want to share a personal picture that no one in the world has ever seen**, a very personal one that I took on my phone last year... for the next post. (March 23rd, 2014 – the photo posted the following day turned out to be a photo of Paul Walker next to VD’s “secret” twin brother) [author’s emphasis]

This update reveals how VD works his audience, by leaving them with a cliffhanger, which promises the fan unique access to content, they cannot get anywhere else. But however personal Vin Diesel appears in his updates, a study of his posts over time reveals that in effect what he posts on the page is mostly publicity material consisting of on-set photos and shots of VD in various poses, albeit contextualised and presented as more informal and exclusive backstage texts. In my study of the page and the comment corpus, I have not found any examples of VD being present in the comment threads – and given that they often come in ten thousands, it is in practice unlikely that VD manages to read very many of them. Rhetorically, it appears, VD is adept at creating the *perception* of an intimate relation between him and his 104million fans. As we will see the public mourning process he has been through after losing Walker has helped create even further the experience of this “inferred intimacy” (Ellcessor, 2009), understood as “access to what seems to be ‘authentic,’ private, backstage star behavior”.

In academic literature, this experience of “inferred intimacy”, the feeling that you know the person on the (social media) “screen” as if it was a real friend, has traditionally been referred to as a parasocial relationship. The notion of “parasocial” interaction was introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956, describing it as a “seemingly face-to-face relationship” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215) between audience members and a media personality. The Internet and social media (e.g. Facebook) might intensify the experience of parasocial intimacy (Courbet & Courbet, 2014; Stever, 2011), for

instance through the proliferation of visual material depicting the star which is available online (Stever, 2011), or exactly because of the *experienced* degree of intimacy between star and fan online. Kassing and Sanderson in their study of fans engagement with athlete Floyd Landis on his website conclude that the nature of communication online changes the parasocial relationship from being a one-sided relationship to being more like a actual mutual social relationship, with fans also being able to give the star (in this case, Landis) direct encouragement and advice which he, as noted above, might actually read.

In a recent article, Matt Hills presents a similar argument, arguing that fans' relationship with certain star figures might be more similar to the social relationships we have with people we actually know, as fans integrate the stars in their lives through ongoing and often long-lasting fandom. In this sense, a fan's relation with a star is indeed socially "real" (Hills 2015). It is no wonder, then, that the loss of the celebrity whom fans have for a long time engaged with can be perceived as devastating as the loss of a personal friend, causing a highly affective responses to their death, whether we refer to it as *parasocial grief* (DeGroot & Leith, 2015; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010) or not. These more recent theories regarding what constitutes the "parasocial relationship" online seem to explain well what takes place in the Vin Diesel case. The continued story of the *Fast and Furious* movies (the first was released back in 2001) has made it possible for fans to feel they really know the fictional characters of Dominic Torretto (ex-convict, elite street car racer) and Brian O'Conner (former FBI-agent, and Torretto's buddy and race companion) well; *and* the persisting presence of VD on Facebook including his personal updates and sharing of private photos, as in the example above, has made it possible for fans to feel they know the person Vin Diesel himself. However authentic VD comes across in his communication on his Facebook page and in the VinBook universe, we should consider that what we witness is likely a strategic *performance* of social intimacy, even in his most transgressive moments of grief.

Mourning and Parasocial Grieving on Social Media

Research into mourning and grieving practices online and on social media is a rapidly developing field. In a seminal article on "new public mourning", Tony Walter argues that vernacular displays of grief are once more emerging in public space, with people openly expressing their emotions in relation to people (such as celebrities), they do not know (Walter, 2008). In a later article, Walter and his co-authors point out that online, social network sites "bring death back into everyday life", noting that while the emotions of grief may be secluded from everyday view in modernity, the dead themselves are not. Indeed, new communication technologies might give the dead more, not less, social presence (Walter, Hourize,

Moncur, & Pitsillidis, 2011). Other researchers have pointed out that social network sites such as Facebook, can be seen as expanding the platform for publicly enacting death and grief both temporally, spatially and socially (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013).

Spatially, R.I.P- profiles and memorial groups on social network sites can be conceived as shared spaces which allow mourners who are geographically separated to participate in collective mourning rituals and creating communities of the bereaved (see also Walter et al., 2011).

Temporally, from the moment of death and years after, social network sites can help construct and maintain the identity and the biography of the dead person through the provision of personal and shared memories, allowing friends to continue their bonds with the deceased – even to the point where the deceased is kept alive in "perpetuity" (Dilmaç, 2016; Irwin, 2015; Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013). On social media, the memory of the departed, Dilmaç argues, which is by definition part of the past, is changed into a "dynamic memory" which is constantly updated (Dilmaç, 2016, p. 9). These observations well describe what VD does. By regularly providing the *Fast and Furious* and Paul Walker fans with new visual images of Walker and stories about him, he not only maintains, but also updates and expands the fans' memories of Walker.

Psychologically and socially, memorialised profile pages and R.I.P pages can provide the bereft with a sense of connectedness with the community of mourners, and help in the process of sense making, providing communal spaces for expressions of sadness, shock, loss, and love (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Giaxoglou, 2015; Hård Af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015; Williams & Merten, 2009). The emerging body of research into celebrity mourning published indicate that it is exactly these shared spaces which are attractive for fans mourning a celebrity. Thus, the communal sites of mourning on social media sites provide fans of a celebrity with a safe space within which to enact a grief which might be disenfranchised and frowned upon in other social contexts (Andsager, 2005; Courbet & Courbet, 2014; Gil-Egui et al., 2016; Harju, 2015). Here they can come together in a context of legitimate and "affective expression and solidarity" (Harju, 2015, p. 143) with other fans; and collectively cope with their emotions, similar to how people in general cope with the death of a loved one on social media (DeGroot & Leith, 2015; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Mourning the death of a favorite celebrity also enables the fans come to terms with their own identity as "fans post-death" through processes of introjection and incorporation (Radford & Bloch, 2012). *Introjection* describes the process of enforcing the positive memories of the deceased, as a means of embodying the deceased in oneself and holding on to the memories of the person. *Incorporation* describes the process when "objects representative of the deceased are used as a means of keeping some part of that person alive", through "material objects, places, or activities associated with the

deceased” (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p. 149), such as clothing, posters, memorabilia, memorial services etc. Finally, mourning on social media allow fans and followers to collaboratively mythologise and idolise the deceased celebrity even further (Andsager, 2005; Radford & Block, 2012). Through these acts they can perpetuate the preferred representations of the celebrity (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010), for instance remembering the celebrity at the peak of his or her career, and maintain their parasocial relationship with him or her (Gil-Egui et al., 2016). Andsager in her early study of web shrines goes as far as claiming that (online) “when a celebrity dies, his or her fan’s regard seems to escalate from admiration to worship, literally” (Gil-Egui et al., 2016, p. 25). Finally post-death fandom enables fans to maintain a more intimate relation with the celebrity than ever before, because they, the fans, are now the ones in control of the celebrity’s image (Gil-Egui et al., 2016, p. 27). From a psychological perspective, this indicates that the perceived intimate (para)social relationship with the celebrity might even be strengthened and enforced post-death. Social media allow fans to leave behind their own trace, memory or history involving the deceased celebrity, in this way also actively contributing to the continued memorialising of their object of fandom (Courbet & Courbet, 2014).

The Vin Diesel case allows a multi-faceted perspective on celebrity mourning, in that it both gives us insight into how someone who has lost a real friend and happens to be a celebrity uses social media as an outlet for his personal grief and memorializing practices. In addition, intertwined with this personal mourning process, this case study offers us an understanding of the support that VD’s fans lend to him while they themselves as fans of Paul Walker mourn within the legitimate space for mourning that VD’s Facebook page provides.

Case Study: Mourning With Celebrities

The analysis is based on the analysis of comments posted in response to three status updates by the Vin Diesel. Post A was posted on December 7th 2013, a week after Walker’s death (Image 1) (207.892 comments sampled); Post B was posted on November 30th 2014 a year after Walker died (Image 2) (41.871 comments sampled); and Post C was posted on April 6th, 2015, right after the release of the *Fast and Furious 7* movie (Image 3) (106.565 comments sampled). The comments were harvested by a crawler developed by the University of Bergen. This crawler retrieves posts in increments of 500 comments until all comments available have been retrieved. The number of comments harvested by the crawler is not equal to the number of comments listed by Facebook. This is a known problem, with Facebook crawlers, likely due to some comments later having been deleted by their posters, profile settings, problems with the API etc. In this case, however, the number of comments actually retrieved is not significantly different from the comment

number listed by Facebook, and therefore still estimated as representative of the complete set. The comments were then imported into Excel and further analysis carried out with this programme.

For the coding, to ensure an equal distribution of comments across global time zones, 100 comments were sampled every sixth hour, starting with the first 100 comments and finishing 36 hours after the post were published, reaching a total of 600 comments. At this point in time, as it is clear from the graph below (Figure 1), commenting had already peaked and was starting to even out.

Comments which overtly contained promotional material calling for people to like or follow specific pages or content were excluded, and replaced with comments from the last time zone. These made up only a small part of the coding sample. Curiously, no clear examples of trolling or extremely deviant comments were found in the coding sample: they might have been deleted, or this might just be because the coding sample is so small compared to the sample total, which is likely to contain comments of this kind.

The coding of the comments was carried out taking a point of departure in a coding scheme, previously developed by the author for a study of “parasocial mourning” on public R.I.P pages for young people whose death got lot of media attention (Klastrup, 2015). The scheme was, however, adapted to reflect and incorporate the fact that since the comments in this sample were made on a fan page, some comments were likely to include or serve as clear expressions of fandom targeted either directly at VD or Paul Walker, or the fictional universe developed in the *Fast and Furious* movies. The coding scheme was furthermore adapted to the celebrity context, by adding codes applied in previous research projects examining celebrity mourning on social media (as presented above). Degroot and Leith in their study of the parasocial mourning of Kutner (a fictional character from the House tv-series) used a general set of codes, adapted from Sanderson: “*traditional grief expressions*”, “*crying*”, “*heaven narratives*”, “*reminiscing*”, and “*memorialising and advocacy*”. These codes were already incorporated in the existing coding scheme, apart from advocacy (which covers comments for what should have happened instead of the Kutner character dying). In the Paul Walker case, there was no alternative solutions to advocate for or against, but rather, based on this author’s previous coding scheme, the code “context” was included to capture comments related to the context of the death (speed driving/car accident). In the sample, these contextual comments were on occasion also critical, but rarely advocating for other behavior. Finally, Radford and Bloch’s concepts of introjection and incorporation (explained above) were included as well, in order to probe into how fans referred to Paul Walker post-death. A pilot coding of the first set of 600 comments revealed that while several examples of introjection in the sample could be identified (for instance “Walker will live on in his amazing movies & in our hearts!”), curiously no clear examples of – or

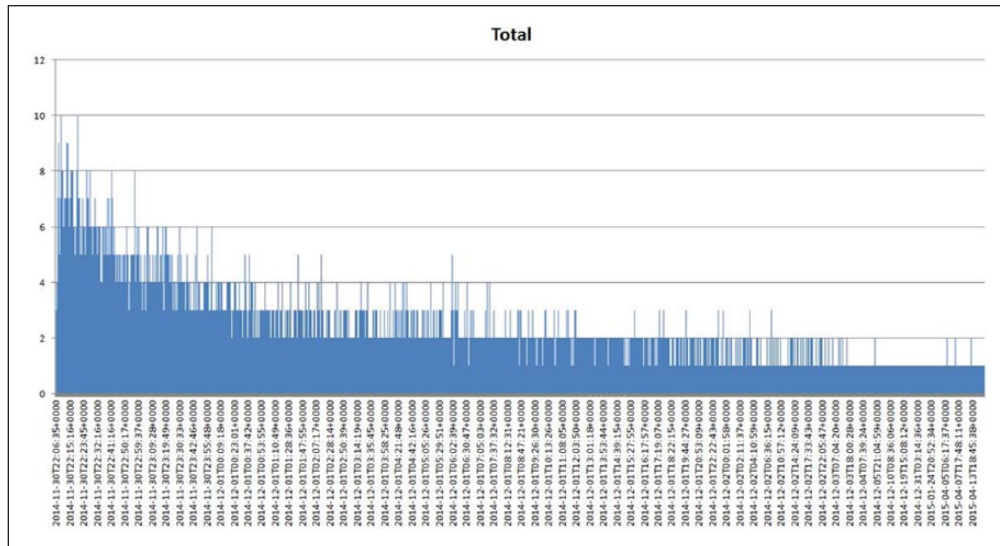


Figure 1. Typical distribution of comments over the span of the first days and months after status update was posted. Increments of thousand.

references to – processes of incorporation were found. In the final stage of coding, the incorporation code was left out, and in the total extracted sample I did not find any explicit examples of references to, for instance, merchandise or memorabilia either.

Based on the pilot coding of the first sample, the final coding scheme included the following, not mutually exclusive, codes: *conventional expressions related to the passing* (“Rest in Peace” in various versions); *sympathy* (comments expressing sympathy for VD and his loss); *the “brotherly tie”* (comments commenting on the relation between VD and Paul Walker); *identification* (comments in which the user expressed identification with either VD or the type of accident, e.g. “I also lost a brother in an accident”); *spiritual discourse* (comments applying religious or spiritual vocabulary or beliefs, referring to Paul Walker as being in heaven, being an angel etc); *introjections* (comments demonstrating introjective strategies, cf. above); *affect* (comments expressing, either by use of language or emoticons, the emotional state and spontaneous reaction of the commenter); *Vin Diesel fandom*; *Paul Walker fandom*; *Fast and Furious references* (comments either mentioning or referencing the FF universe); *tagshares* (commenters sharing the post by tagging one or more friends in the comments); *post evaluations* (comments engaging directly with the content of VD’s post in terms of praise, impact, the content in the photo etc); and the *context of death* (comments directly related to the accident). In addition, the pilot study revealed that the commenters were fond of using emoticons. In many cases, people simply just “hearted” (<3) as way of comment, without any elaboration. Furthermore, several commenters used a crying emoticon to demonstrate how sad they felt (in which case the comment was also

marked for expressions of “affect”). Consequently, the entire sample of 1800 comments was coded for the use of emoticons to gauge the use of emoticons in general and hearts in particular, and to get a clearer sense of how prevalent these means of expression were. Finally, I found it necessary to add a category of “other”, in order to include comments I could not decipher, such as comments in unknown languages (also to Google Translate) or comments the target of which it was difficult to assess (e.g. “la puta”).

Analysis

In order to understand the context, in which the comments appear, one needs to take into account how VD’s posts works towards framing people’s reactions. As stated about, VD’s posts have a very personal style and can be highly emotional, in particular those post in which he mourns the death Paul Walker, both in words and by use of photos. In the period from Paul Walker’s death in late 2013 to April 6th (the last post in the sample), VD posted 27 posts which either explicitly or implicitly refer to Walker’s death and Walker’s personality. These posts mark important events especially during the first year, like the film crew returning to set, the date six month after the day of death, Walker’s birthday etc. In order to give readers a better understanding of the immediate context of the comments analysed, the three posts including photos, are shown below.

General Comment Patterns

A majority of the comments to all three posts are written in English, some clearly written by non-native speakers. This



Image 1. Post A – posted shortly after the death of Walker. Screenshot from Vin Diesel’s public Facebook profile. Posted December 7th, 2013.



Image 2. Post B – posted a year after the death of Walker. Screenshot from Vin Diesel’s public Facebook profile. Posted November 30th, 2014.

is also apparent in some of the quotes, I present below, which I have chosen to present exactly as they have been written, in order to convey how people also sometime struggle with expressing their emotions properly in a language which is not their own. While it is impossible to check for the nationality of all commenters in such a big sample, the use of language or explicit references to the commenter’s nationality (“Brasil loves you!”) gives a good indication of the global popularity of VD. Thus, the 1800 comments included comments from people in Russia, India, The Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Rwanda, Brazil, Italy, Spain, Turkey, England, the US, France, Germany, Nicaragua and Hungary.

Although the comment patterns across the three posts have many similarities, there were marked differences

between them, which is evident in Table 1 below, which shows the distribution of the coded content in order from the most dominant to the least dominant content forms. In the sections below, the most notable findings and differences will be discussed in further detail.

Fast Mourning: R.I.P.-ing and “Hearting”

Whether the comment consists just of sad emoticons, multiple hearts, or the distraught emotional outpouring of a dedicated fan, the responses to all three posts make it clear that a majority of people commenting on VD’s posts appear to share his emotions and wish to express both their condolences and sympathy with him, as well as their own emotional state and feelings as conveniently as possible. Many commenters resort to

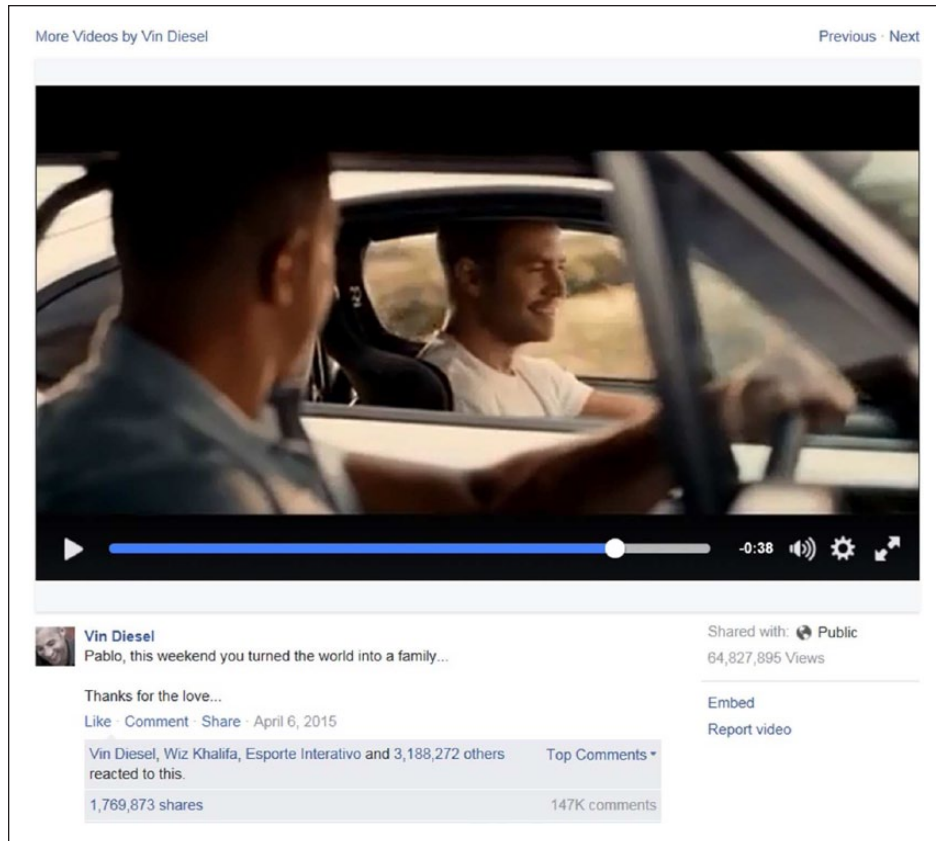


Image 3. Post C – posted in relation to release of tribute video. Screenshot from Vin Diesel’s public Facebook profile. Posted April 6th, 2015.

using the conventional “Rest in Peace” phrase, especially in relation to Post B, the day marking a year since Paul Walker died. Expressing condolences through the use of variations on the “rest in peace” phrase is a common practice observed in previous studies (Klastrup, 2011, 2015). Other commenters use multiple emoticons, in particular heart emoticons or emojis to show their sympathy for VD and their love for Walker, for instance like this “😭😭😭😭😭❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️” (male, post b). Overall, in the total sample, 11% of the 1800 comments contained hearts, and respectively 32% (post A), 19% (post B) and 30% (post C) contained either a heart or another form of emoticon, especially crying or sad faces. This prevalent use of visual expressions of the commenters’ state of mind points to the importance of analysing affect on social media not just in verbal form, but also in the convenient short-forms of emoticons and emojis.

Affect

Several of the commenters, in the case of all three posts, appear to be emotionally affected by the death of Walker, especially in the comments to the first post in which almost half of the coded comments expressed some form of affect (ranging from crying emojis to wordy texts). In the coded comments to post A (posted a week after Walker died), fans

describe themselves in various emotional states of shock and acute grief.:

“I’m so sorry for u vin no one know how much I’m sad I don’t want to cry [...] every time I Remember his voice or face I can’t hold myself right Now I Can’t Watch any Movie For him because I’ll Cry So bad” (female).

Others explicitly compare the loss of Walker to the loss of a family member, demonstrating their perceived close relation to Walker: “*He will be missed so much! I am so sad I feel like someone from my family die*” (female). Others acknowledge that they are not in fact “friends” with Walker, but nevertheless they are still moved by his death: “*I only know Paul Walker from being a fan of his movies. Hearing the news I couldn’t believe it. Wishing and hoping that it was a mistake ...*” (male). When responding to the later posts (B and C), fans are still clearly emotionally affected by the death, but albeit no longer in the same state of emotional shock expressed in the comments to the first post. However, watching the Walker tribute video (post C), seem to rekindle some of the initial feelings of loss: “*SO MANY EMOTIONS* (female), or as another fan states it: “*...There are no words to express the emotions felt about the ending of this movie [...] Totally heartbroken about losing him once more :’(*”.

Table 1. Distribution of codes across comment sample.*

%	AFFECT	RIP	PW	FAN	TEXTEVAL	SPIRIT	TAG	F&FREF	OTHER	INTROJECT	VD FAN	VD+PW	CONTEXT	IDENT.
7.Dec. 2013	44	29	26		8	14	1	5	4	6	3	3	2	1
30.Nov 2014	32	47	28		10	7	3	4	5	4	3	1	0	1
6.April 2015	34	13	15		28	5	33	11	7	4	6	1	1	0

* "Eval" is comments evaluating the qualities of the post text or image. "Ident" is comments where the commenter identifies him- or herself with VD.

Sympathising With Van Diesel

Given that these comments are, after all, posted on a fan page dedicated to VD, I initially surmised that many comments in the coded sample would be directed at VD, either sympathising with him or trying to comfort him. However, the coding revealed (see Table 1), that only one-fifth of the comments to post A and post B did indeed contain elements of sympathy for VD, and in the case of post C, the number of comments which explicitly expressed sympathy with VD were down to only 7%. This unexpectedly low number of sympathisers indicate that rather than being just VD fans, the people frequenting Vin Diesel's page are fans of both VD and Walker, and indeed the entire *Fast and Furious* universe (between 4-11% of the comments in the sample make explicit reference to the movies). Those who do sympathise with VD clearly speak to him, as if they were addressing a friend or acquaintance, often directly addressing him in their comments: "So sorry - words can't convey the emotions of losing a friend- my thoughts and prayers to you and the family" or "I'm sorry for your loss. Friends we choose as family is always harder to let go of" (female, post B). Other fans, in an attempt to comfort Vin Diesel emphasise the strong bond, the two actors had. "You were lucky to have known him! Not many people share a good friendship with someone! [...] You seem to have loved him very much!..." (female, post B). These modes of address indicate that fans do consider themselves "friends" of VD, who are trying to comfort him.

As can be seen from the overview in Table 1, several commenters also used some form of religious discourse or spiritual reference to talk about Walker (post A: 14%, post B: 7%, post C: 5%). In several cases, this was also in the context of comforting VD:

"He is watching over you and family Vin Diesel. He is no longer here in the flesh but he is in the spirit. [...]. I'm certain he wouldn't want you to be sad but instead to celebrate his life... (female, post B). Other fans do not attempt to comfort VD directly, but acknowledge, praise or thank him for writing: "That is an awesome tribute, Vin. Thank you for sharing." (female, post B).

This mode of engaging with VD can be seen in 8% of the comments to the first post, and 10% of the commenters to the second post (in the case of the third post, most seem to

evaluate and comment on the video itself). Remarkably, while VD himself in his posts consistently emphasises the brotherly bond between Walker and himself, only a few followers (between 1-3% of the coded sample) comment on this bond. Apparently fans tend to either focus on VD *or* on Paul Walker, and not so much on their relation.

Paul Walker and Vin Diesel Fandom. Be it in the form of introjection, grief, or just general expressions of fandom, the comment analysis revealed that many of the commenters used VD's posts as an opportunity to talk about and express their Paul Walker fandom. A significant higher number of commenters expressed Paul Walker rather than VD fandom, indicating that they see Vin Diesel's mourning posts as an ideal opportunity to express their own emotions in relation to Walker. As one fan, in an act of introjection, writes addressing the entire community (female, post A): *We have lost a great actor, a great person, a great friend. Even though he is gone, he is still loved, thought of and wish he was still with us.* Even a year or later after his death, dedicated fans were still mourning – and thinking about – Walker. One female fan in response to post B writes: *"Miss him everyday ☹️ Never forgotten always in my heart ❤️"* and a male fan, in response to the tribute video states: *"#PaulWalker, I have seen F&F series more than 50 times till now and knowing this you're not in this world anymore, just makes me wonder that how good you have been to millions of fans.."* It should be noted that the comments to the third post include an exceptional high amount of tag-shares (33%): it is evident that fans here ping other fans or friends in order to make them aware of and share the tribute video with them.

However, while some fans are clearly devoted Paul Walker fans, other express their fandom in relation to the entire *Fast and Furious* universe, and not the least the notion of "family" (in the broad sense), which is deeply integrated in the movies, pop up. Especially comments to post C emphasise this aspect:

"my kids grew up watching these movies and until now they never get bored watching it. We all love fast cars, we love the sound of that engine as it takes off but one thing different about these movies like no other is the bond of all the cast which made them a "FAMILY" from beginning to end. #seeyouagain #ForPaul #mifamilia" (female, post C).

In total, about 6000 of the total number of comments to this post (106.565) contained references to “family” (including variations such as “family”, “familia”, “famiglia”), indicating the salience of this concept in the FF fan community. More important perhaps, than the brotherly bond between VD and Paul Walker is the concept of family, of all, including VD himself, belonging to the same family of mourners.

Conclusion: Mourning Paul, Mourning With Vin Diesel

This study has shown that Vin Diesel’s fan page seem to have served as a safe haven where both VD himself, Paul Walker and *Fast and the Furious* could co-perform their grief, not just in the moments and days after Paul Walker died, but also over a substantial period of time. VD’s performance of intimate mourning seem to have spurred and encouraged what one might call an act of “mass mourning” as indicated by the massive amounts of likes, shares and comments VD’s posts about Paul Walker have accrued. In addition, VD’s posts seem to have given his own fans an opportunity to engage directly with the star, taking on the roles as fellow mourners and pillars of support. This study has thus provided some interesting insights into the affective uses of social media in a celebrity mourning context. Both VD’s own posts and the comments of the fans testify that Facebook can be used as a public venue through which it is possible to collectively mourn over time, and express one’s emotions as they play out in relation to significant dates and events which repeatedly calls forth memories and feelings of loss. Coding comments over the span of over a year has demonstrated that expressions of grief change over time (for instance the amount of highly emotional comments decreased over time). This pattern indicates that as is the case with any mourning process also offline, fans mourning a star or celebrity go through different stages of (parasocial) grief. Furthermore, while Vin Diesel’s Facebook page seem as the perfect “go-to” site for the Paul Walker mourners, the large number of both direct and indirect (tag) shares of VD’s content indicates that fan mourning is not restricted to the VD’s own page, but that fans are willing to openly share and broadcast their continued Paul Walker fandom to their network of Facebook friends. The continuous tributes and references to Paul Walker which to this day Vin Diesel still posts, seem to afford a cyclic process of networked mourning: on his page Vin Diesel can indeed keep the memory of that precious friend alive in perpetuity within a community of massive support.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Terje Svindseth for technical support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Lisbeth Klasttrup  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3966-0757>

References

- Andsager, J. L. (2005). Altared sites: Celebrity webshrines as shared mourning. In S. Jones & J. Jensen (Eds.), *Afterlife as afterimage: Understanding posthumous fame* (pp. 17–30). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Barron, L. (2015). *Celebrity cultures – An introduction*. London, England: SAGE.
- Baym, N. K. (2012). ‘Fans or friends?’ Seeing social media audiences as musicians do. *Participations: Journal of Audiences & Reception Studies*, 9, 286–316.
- Beltran, M. (2013). Fast and bilingual- Fast & furious and the Latinization of racelessness. *Cinema Journal*, 53, 75–96.
- Bennett, L. (2014). ‘If we stick together we can do anything’: Lady Gaga fandom, philanthropy and activism through social media. *Celebrity Studies*, 5, 138–152.
- Brubaker, J., Hayes, G., & Dourish, P. (2013). Beyond the grave: Facebook as a site for the expansion of death and mourning. *The Information Society: An International Journal*, 29, 152–163.
- Bulck, V. D., & Larsson, A. O. (2017). ‘There’s a Starman waiting in the sky’ mourning David#Bowie on Twitter. *Convergence*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1354856517709670
- Busch, A. (2016). Vin Diesel Officially Passes 100M On Facebook But Females Are Top 2016 Social Media Stars. *Deadline*. Retrieved from <http://deadline.com/2016/07/celebrities-social-media-leaders-2016-facebook-twitter-instagram-1201794310/>
- Carroll, B., & Landry, K. (2010). Logging on and letting out: Using online social networks to Grieve and Mourn. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30, 341–349.
- Chin, B., & Hills, M. (2008). Restricted confessions? Blogging, subcultural celebrity and the management of producer-fan proximity. *Social Semiotics*, 18, 253–272.
- Click, M. A., Lee, H., & Willson, H. (2013). Making monsters: Lady Gaga, fan identification, and social media. *Popular Music and Society*, 36, 360–379.
- Courbet, D., & Fourquet-Courbet, M. P. (2014). When a celebrity dies... Social identity, uses of social media, and the mourning process among fans: The case of Michael Jackson. *Celebrity Studies*, 14, 275–290.
- Dagbovie, S. A. (2007). Star-light, start-bright, star damn near white: Mixed-race superstars. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40, 217–237.
- DeGroot, J. M., & Leith, A. P. (2015). R.I.P. Kutner: Parasocial grief following the death of a television character. *OMEGA*. doi:10.1177/0030222815600450
- Dilmaç, J. A. (2016). The new forms of mourning: Loss and exhibition of the death on the Internet. *OMEGA*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0030222816633240
- Dyer, R. (1986). *Heavenly bodies: Film stars and society* (1st ed.). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ellcessor, E. (2009, May 28). People i want to know: Twitter, celebrity and social connection. *Flow*. Retrieved from <http://www.flow>

- journal.org/2009/05/people-i-want-to-know-twitter-celebrity-and-social-connectionliz-ellcessor-university-of-wisconsin-madison
- Eyal, K., & Cohen, J. (2006). When good friends say goodbye: A parasocial breakup study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50, 502–523.
- Faina, J. (2012). Twitter and the new publicity. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 69(1), 55–71.
- Giaxoglou, K. (2015). Entextualising mourning on Facebook: Stories of grief as acts of sharing. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 21, 87–105.
- Gil-Egui, G., Kern-stone, R., & Forman, A. E. (2016). Till death do us part? Conversations with deceased celebrities through memorial pages on Facebook. *Celebrity Studies*, 8, 262–277.
- Greven, D. (2009). *Manhood in hollywood from bush to bush*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hård, Af, Segerstad, Y., & Kasperowski, D. (2015). A community for grieving: Affordances of social media for support of bereaved parents. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 21, 25–41.
- Harju, A. (2015). Socially shared mourning: Construction and consumption of collective memory. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 21, 123–145.
- Hills, M. (2015). From para-social til multisocial interaction – Theorizing material/digital fandom and celebrity. In P. D. Marshall & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 463–482). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and parasocial interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19, 215–229.
- Irwin, M. D. (2015). Mourning 2.0 – Continuing bonds between the living and the dead on Facebook. *OMEGA*, 72, 119–150.
- Kehrberg, A. K. (2015). ‘I love you, please notice me’: The hierarchical rhetoric of Twitter fandom. *Celebrity Studies*, 6, 85–99.
- Klastrup, L. (2011). “Offentlighed for en dag? Facebook-grupper og de nye ”massebrugere. *Journalistica*, 1, 17–49.
- Klastrup, L. (2015). “I didn’t know her, but...”: Parasocial mourning of mediated deaths on Facebook RIP pages. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 21, 146–164.
- Kern, R., Forman, A. E., & Gil-Egui, G. (2013). RIP: Remain in perpetuity. Facebook memorial pages. *Telematics and Informatics*, 30, 2–10.
- Marshall, P. D. (2010). The promotion and presentation of the self: Celebrity as marker of presentational media. *Celebrity Studies*, 1, 35–48.
- Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence*, 17, 139–158.
- Mire, M. (2016, March 11). A powerful collective rooting for you: On Vin Diesel’s Facebook. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/11/magazine/a-powerful-collective-rooting-for-you-on-vin-diesels-facebook.html?_r=0
- Page, R. (2012). The linguistics of self-branding and micro-celebrity in Twitter: The role of hashtags. *Discourse & Communication*, 6, 181–201.
- Park, L. (2008). Virtual race: The racially ambiguous action hero in the matrix and pitch black. In M. Beltrán & C. Fojas (Eds.), *Mixed race hollywood* (pp. 182–202). New York: New York University Press.
- Radford, S., & Bloch, P. (2012). Grief, commiseration, and consumption following the death of a celebrity. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 12, 137–155.
- Richards, C. (2013, December 13). Paul Walker death: Vin Diesel’s touching Facebook post about how he lost his other half. *Mirror*. Retrieved from <http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/paul-walker-dead-vin-diesels-2900265>
- Sanderson, J., & Cheong, P. H. (2010). Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30, 328–340.
- Schofield, A. (2016). Hard bodies, soft hearts: Mixed-race men as muscular daddies in the films of Vin Diesel and Dwayne Johnson. In E. Podnieks (Ed.), *Pops in pop Culture: Fatherhood, masculinity, and the new man*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Steuer, G. (2011). Fan behavior and lifespan development theory: Explaining para-social and social attachment to celebrities. *Journal of Adult Development*, 18, 1–7.
- Steuer, G. S., & Lawson, K. (2013). Twitter as a way for celebrities to communicate with fans: Implications for the study of parasocial interaction. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 15, 339–354.
- Theberge, P. (2005). Everyday fandom: Fan clubs, blogging, and the quotidian rhythms of the Internet. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 30, 485–502.
- Turner, G. (2014). *Understanding celebrity*. London, England: SAGE.
- Vincent, M. (2001). The fast and the furious’ Vin Diesel opens the throttle in new speed movie and joins an elite ‘action-star’ fraternity. The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, Virginia). Retrieved from http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=VP&p_theme=vp&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&p_topdoc=1&p_text_direct=0=0F552F52A780C161&p_field_direct=0=document_id&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&s_trackval=GooglePMp
- Walter, T. (2008). The new public mourning. In M. Stroebe, R. Hansson, W. Stroebe, & H. Schut (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: 21st century perspectives* (pp. 241–262). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Walter, T. (2011). Angels not souls: Popular religion in the online mourning for British celebrity Jade Goody. *Religion*, 41, 29–51.
- Walter, T., Hourize, R., Moncur, W., & Pitsillidis, S. (2011). Does the internet change how we die and mourn? *OMEGA*, 64, 275–302.
- Williams, A. L., & Merten, M. J. (2009). Adolescents’ online social networking following the death of a peer. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24, 67–90.

Author Biography

Lisbeth Klastrup (PhD, IT University of Copenhagen) is an associate professor of Digital Media Studies at the IT University of Copenhagen. Her research interests include the mundane uses of social media, parasocial mourning practices online and transmedial fandom in everyday life.